



The Importance of Consistency

How editorial style guides help make your publications more professional.

If you are not familiar with the concept of editorial style guides, read on for an explanation of what they are, why you might want one, who uses them and what they cover. Also included is a simple way to go about developing a house style guide for your organisation.

What is an editorial style sheet, guide or manual?

Style, in this context, has nothing to do with graphic design, the font you choose or even the tone or type of language you use.

An editorial style guide records decisions you have made about how to present certain things in the writing you produce. When you write anything new for your business, you can check the style guide for the styles used in previous publications. Examples are: idiosyncratic spellings; whether you use an em dash or an en dash (see below); or how to present numbers and dates.

There is no right or wrong about style decisions, but once you have established a style, it is best to stick to it and be consistent. Otherwise, your writing could look unprofessional and sloppy.

Why should I care?

People judge by appearances. Most of us dress to demonstrate our professionalism to our clients, and keep any public areas in our offices tidy.

Attention to detail can be even more important in the documents produced by a business. They must be spelt correctly, grammatical – and presented in a consistent style. You don't want potential clients wondering what other things you can't be bothered to get right.

Additionally, when a business has a defined house style, staff and consultants can refer to it in order to produce material that is consistent with other house publications.

Who uses them?

Book editors have a separate style sheet for each book; publishers also have an overall house style.

The Australian Government has a style guide: *Style Manual for authors, editors and printers*, currently in its thoroughly revised sixth edition, which covers all governmental publications. This manual is a useful reference for anyone producing publications of any type within Australia as the default style, for anything not covered in a specific style sheet or guide.

Businesses, too, benefit from having a house style, recorded in a style guide. It can be anything from one page to a booklet, and will set the style for any publication made for the business, in print or electronic form.

What goes into a style guide?

Things that may be covered in a style guide include:

- Spellings of words that may be unusual, foreign or idiosyncratic. These are listed alphabetically, so you can look them up easily. (Examples: personal names; technical terms. Additionally, you may choose to present foreign words, not commonly used in English, in italics, to flag to the reader that the word comes from another language.)
- Australian or US spellings. (Examples: colour and realise vs. color and realize.) Australian spellings are appropriate for any material intended for an Australian or broadly international audience; however, a business that directs its marketing specifically to the US should use American spellings.



- Any abbreviations used within the document. (Examples: NSW; Bros.)
- Quotation mark style. (Examples: As a rule, newspapers use double marks, with single marks within a quotation; book publishers usually use single, with double within.) It does not matter which style a business chooses, so long as it is consistent within all documents.
- Use of em or en dash. (Examples: The em dash is long (the length of an 'm')—like this—with no spaces; the en dash is shorter (but longer than a hyphen: it's the length of an 'n') – like this – and always has a space on either side.) Only one should ever be used: choose the one you prefer. Keyboard hint: for an em dash on a computer keyboard, press Ctrl + Alt + the minus sign on the number pad. The en dash is obtained by pressing Ctrl + the minus sign on the number pad. For hyphens, use the short dash or minus sign alone.
- Capitalisation and punctuation (if any) of headings and captions. (Example: whether headings or captions are in title case or sentence case.) Often a first level heading will be in title case, and subsequent levels in sentence case, as in this article.
- Punctuation of bullet points. (Examples: Capital letter or not at the beginning of each point; full stop, semi colon or no punctuation at the end.) Minimal punctuation is generally accepted as usual nowadays, unless the bullet points contain full sentences/paragraphs, as in this article.
- Where numbers are expressed as figures or spelt out. (Example: often, numbers up to and including ten or twenty are spelt out, and figures used after that.)
- Dates and years. (Examples: 12 November 2009; 12/11/09; 12th Nov '09; Twelfth November, Two thousand and nine.) Again, make a decision and stick with it.
- Time. (Examples: 11.15 pm; 23:15 hours; quarter past eleven at night.)
- Dollars and cents. (Examples: \$150 or 150 dollars; \$1,000,000, \$1 million dollars or one million dollars.)

There are thousands more style decisions that could be made for a house style; a single publication may only need a few.

How do I start one?

Developing a house style doesn't need to be complicated. A simple way is to start a guide while working on your next publication. Make a few preliminary decisions, and then add more to the guide as they come up with each new publication. This is much less overwhelming than trying to think of every eventuality all at once.

As a copywriter, I like to begin by asking the client for a style sheet or manual, if there is one. If not, I will create one for the publications I am working on. I present this early on, so the decisions I make can be approved. Then if required, I submit the end result with the final copy, so the client can use and build upon it in the future.

You can access the template that I use for a single publication style sheet below. Start adding your own style decisions, and you're on your way to having your own house style.

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EDITORIAL STYLE SHEET

A, B Abbreviations: Acronyms:	C, D Capitalisation: Dates: Dollars:
E, F, G, H eg and ie or e.g. and i.e.: en or em dash fractions: Hyphens:	I, J, K, L, M, N Italics: Legislation: Numbers:
O, P	Q, R, S Quotation marks: Australian or US Spelling: (-ise; -our/-ize; -or)
T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z Time: Titles: Years:	
Format for graphs/tables:	

Use the Australian Government Style Manual for writers, editors and printers for anything not covered in this guide.