

UNEP Publications Reference Series

Guidelines for Authors

This reference document is part of a series aimed at highlighting key policies, procedures, best practices and common oversights encountered during the UNEP publication creation process. These process-specific guides are drawn from the more comprehensive *UNEP Publications Guidelines* and *UNEP Publications Policy*. View the entire series:

[AUTHOR GUIDELINES](#) | [PEER REVIEWER GUIDELINES](#)
[PLAGIARISM AND CITATION FACT SHEET](#) | [EDITOR GUIDELINES](#) | [LAYOUT MANUAL](#)

Overview

UNEP produces a wide range of publications that target a diverse set of stakeholders.

While writing style and structure will vary, depending on the format, type of publication, issue area and target audience (more below), UNEP has three important reminders for Authors when approaching a UNEP publication:

- ensure that a manuscript is built upon a robust evidence-based and appropriately cited;
- ensure that UNEP's established positions on the issue are considered, have been agreed at an institutional level and reflected in the text;
- be concise when drafting introductory sections;
- ensure that headings, section titles and bolded first sentences of paragraphs enable readers to skim the contents of a report and still be able to take away the key messages; and
- create a publication title and cover art that commands attention and emphasizes the intended takeaway key message of the report.

Planning

Authors need to consider the expectations for the final output are clear from the outset. This includes the purpose and intended audience of the publication, what the publication coordinators hope to achieve with the publication, the gaps the report aims to fill, and an assessment of UNEP's previously published work in this area and other peer reviewed resources that should be used as the foundation for the publication.

Writing for UNEP publications

In most circumstances only a small subset of the intended audience will read a publication cover to cover; most will skim and scan for information that is relevant to their work. Thus, it is the Author's responsibility to ensure readers are able to access information in the most efficient way possible. Writing in clear, direct and understandable language is crucial and includes informative headings and figure and table labels.

UNEP's audiences are typically not technical experts and therefore UNEP should ensure its publications are as accessible as possible. Visualizations and pictures, if done well, can be more effective in bringing some ideas across than text.

Clarity | Use short, direct sentences so readers can understand the key messages that you want to embed in your audience's mind. Technical language, while needed, can be a barrier to audience engagement and hence using simple language to convey scientific and technical concepts is essential.

Coherence | Effective writing has a strong logical flow of ideas when sentences and paragraphs add up to a coherent, cumulative meaning.

Conciseness | Do not use words that don't add to the value of the text and that do not help communicate your message clearly. Remember to avoid words that: mean little or nothing (e.g., actually, practically, really, various, virtually, etc.), repeat the meaning of other words (e.g., "each and every", "first and foremost", "any and all", "hopes and desires, etc.), are redundant modifiers (e.g., "each individual", "basic fundamentals", "final outcome", etc.), replace a phrase with a word (e.g., "of a bright colour" vs "bright, or "in a confused state" vs "confused".

Further writing guidance can be found in the [UN Publication Writing tips](#).

For comprehensive information about style conventions to be used when writing UNEP documents in English, see the United Nations Editorial Manual.

Structuring a publication

The suggested structure of a UNEP publication varies depending on the type. More information for the components for each type can be found in the UNEP Publications Guidelines.

Allow skim-reading

The majority of readers do not read publications cover to cover—they skim and scan. UNEP uses the several writing styles to support this and there is no one size fits all approach noting the flow of content should be logical and supported by an appropriate evidence base.

Bolded first sentence | This is typically only used in the Executive Summary and Key Messages or a short report, but can be applied throughout a full report as well. Each paragraph within each section begins with a statement (in **bold** or **emphasised by colour**) that tells readers the main point of the paragraph, followed by sentences supporting the initial statement. This facilitates skimming and scanning over a traditionally structured publication, which may open with a question or builds slowly to a point. In most cases, the opening sentence should make a single point (rather than a series of points) and the paragraph should be dedicated to that single point.

Inverted pyramid structure seen in "Making Peace with Nature."



Key message headings | well-crafted headings and subheadings

can help tell "the story" of a publication even before the reader begins. Key message headings tell a reader what the chapter or section says—rather than what it is about. This approach allows readers to establish a strong understanding of the findings of a full publication, simply by reading the Table of Contents. Example: "The current mode of development degrades the Earth's finite capacity to sustain human well-being".

This approach does not work for all publications. Especially technical publications might instead use the traditional descriptive headings, which tell readers what content is explored in a given chapter or section. Example: "Modes of development and human well-being".

Language and style

Language and style conventions for UNEP publications follow the [United Nations Editorial Manual](#). While outlining all language and style rules is outside of the scope of this document, some common conventions are noted here.

Abbreviations and acronyms | The use of abbreviations and acronyms should be avoided as much as possible. When they are used, spell them out in full on the first occurrence, followed by the acronym or abbreviation in parentheses, then use the acronym in subsequent occurrence. Abbreviations and acronyms are discouraged in chapter titles or headings.

Comma usage | The final comma before “and” (i.e., Oxford or serial comma) is not normally used in United Nations documents. Commas are placed outside of quotations marks (see Quotations”).

Numbers | Numbers are expressed in words when they are i) under 10, ii) in simple fractions, and iii) at the beginning of the sentence. Numbers expressed in figures include percentages, ages, temperature, sums of money, measures and weight, ratios and map scales, and compound fractions.

Quotations | Quoted words, sentences and paragraphs are enclosed within double quotation marks. Single quotation marks are used to enclose quotations within quotations. In general, final punctuation is placed outside the quotation marks. Quotations should be used sparingly in publications and used for emphasis.

Spelling | The Concise Oxford English Dictionary is the current authority for spelling in the United Nations.

Citations, references and plagiarism

Accurate, timely and properly cited references help ensure the integrity and credibility of UNEP information products. Authors must ensure that all primary and secondary research—including work previously published by the Author—is clearly acknowledged. Extensively quoting or summarizing previously published work must be avoided, and if necessary it must be made absolutely clear with clear reference to the previously published work. Data and other findings must be current and from objective, peer-reviewed publications. While reputable think-tanks and other advocacy organizations often publish high-quality work that is readily available, they are often not objective, not peer reviewed and, thus, not appropriate for citing facts and drawing conclusions in UNEP publications. They may be used to indicate concerns or where emphasis or views are being presented. These sources must be cited and any comments referred to provided with appropriate caveats. Whenever possible, citations and references should be from recently published sources. If referenced data are more than 10 years old, there should be a clear rationale.

UNEP publications use the Harvard Referencing system. In general, this means using in-text parenthetical citation (**Surname, 2022**), followed by a full alphabetical “Reference list” at the end of the publication in the following style: **Author surname, initial. (Year) ‘Article title’, Journal Name, Volume(Issue), pp. page range**. It is also acceptable to use the keyed referencing system, especially in short documents or where sources are from languages with different scripts.

The 2022 UNEP Publications Guidelines provide guidance on usage of the Harvard Referencing style and the Keyed Referencing Style in UNEP publications. Forewords, key messages and executive summaries

Forewords, key messages and executive summaries are standard features in the initial pages of a UNEP publication. They are often not drafted by the author, but this depends on the Author Brief. Not all three are required for a publication and will be dependent on the purpose and audience.

FOREWORD | Forewords are short introductory passages written by someone other than the author of the publication and are intended to tell readers why they should take the time to read the publication. Often, this is a person with name recognition and authority that will be recognized by intended target audiences. Forewords should make links beyond the publication to demonstrate the value of the publication in the broader context. Forewords should be no longer than **one page**.

KEY MESSAGES | Key messages sections highlight the standout takeaways from a given publication. While intended to give readers an opportunity to briefly glean the most salient key messages, these sections have ballooned in size in recent years—sometimes stretching as long as five pages. The new guidance for these sections is now no longer than **two pages**.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | Executive Summaries are also intended to provide readers with an opportunity to read an abridged version of a publication in order to gauge whether the content contained in the full publication is what they are looking for. Executive summaries should be no more than **two pages**.

Choosing a title for a publication

Technical and descriptive publication titles work well for keyword searches, but provide little understanding of the key message of a publication. Some publications targeting broad audiences are using catchy and clever titles, followed by more elaborate tagline containing keywords that facilitate issue area searches.

Approaches to playful titles can vary from a play on words to alliteration or reference to popular culture that makes audiences stop and think—while also giving away the main point of the report. For example, the 2021 publication “[Making Peace with Nature: A scientific blueprint to tackle the climate, biodiversity and pollution emergencies](#)” demonstrates the double-barrelled approach well. In this case, the title “Making Peace with Nature” (borrowed from a December 2020 speech by the UN Secretary General) makes readers think about the idea of “making peace” in relation to “nature”—at the same time, it gives some indication of the issues discussed in the publication. The tagline “A blueprint on how to fix the environmental crises” then more clearly articulates what the report is about.

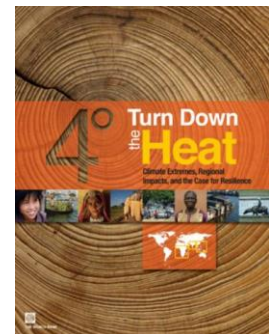
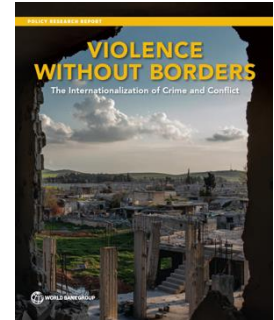
Some points to consider in the creative process toward choosing a playful report title:

- if translation is planned for the publication, consider whether cover art visuals will work if a play on words or alliteration. For example, is it possible to translate “Fishing for compliments” and still use the same cover art?
- many popular expressions have been used already to title reports from similar organizations. Check to ensure titles are unique.
- if titles are too creative or build upon lesser-known English expressions, non-native English speakers may not understand what is being expressed (even if they have a strong command of the language).



Examples of playful report titles

- [Life in Lockdown: Child and adolescent mental health and wellbeing in the time of COVID-19](#) (UNICEF, 2021). Note the use of alliteration.
- [Fed to Fail: The crisis of children's diets in early life](#) (UNICEF 2021 Child Nutrition Report, 2021) Note the use of alliteration.
- [Violence without Borders: The Internationalization of Crime and Conflict](#) (The World Bank, 2020) Note the reworking of Doctors without Borders for effect.
- [At Loggerheads? Agricultural Expansion, Poverty Reduction, and Environment in the Tropical Forests](#) (World Bank, 2007) Note the use of the idiom “loggerheads” connoting a difficult dispute, while also being a pun on the word “logging.”
- [Ebb and Flow: Water, Migration, and Development](#) (World Bank, 2021) Note the reference to the natural flow of water and the back and forth challenges discussed in the report.
- [High and Dry: Climate Change, Water, and the Economy](#) (World Bank, 2016) Note the use of the common expression to connote high temperatures and dry environments, as well as the expression referencing abandonment.
- [Turn Down the Heat: Climate Extremes, Regional Impacts, and the Case for Resilience](#) (World Bank, 2013) Note the use of the popular expression, which also clearly indicates the key message.
- [Northern exposure: Measures to prevent the spread of covid-19 have also fended off flu](#) (The Economist, 2021) Note the reference to a popular television programme.
- [Sum of a preacher man: Nigerian megachurches practise the prosperity they preach](#) (The Economist, 2021) Note the playful reworking of the title of a popular soul song.
- [Fishing for compliments: Chilean salmon take a vigorous leap towards sustainability](#) (The Economist, 2021) Note the employment of a playful idiom employed somewhat literally in this example, giving a double meaning.
- [Call on me: The military draft is making a comeback](#) (The Economist, 2021) Note the reference to a pop song, while also alluding to governments “calling on” their citizens for military service.
- [Beating bitcoin: Cryptocoins are proliferating wildly. What are they all for?](#) (The Economist, 2021) Note the use of alliteration.
- [Vacancies in the Village: Will empty shopfronts revive as New York comes back to life?](#) (The Economist, 2021) Note the use of alliteration.
- [Going Viral: COVID-19 and the Accelerated Transformation of Jobs in Latin America and the Caribbean](#) (World Bank, 2020) Note the use of viral in reference to the pandemic and also a rapid change in the job market.
- [Bureaucrats in business: the economics and politics of government ownership](#) (World Bank, 2013) Note the use of alliteration.



Publication cover art

The cover of a publication should tell readers at a glance what the publication’s main message is. Simple, powerful, one concept illustrations that complement the title of the publication help to underscore key messages and clearly articulate what a publication is about. It is important to note that the title/subtitle and the cover art need to work together.

