Chapter 2. Style

This chapter addresses a few of the more common or troublesome questions of style in terms of ASA, CSSA, and SSSA publication requirements and guidelines. It only incidentally covers English grammar, style, and usage.

To improve the quality of your writing, consult this manual and any of the excellent books available that cover grammar, punctuation, and other points of English usage (APA, 2009; Burchfield, 2004; Skillin & Gay, 1974; Strunk & White, 1999; UCP, 2010). The ACS Style Guide (Coghill & Garson, 2006) and Scientific Style and Format (CSE, 2006) address scientific writing and usage in general and provide detailed guidelines and examples within the sciences.

Strategies for eliminating awkwardness and cumbersome constructions include writing short, declarative sentences; keeping subjects and verbs as close together as possible; and, given a choice, selecting shorter and simpler rather than longer words (try vs. endeavor, show vs. demonstrate). In addition, a sentence recast in the active voice is often both shorter and clearer than the passive form.

ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

Define abbreviations at first mention in the abstract or text and again in the tables and figures. Provide an alphabetical list of abbreviations. The common abbreviations in Table 2–1 do not need definition, nor do SI units (Chapter 7) or chemical element symbols. For commonly used abbreviations and statistics, see Table 4–1. In the manuscript, place the list of abbreviations after the abstract.

Rules for abbreviating and lists of many accepted abbreviations and acronyms are given in Scientific Style and Format (CSE, 2006, p. 135–140) and in the ACS Style Guide (Coghill & Garson, 2006, Chapter 10). Acronyms do not have periods; nor do SI unit symbols. Abbreviations may or may not have periods.

Use abbreviations sparingly. If you do abbreviate, use a standard abbreviation rather than making up one specific to your paper. If you must devise an abbreviation, use letter groups that are not already familiar abbreviations for other phrases, that are not identical to units of measure, and that will not be confused with an element symbol. (For example, do not abbreviate leaf appearance interval as LAI, even if you are not going to discuss leaf area index).

Avoid using abbreviations at the beginning of sentences and in titles.

Additional useful points are as follows.

- Abbreviate SI units in numeric expressions; SI unit symbols do not end in a period. (See Chapter 7.)
- Abbreviate the names of states, provinces, and territories when following a city name, using the U.S. postal abbreviations (Table 2–2). Otherwise, spell out place names in full.
- The symbol % is used with numerals. As with other units, the symbol is not repeated with each number in a range or series (e.g., 10–20%). Do not use the word percent with a number.
- In a full date (international format: day month year), abbreviate the names of months longer than four letters: Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr., May, June, July, Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec. In text, spell out the month when used alone, or with only the day or year, and at the beginning of a sentence. Always abbreviate the month in references and tables. (See also the section on time and dates in Chapter 7.)
TABLE 2–1  These common abbreviations do not need definition. Use may be restricted to use in tables and figures (T) or with numeric values (N). For statistics symbols and abbreviations, see Table 4–1. For other unit symbols, see the tables in Chapter 7.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbr.</th>
<th>Meaning (restriction)</th>
<th>Abbr.</th>
<th>Meaning (restriction)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a.i.</td>
<td>active ingredient</td>
<td>GIS</td>
<td>geographical information system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>asl</td>
<td>above sea level (N)</td>
<td>GPS</td>
<td>global positioning system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>avg.</td>
<td>average (T)</td>
<td>h</td>
<td>hour (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BCE</td>
<td>before common era</td>
<td>i.d.</td>
<td>inside diameter (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bp</td>
<td>base pair</td>
<td>max.</td>
<td>maximum (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CE</td>
<td>common era</td>
<td>min.</td>
<td>minute (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CI</td>
<td>Cereal Investigation [number]^a</td>
<td>min.</td>
<td>minimum (T)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cM</td>
<td>centimorgan</td>
<td>mo</td>
<td>month (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>coef.</td>
<td>coefficient (T)</td>
<td>no.</td>
<td>number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>conc.</td>
<td>concentration (T)</td>
<td>o.d.</td>
<td>outside diameter (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>day (N)</td>
<td>PI</td>
<td>Plant Introduction, Plant Identification [no.]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Da</td>
<td>dalton</td>
<td>s</td>
<td>second (N)</td>
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<tr>
<td>diam.</td>
<td>diameter (N,T)</td>
<td>sp., spp.</td>
<td>species</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DNA</td>
<td>deoxyribonucleic acid</td>
<td>v/v</td>
<td>volume per volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dry wt.</td>
<td>dry weight (N,T)</td>
<td>vs.</td>
<td>versus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exp.</td>
<td>experiment (N)</td>
<td>wk</td>
<td>week (N)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fresh wt.</td>
<td>fresh weight (N,T)</td>
<td>w/v</td>
<td>weight per volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td>gravity constant</td>
<td>w/w</td>
<td>weight per weight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yr</td>
<td>year (N)</td>
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</table>

ARS  Agricultural Research Service  
EU  European Union  
NASA  National Aeronautics and Space Administration  
NOAA  National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration  
NRCS  Natural Resources Conservation Service  
USDA  United States Department of Agriculture  
USDOE  United States Department of Energy  
USEPA  United States Environmental Protection Agency  
USGS  United States Geological Survey  

^a The CI must be followed by a two-letter abbreviation for the applicable cereal genus: Clav for oat, Clho for barley (Hordeum), Cltr for wheat (Triticum), etc.

- Use the abbreviation or symbol for units only with numeric values. Use the same form for both singular or plural (e.g., 1 kg; 14 g; 2 wk; 9 yr).
- Use an uppercase "L" for "liter" when used as a stand-alone unit (e.g., 15 L) to avoid confusion with the lowercase letter l and the number 1, but use a lowercase "l" when used with prefixes such as deci, centi, and milli (e.g., 15 ml).
- At the beginning of a sentence, spell out the numeric value and the unit of measurement that follows (e.g., "Fifteen liters . . . was added"). Within a sentence, use the usual numerals and symbols ("15 L . . . was added").
- For chemical elements, use the standard symbols. No definition is needed at first use. As with other abbreviations, spell out the word at the beginning of a sentence.
- In a series of measurements, give the unit or units at the end (e.g., 2–10 °C; 5, 10, and 20 kg ha⁻¹).
- Use United States as a noun. Use the abbreviation "U.S." for United States only as an adjective (e.g., U.S. Cotton Belt). You may use "USA" as a noun in tables and titles.
• Abbreviate the genus in a Latin name (i.e., the scientific binomial) of organisms after first mention, except at the beginning of a sentence; always spell out the specific name or epithet. Abbreviate authorities (used for plants only). For abbreviations of authorities, follow the form given in your source for the scientific name or consult Authors of Plant Names (Brummitt & Powell, 1992). For further details, see Chapter 3 in this manual. See also Appendix A for online resources.
• Use the abbreviations "lat" and "long" with geographical coordinates (e.g., 30° N lat; 89°24′04″ N lat; 30° W long). Omit the abbreviations when both coordinates are given (12°39′ N, 8°00′ W; 27°33′00″ S, 151°58′00″ E). Decimal degrees are allowed.
• Some organizations do not need to be defined in the references and may stand alone as institutional authors, including IPCC and international agricultural research centers in the Consultative Group on Agricultural Research (CGIAR; www.cgiar.org)—CIAT, CIFOR, CIMMYT, CIP, ICARDA, ICLARM, ICRAF, ICRISAT, IFPRI, IITA, IBPGR, IPGRI, IRRI, ISNAR, IWMI, and WARDA. Thus, the text citation "CIMMYT (1988)" would appear in the reference list as "CIMMYT. 1988." Alphabetize such abbreviations letter by letter. Do not add the full name parenthetically in the author position in a reference entry.

**SPELLING AND CAPITALIZATION**

*Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster, 2003) is the desk dictionary used by ASA, CSSA, and SSSA editing staff regarding spelling, capitalization, and compound terms. Other dictionaries are usually acceptable; whichever your dictionary, use American spelling instead of British, except in quotations and titles, and choose the first spelling of a word.

The *Chicago Manual of Style* and the CSE style manual contain chapters on spelling and distinctive treatment of words, including hyphenation and compounds (UCP, 2010, Chapter 7; CSE, 2006, Chapter 6). For specialized terms, the *ACS Style Guide* (Coghill & Garson, 2006) has several helpful lists, including the spelling, abbreviation, and presentation of chemical elements and compounds. An additional resource for spelling, punctuation, abbreviations, symbols, and type style for specialized terms in the physical and life sciences is the *New Oxford Dictionary for Scientific Writers and Editors* (Martin, 2009). This book is not primarily a dictionary of definitions but of usage and style.

The first letter is capitalized in the following cases:

- Regions, sections, or groups of sites commonly associated together (e.g., Corn Belt, the Midwest, the South, the West). Do not capitalize the adjectival form (e.g., midwestern practices, southern states, western Texas). Note the following distinction: the southeastern United States, but the U.S. Southeast.
- The first letter of genus and all higher taxa (e.g., family and order), but not lower taxa (specific name or epithet, subspecies, variety).
- Trademarked names. Trademarks are adjectives and must modify a generic noun. It is a misuse of a trademark to pluralize it or to derive a verb or noun from it. For ASA, CSSA, and SSSA publications, omit the various trademark symbols, such as ® and ™.
- Words specified by number, and so treated as proper nouns (e.g., Treatment 1, Day 2, Exp. 3, Year 4, No. 5 [but Paper no. 6]). Exceptions may apply within special fields (e.g., chromosome 6 and metaphase I).
- The first word after a colon if the colon introduces a quotation, two or more sentences, or a direct question.
- Any title of office immediately preceding a name (SSSA President Jane Smith). Do not capitalize titles standing alone (e.g., the SSSA president was elected).

If a chemical name to be capitalized (as in titles, or beginning a sentence) begins with a Greek letter, a numeral, or a prefix in italics or small capitals, leave that unchanged and capitalize the next letter. Examples: β-1-4-Glucose, p-Coumaric acid, and D-Glyceraldehyde.
Words derived from proper names but now in common usage tend not to be capitalized (e.g., paris green, bunsen burner, petri dish; but Erlenmeyer flask). Common names, races, and market types of crops are not capitalized, even if the name comes from a proper noun (e.g., bermudagrass, japonica rice, pima cotton, spanish peanut, sudangrass).

Months and days of the week are capitalized, but seasons are not.

**PUNCTUATION**

Punctuation marks help to show the meaning of written speech by grouping words according to meaning. Too much or too little punctuation slows down the reader, and careless punctuation misleads the precise reader without helping anyone else.

The standard rules of punctuation are adequate for all ASA, CSSA, and SSSA publications. The APA and ACS style manuals (APA, 2009; Coghill & Garson, 2006) treat punctuation clearly and comprehensively.

The following rules address usages that often give authors trouble.

- Use a comma before "and" or "or" in a series of three or more items. Examples: "0.8, 2.1, and 3.9 kg ha\(^{-1}\); "shoot biomass, root biomass, leaf blade or leaflet length and width, and plant height"; but "nodule weight and size and N\(_2\) fixation."
- Use a semicolon to separate a series of items within a list if any one of them includes a comma. Example: Treatments in the second fertilizer study were rates of 56, 112, and 448 kg ha\(^{-1}\) N; 25 and 49 kg ha\(^{-1}\) P; and 47, 93, 139, 186, and 279 kg ha\(^{-1}\) K.
- Punctuation in display lists (where each item starts on a new line) depends on the content and context. If all the items are short, independent phrases, use no period. If any one of the items is a complete sentence, end each item with a period. If the list is functionally part of the introductory sentence, punctuate with commas or semicolons and a final period, just as you would if the sentence had no line breaks.
- For numbered display lists, use arabic numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.) followed by a period for each item. For numbered lists in text, use lowercase letters (a, b, c, etc.) in parentheses.
- Use no comma in dates (e.g., May 2000; 14 May 2000).
- Commas and periods come before a closing quotation mark, an asterisk, or a superscripted footnote number; semicolons and colons come after. Do not double periods at the end of a quotation: "Once is enough."
- Use single quotes around a cultivar name when it follows the Latin name (e.g., *Triticum aestivum* L. 'Cheyenne'); you do not need to use single quotes after the word *cultivar* (e.g., the cultivar Cheyenne). Place punctuation outside of the single-quote marks. Do not use cultivar quotes with landraces or experimental lines. With the exception of articles in *Crop Science* and *Journal of Plant Registrations*, single quotes are not needed when cultivar names are written alone unless their absence would create confusion.
- Use parentheses to indicate equation numbers in display equations. Spell out "Equation" when referring to equations in the text (e.g., Equation 2).
- For parentheses within parentheses, substitute square brackets for the inner pair. Example: "(Lloyd-Jones, 1873 [as cited by Andrews, 1996])." Two exceptions in prose are required in ASA, CSSA, and SSSA publications:
  - Use brackets to enclose scientific names that already contain parentheses, as in "soybean [*Glycine max* (L.) Merr.] was. . ." An alternative is to use commas, as in "soybean, *Glycine max* (L.) Merr., was. . .".
  - For mathematical usage, fences are used in the order {[( )]}. See Chapter 6.
• To form the plural of abbreviations without periods, add a final lowercase s (e.g., RFLPs, PIs, SEs). To form plurals of abbreviations with periods, lowercase letters used as nouns, uppercase letters that could be confused for something else, and abbreviations or symbols ending in a superscript or subscript, use an apostrophe before the s. Examples: j’s, A’s, F₂’s.

**COMPOUND WORDS AND DERIVATIVES**

**Hyphens, Spaces, and Dashes**

A word containing a prefix, suffix, or combining form is a derivative and is most often written as one word. Compound words used to express an idea different from that expressed by the separate parts are usually written as one word. Hyphens and en-dashes are used to avoid a confusing sequence of letters, a confusing sequence of adjectives, a jumble of ideas, or possible confusion with a word of the same spelling without the hyphen (e.g., co-op, as distinct from coop). Comprehensive rules for compounds are found in the *Chicago Manual of Style* (UCP, 2010) and *Scientific Style and Format* (CSE, 2006).

Most compounds and derivatives fall under these general rules:

• Derivatives are usually written as one word. Examples: antiquality, clockwise, fourfold (but 10-fold or 1.5-fold), nonadditives, nonsignificant, postdoctoral, preemergent, reuse, shortwave.

• Where several usages are acceptable, choose one and use it consistently throughout the manuscript. Example: main stem or mainstem, but not both.

• Use hyphens with prefixes to words that begin with a capital letter and in a few awkward combinations that bring like vowels together. Examples: un-American, semi-independent.

• Hyphenate a compound adjective when used before, but not after, the word it modifies. Example: a winter-hardy plant; the plant is winter hardy.

• Use a hyphen after a prefix to a hyphenated adjective. Examples: semi-winter-hardy plant, non-winter-hardy plant.

• Use a hyphen in a compound adjective that includes a number. Examples: 10-yr-old field, 6-kg samples, 4-mm depth.

• Hyphenate compound modifiers starting with the adverb "well," except when another adverb precedes it. Example: well-known method, but very well known method.

• Do not use a hyphen after an adverb formed by adding "-ly" to an adjective. Example: an intensively cultivated hillside.

• Use a hyphen for compound adjectival expressions as needed for clarity (e.g., "on a per-gram basis," "winter-grown cereals," but "low molecular weight substance").

• Use an en-dash instead of a hyphen in a compound or prefixed adjective that has a phrase in one of its parts (and the phrase cannot be hyphenated). Examples: "Avena sterilis–derived resistance genes"; "pre–Civil War surveys."

• Use an en-dash instead of a hyphen after a superscript or subscript. Examples: F₃–derived; NO₃–N (but "nitrate N" when spelled out).

• Use hyphens to join numbers and prefixes in chemical names (e.g., *trans*-2-bromocyclopentanol). For exceptions, see further in the *ACS Style Guide* (Coghill & Garson, 2006, Chapter 12).

• Use an en-dash between joined nouns of equal importance. Examples: Webster–Nicollet soil complex; oxidation–reduction potential; Waller–Duncan k ratio; corn–soybean rotation; Fusarium wilt–root-knot nematode complex.
• As a specialized instance of the previous rule, use an en-dash between two chemical compounds (e.g., HCl–H₂SO₄).
• Use an en-dash to indicate a range of numbers. Examples: "p. 23–49."; "Plant Disease, 66, 172–176"; ; "during the final study years (1997–1999)," "the 1999–2000 winter wheat growing season". Exception: If either of the numbers is negative, or is otherwise modified, use the word "to" instead of the dash. Examples: "(0 to ≤5%)" or "(−5 to 10 °C)".

If you cannot or do not wish to distinguish hyphens from en-dashes in your manuscript, use hyphens throughout. The copyeditors will convert as necessary.

**MISCELLANEOUS POINTS OF USAGE**

The following entries address common difficulties in scientific usage.

**Affect vs. effect (verb).** "To affect" means to act upon something that already exists; "to effect" means to bring some thing or condition into existence.

**Affect vs. effect vs. impact (noun).** An "effect" is a result or outcome; an "affect" is an emotion (the term is used chiefly in psychology); an "impact" is a collision, the force of a collision, or (by extension) a major effect. That is, "impact" is not a neutral equivalent of "effect."

**Alternate vs. alternative.** Use "alternate" to mean occurring or following by turns, or alternating in time or space—first one, then the other. Use "alternative" for one of two or more mutually exclusive possibilities.

**Based on.** "Based on" can have verbal force ("We based our conclusions on four years of experience") or adjectival force, in a passive sense, modifying a noun or pronoun (which usually immediately precedes it). Example: "This conclusion is based on four years of experience" or "Conclusions based on experience may still require testing." To modify a verb, use other constructions, such as "on the basis of." Avoid: "Based on the first four years of results, we discarded the original hypothesis." Better: "On the basis of our results, we discarded the original hypothesis."

**Between vs. among (prep.).** Use "between" for two entities, "among" for more than two.

**British spelling.** Except in references, change British to American spelling (e.g., "analyse" to "analyze"; "behaviour" to "behavior"; "grey" to "gray"; "modelled" to "modeled").

**cf. (Latin confero, compare).** Use "cf." sparingly, to mean "see, for a contrasting view." For scientific writing, the English "see" and "compare" are preferable.

**Compare to vs. compare with (verb + prep.).** Use "compare to" for overall likenesses and contrasts and for subjective, qualitative comparisons ("Shall I compare thee to a summer day?" [Shakespeare, Sonnet 18]). Use "compare with" for objective, quantitative comparisons (e.g., the results of the low-P treatment were compared with those of the high-P treatment). Also, do not be afraid to simplify "more ... compared with" to "more ... than" (e.g., "more biomass at the second harvest than the first instead of "more biomass at the second harvest compared with the first").

**Due to (adj. or prep.) vs. because of (prep.).** "Due to" as an adjective must modify a noun or pronoun; as a preposition, however, it is equivalent to "because of" or "owing to" and can modify a whole clause. Authorities disagree on this usage. A writer wishing to
avoid minor controversy may safely use "because of" instead of "due to" at the beginning of a sentence or an independent clause.

e.g. (Latin exempli gratia, for example) vs. i.e. (Latin id est, that is). Use "e.g." to mean "for example"; use "i.e." to mean "that is." Use the abbreviated forms only in parentheses; otherwise, use the English words.

Ensure vs. insure (verb). Use "ensure" to mean "make certain that a desired outcome occurs." Use "insure" to mean "protect" against monetary loss (as in an insurance policy).

Further vs. farther (adj. or adv.). "Further" means in addition or to a greater extent; "farther" implies distance in space or time.

Geographical names. Use common English equivalents of place names where such exist (e.g., Rome, not Roma; Munich, not München; Mexico City, not México; but Buenos Aires, Beijing).

Percent vs. percentage vs. percentage point. "Percent" is used with numeric values and is spelled out only at the beginning of a sentence. "Percentage" describes such a value and is always spelled out. "Percentage point" is used with numeric values and refers to a step of 1% in a percentage value; it is treated as a word, not a unit, and so is not abbreviated. Examples: "Grain fill was 20%"; "Nine percent of the plants"; "the percentage of grain fill"; "was reduced by 1.2 percentage points."

Principal (adj.) vs. principle (noun). Use "principal" to mean foremost, chief, main; use "principle" to mean a tenet or belief.

Restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses (that; which). Generally, "that" introduces a restrictive clause, one that gives information essential to the meaning of the sentence; "which" may also do so, but to be read as restrictive, "which" must not be preceded by a comma. Examples: "Only soil samples that contained >30% clay were tested." "Those samples which were rejected for testing were stored for use in a separate study." If in such sentences the restrictive "that" clause were omitted, essential meaning would be lost.

"Which" introduces a nonrestrictive clause, one that gives only incidental, supplemental information. Examples: "The soil samples, which had been stored in a rain shelter, were tested for clay content." "The rejected samples, which received no further treatment, were stored for use in a separate study." If in such a sentence the nonrestrictive "which" clause were removed, the basic statement remains.

Because the difference in meaning between restrictive "that" or "which" and nonrestrictive "which" is signaled by only a comma, we suggest following a simple rule: Use "that" with no preceding comma when the added phrase is restrictive; use "which" with a preceding comma when the added phrase is nonrestrictive.

Some troublesome singulatirs. Apparatus (pl. apparatuses or apparatus); criterion (pl., criteria); medium (pl., media); phenomenon (pl., phenomena); species (pl., species).

Subject–verb agreement. The cause for errors in subject–verb agreement is often confusion about the number of the subject. Two singular nouns joined by "and" require a plural verb unless the two nouns function as a single entity (e.g., "research and development"). When two or more nouns are joined by "or," the verb takes the number of the closest subject. Collective nouns take a singular verb when the group as a whole is meant (usually preceded by "the") (e.g., "The series of experiments was...."; "A series of experiments were....").
Units of measure should be treated as collective nouns that take a singular verb:

- Six milliliters of the solution was....
- After 3 h, 6 ml of the solution was....

**Use vs. employ (verb).** "Use" is the simpler word, and neutral. "Employ" carries additional connotations, as of advantageous use or hiring for wages.

**Use vs. utilize (verb).** The meanings are not identical. Use "utilize" (meaning "to turn to practical use") only to indicate that some unexpected use was found for an object or procedure ("kerosene tins utilized as champagne glasses").

**Using.** The participle "using" must modify the agent of the action, and the agent must be expressed. People (and experiments) use, but plants and pieces of equipment do not. A passive sentence such as "the samples were oven-dried using the larger oven" implies "by us" (this grammatical construction is called *subject understood*), but in scientific writing an explicit statement is far preferable. Recast the sentence in the active voice ("We oven dried the samples using..."). Alternatively, change "using" to "with" for pieces of equipment or materials and "by" for procedures.

**Words of foreign origin.** Foreign words in common usage in English and that appear in the main section of *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (e.g., *ad hoc*, *a priori*, et al., *in situ*, *in vitro*, *in vivo*, *per se*, *vice versa*, and vs.) are considered to have been incorporated into the language. They are thus considered English words and are set in roman type, not italic. Do not hyphenate such foreign words, even in adjectival position.

**/ (slash or solidus).** With a few exceptions (e.g., *and/or*), reserve the slash for mathematical division and ratios. To express a combination of ideas, "and" or "or" can usually be substituted for the slash. Example: For phrase "Appearance of collar/ligule of first leaf," change the wording to "collar or ligule," "collar and ligule," or "collar and/or ligule."

**GREEK LETTERS**

The Greek alphabet, showing both uppercase and lowercase letters, is given below. Modifications of a few of these letters may be acceptable, but the ones given here should be used insofar as possible. Do not italicize Greek letters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Upper case</th>
<th>Lower case</th>
<th>Upper case</th>
<th>Lower case</th>
<th>Upper case</th>
<th>Lower case</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>A</td>
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<td>pi</td>
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