



Softbites Style Guide

General Info

The Softbites blog is designed for anyone with an interest in soft matter and a bit of familiarity with physics fundamentals. We expect that readers will know words like “energy” or “vector,” and how to read plots and (simple) equations.

Softbites posts should be accessible and fun, without compromising scientific accuracy. The most important points to remember are:

- The post should be short, sweet, and to the point. The goal is to post ‘bite-size’ pieces that readers can digest in a few minutes (<1000 words, ideally 500-700).
- Start with a “hook,” a sentence that catches the reader’s attention and interest
- Keep language simple, our readers will not be familiar with most technical, jargony terms.
- Don’t overload the piece with too many scientific concepts; simplify the story when necessary, while still staying faithful to the original research being presented.
- Make sure the post tells a good story! There should be transitions between each concept, and every post should have a beginning, middle, and end.

A good story has a beginning (setting up a problem that needs to be solved), a middle (how we solved the problem) and an end (we’ve solved the problem; what lessons have we learned? What general insights have we gained?).

It may also be helpful to think about the typical story in a scientific paper, with a beginning (introduction), middle (methods), and end (conclusion).

- A post should **start** with the main point / thesis and then explain it -- don’t save your punchline for the end or the reader might never get there!
- Figures should always support and clarify the writing, and be directly mentioned in the text.
- Formal citations should be avoided. Additional information can be made available as a footnote or as an in-text hyperlink to a non-paywall source.

Most conventions are up to the Contributor (i.e. British vs. American English, etc.), as long as the piece is self-consistent. Others (like the Oxford comma) are preferred and noted in the checklist below. We recommend the singular “they” when referring to a hypothetical, unspecified person.

Some nice tips from “The Elements of Style”:

- *Omit the needless word*
- *Use definite, specific, concrete language*
- *Put statements in positive form; knowing “what is” satisfies the reader more than “what’s not”*
- *Brevity is the byproduct of vigor!!*

Don’t say:

It was not long before she was very sorry that she had said what she had said

Say:

She soon repented her words.





Style Checklist

- Title is short, grabs the reader's attention, and is directly related to the content
- The opening and closing sentences (and subtitle if relevant) are supported by the rest of the story
- Transitions exist between paragraphs and between concepts, ensuring that the flow is smooth
- The grammar and spelling are correct (the [Grammarly plugin](#) is super efficient at spotting small typos like missing commas or double spaces)
 - Same verb tense is used throughout (or at least the same tense is used throughout a given paragraph)
 - Verbs match nouns (i.e. "there is one cat" not "there are one cat" or "there is one cats," etc.)
 - Oxford comma (one, two, and three or more things in a list require an Oxford comma)
- Jargon is minimized as much as possible (this [jargon identifier](#) might help)
- All technical terms, pieces of jargon, abbreviations, acronyms, etc. are defined when first used
- Effort is made to introduce only one new technical concept per paragraph
- Minimal abbreviations (i.e. use "for example," not "i.e.," "e.g.")
- Limit passive voice (when possible, say "the researchers show that" instead of "it is shown that")
- Minimal cliches (avoid both science-specific phrases like "shedding light on," "paradigm shift," etc, and general ones like "at the end of the day," "thinking outside the box," and similar)
- Ordinal numbers are consistent ("first" not "1st")
- Make sure the piece is self-consistent:
 - Spelling is consistent (British or American, etc.)
 - Punctuation is always either inside or outside of quotes ("this." or "this".)
- No formal citations. Additional information is given as footnotes or as in-text hyperlinks to an open source copy of the reference (i.e. no paywall)
- Each footnote is mentioned in the body-text as a number in brackets (i.e. "[1]" or "[2]")
- Figures support the thesis of the post
- The usefulness of each figure is explained in the body-text as part of a sentence.
Say things like: "The velocity of the car increases over time, as shown in Figure 1" rather than citing a figure like in a manuscript (i.e. "(Figure 1)") or restating the caption in the body text (i.e. "Figure 1 shows car velocity versus time.")
- Figure titles are "Figure #" (not "Fig. #" etc.)
- All figures/images are attributed appropriately in the caption text:
 - For images requiring external permission: "Image courtesy of [SOURCE]."
 - For figures taken from the original paper: "Image adapted from [AUTHOR'S] original paper."
- All hyperlinks are in-text (i.e. "Information is available on the [Soft Matter Wikipedia Page](#)" NOT "Information is available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soft_matter")





Figures

Figures should be chosen to support and clarify the scientific content of the article. Each figure should stand on its own with its caption, and its relevance should be mentioned in the body-text. Don't overload the post with plots of data.

- Choose a visually engaging image to headline the post (the image should pair well with the title).
- Schematics are often better at conveying an idea than of a long piece of text.
- Figures from the original paper should be minimalist in style: keep only the panels that are directly relevant to the text, and delete insets, extraneous labels, etc. Conversely, sometimes it may help to add to the chosen panels to make them more clear.

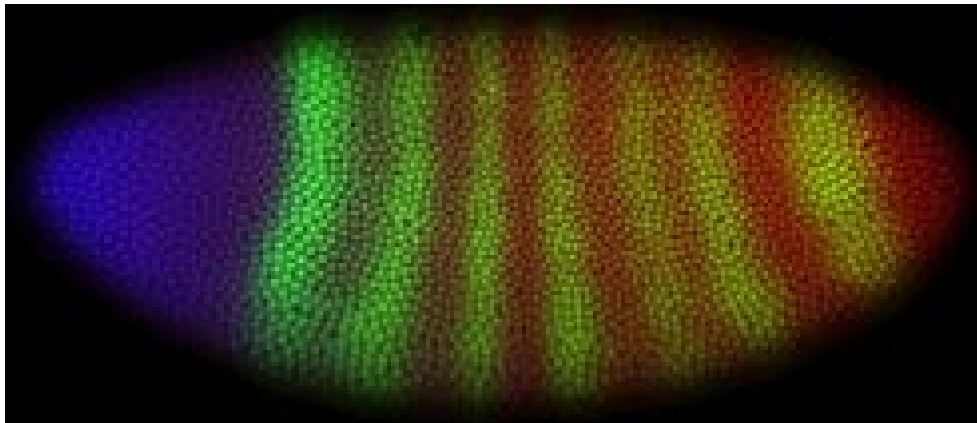
Metadata

It is important to fill out all the metadata: "Title," "Caption," "Alt text," and "Description."

- "Title" -- the full title of the image/figure, or a shortened version
- "Caption" -- the title and caption text for your figure (i.e. "Figure 1: Model schematic. A droplet composed mostly of fluid B (green) within a bath of fluid A (blue).")
- "Alt text" -- text that will sometimes appear when the mouse is hovered over an image, and will always appear as an alternative if the image does not load. Choose something short, simple, and descriptive.
- "Description" -- this is descriptive text available to be read to users who are blind or have limited vision. It should describe all relevant visuals in the image that help the reader understand the figure. Examples are provided below.

Two Examples of Description Text:

Description Text Example 1

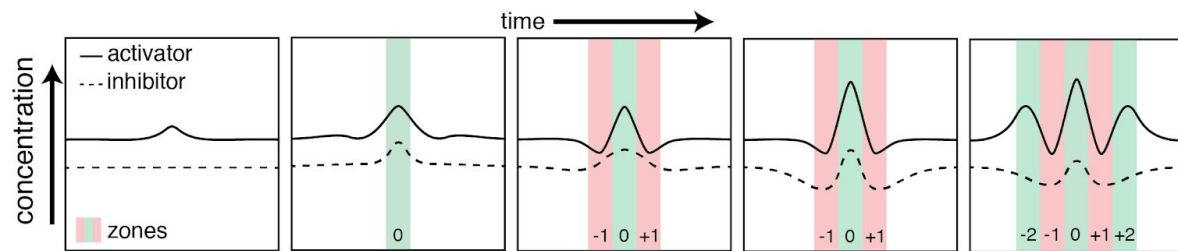


Description: "A picture of a developing *Drosophila* embryo. It is in the shape of an oval made of many small circles. The left one-third of the oval is blue, the rest is patterned in alternating green and red stripes."





Description Text Example 2



Description: "A series of five graphs showing two lines changing over time. The top line is for the activator (X) and the bottom line is for the inhibitor (Y). The first graph has a small peak in the top X-line indicating a local area of higher concentration. In the second graph this peak has become larger and a peak has also appeared in the lower Y-line. Here the peaks are labeled with a green stripe called "zone 0." In the third graph a trough is forming on either side of the peak in the X-line. These troughs are labeled with red stripes "zone -1" and "zone +1." In the fourth graph the troughs are deeper and appear in the Y-line as well. In the last graph new peaks have formed next to the troughs and are labeled with green stripes "zone -2" and "zone +2." The graphs have gone from a straight line to a wave pattern, and from a blank white background to a striped green and red background."

