

A person is sitting at a desk, working on a laptop. In the foreground, there is a dark mug on the left and a notepad with a pen on the right. The notepad has some handwritten notes and a pen labeled 'PILOT G-2 05'. The background is slightly blurred, showing the laptop screen and the person's arm.

How to ...

CREATE A STYLE SHEET

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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Creating a style sheet is a great way to give your writing extra polish, and you added credibility.

The last thing you want is for your reader to be distracted from your message by inconsistencies in how elements of your writing are presented.

Poor spelling, bad grammar and inconsistencies in capitalisation or hyphenation can be a major irritant to your readers. Whether you like it or not, they will judge you by the quality of your written materials.

This guide will help you to start building a style sheet tailored to your writing, which means you can be confident that your reader will focus on the most important thing – your message.

Denise



WHAT IS A STYLE SHEET?

IT'S NOT A GRAMMAR GUIDE

A style sheet is a document where you collect all the information about how you would like words and numbers to be used, including spelling, capitalisation, dates and times, and hyphens.

It can also detail how you lay out tables, bullet lists, quotes, and captions.

You can even include words not to use, or those you prefer in certain situations.

A style sheet is not a grammar guide.

It should be specific to your writing style.

It should help make your writing clear and consistent.

Remember: it's *your* writing and *your* message, so your words should sound like *you!*



WHAT SHOULD I INCLUDE IN MY STYLE SHEET?

MAKE A DECISION ONCE, THEN STICK TO IT

Anything that can be expressed in more than one way – that's words, numbers and punctuation for starters – can go in your style sheet.

Instead of trying to hold everything in your head – *Did I hyphenate 'co-operate' the last time I used it?* – you can make a decision, record it and forget about it until next time.

Then you look it up in your style sheet!

Spelling preferences

Capitalisation

Hyphenation

How numbers and
dates are written

Punctuation
preferences

... and much more.



CONSISTENCY IS KING

SPEAK WITH A UNITED VOICE

Are you writing a book with a co-author? Or maybe several people contribute to your company's written content.

Repeatedly discussing whether to hyphenate a word, for example, wastes time and energy and diverts your focus away from the business of writing.

Creating a style sheet for everyone involved avoids circular arguments on points of style.

In addition to your style sheet, consider choosing which dictionary you will defer to over spelling.

Having an overarching style guide that suits the tone of your writing is also good practice.

See the sections at the end of this guide for some suggestions.



DEALING WITH WORDS

SPELLING VARIATIONS

Your style sheet should include any words or expressions that can be spelled in different ways.

Most of us recognise the difference between the US and British English versions of common words, such as [colour /color](#), [centre/center](#) and [programme/program](#).

It's important to pick one style and stick to it – either US English, British English, or the English of your choice – so think of your audience.

The -ize ending

Contrary to popular belief, an *-ize* ending does not indicate US spelling.

The *-ize* ending is correct in both US and British English so, again, choose one style and stick to it always.

Be aware that some words in British English never take an *-ize* suffix, e.g. *analyse*.



CAPITALISATION

TO CAP OR NOT?

Are you unsure when to capitalise some words?

Capitalisation is a difficult area for many people.

Just because something is Important to You or Your Business, doesn't mean it should be capitalised.

Avoid overusing capitals as it can look fussy.

Examples

Prime Minister David Smith *but* David Smith, the prime minister.

President Jones *but* the company president.

Most dictionaries and style guides don't capitalise *internet*.



HYPHENATION

ONE WORD, TWO WORDS OR HYPHENATED?

When to use hyphens can be fraught with difficulty, as there are no rigid rules.

You may or may not decide to use one with prefixes, such as pre-pay, anticlockwise, resit or postwar.

However, sometimes a hyphen is needed to avoid confusion:

to **recover** (to find again) is not the same thing as **re-cover** (to cover again).

The choice is yours, but be consistent.

When a compound adjective comes before a noun it's usually hyphenated:

A well-dressed man.

When it comes after the noun it isn't:

The man is well dressed.

If an adjective ends in *-ly* it doesn't need a hyphen:

A smartly dressed man.



ABBREVIATIONS

KEEPING THINGS BRIEF

Abbreviations, acronyms and initialisms are invaluable for expressing yourself concisely.

Think carefully about using too many abbreviations. Although a shared shorthand can be useful, beware of assuming that your reader will always understand what you mean.

Be consistent, and decide whether or not you want to use full stops.

For example: U.K. or UK, B.Sc. or BSc, R.O.I. or ROI?

Abbreviations are made when the end is left off a word, e.g. Fri for Friday.

Initialisms are when you use the initial letters of the original words, e.g. BBC, RSVP or RAC.

Acronyms are a subset of initialisms and are pronounced as words, e.g. UNICEF, FIFA or AWOL.



NUMBERS

WORDS OR NUMERALS?

Inconsistency in how numbers are presented is a common mistake. A generally accepted rule of thumb is:

Use WORDS for numbers up to and including ten.

Use NUMERALS for 11 and above.

However, some style guides recommend writing out numbers up to one hundred.

When it's your project, you get to chose – just be consistent.

EXAMPLES

We're offering a 25% discount for the next 12 days.

Each team has between four and six members.

The players were between 14 and 16 years old.



THE PERFECT DATE

Think about how you'd like to style dates.

The order of day and month, whether or not to use commas and the ordinal (*st*, *nd*, *rd*, *th*) vary according to style guides and conventions in different countries.

The last example in the box is US style so, again, think carefully about who will be reading your content.

EXAMPLES

These are all correct:

23rd August 2019

23rd August, 2019

August 23, 2019

23 August 2019

23/08/2019

08/23/2019



TIME

12-HOUR OR 24-HOUR CLOCK?

There are a few things you need to consider when it comes to writing about times.

Do you want to use the 12-hour or 24-hour clock?

Will you use am and pm (or a.m. and p.m.) or not?

Will you put a space before am/pm?

It's up to you, but your choice may be influenced by what you are writing and the expected readership.

EXAMPLES

0800–1730

8.00–5.30

8am–5.30pm

8 am – 5.30 pm

8.00am to 5.30pm

An editor can advise on what would be best for your project.



PREFERRED WORDS

PLAIN ENGLISH

It's very easy to fall back on jargon and cliches, especially if you're writing for a niche sector.

If you know you can be prone to using buzzwords, create a list of words or phrases you'd like to reduce the use of or avoid altogether.

The examples are words popular in business writing that are both overused and needlessly formal.

What's wrong with *affect*, or *use*, or *help*?

EXAMPLES

actioned
benchmarked
commence
cutting edge (or worse, bleeding edge)
facilitate
impact (as a verb)
key
leverage
showcase
synergy
task (as a verb)
utilise

EXAMPLE STYLE SHEET

At it's simplest, your style sheet can be an A-Z list of your word choices like this example.

This is easy to create and you can add to it as you go along.

Over time your style sheet may expand to several pages as you make decisions on your preferred use of language.

It may include sections on people's names, book or song titles, or events, depending on what you write about.

A add-on treatments all-over	B	C cooperate complementary therapy (not complimentary)
D decision making	E e.g. email	F full-price therapy
G	H	I the internet i.e. -ise endings (e.g. revitalise)
J	K	L lose weight (not loose)
M	N north-west England	O
P per cent percentage	Q	R
S south-east Scotland stress-free experience sneak peek	T top-to-toe pampering	U UK
V	W website	X, Y, Z
HYPHENS pre-tanning routine in-store exclusive	NO HYPHEN wellbeing	DATES 25 April 2015
ITALICS	NO ITALICS	TIMES 8.30am-7.00pm Appt. times 30mins
NUMBERS one to ten 11 upwards 25% (no space) 2nd, 3rd NOT 2 nd , 3 rd		



DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

WILL IT BE NOTICED?

Inconsistencies in spelling and presentation can reflect badly on you and your writing.

Regardless of what you are saying, the reader will be distracted and may even see a lack of attention to detail in your copy as evidence of sloppiness in other areas of your business.

A style sheet can help eliminate inconsistencies and give your writing polish and credibility.

A study* revealed that 59% of Britons wouldn't use a company that had obvious grammatical or spelling mistakes on its website or marketing material.

Have you checked yours?

*<http://realbusiness.co.uk/article/24623-poor-grammar-on-websites-scares-59-away>



ANYTHING ELSE?

AND FINALLY ...

- Remember to keep your style decisions consistent across everything you write, and I mean everything!
- Your style sheet isn't static – each time you come across a new word, phrase or expression which needs a decision, add it.
- If you have a lot of content, or you don't have time, or you lack confidence in your decisions, consider hiring an editor to help you develop a style sheet for your business.

Your style sheet covers your:

website
blog
book
business cards
flyers
posters
promo materials
social media posts



IN SUMMARY

SAVE TIME & LOOK POLISHED

It really is worth taking the time to create a style sheet.

Whether you're writing and self-publishing a book, or managing content delivery for an organisation across multiple platforms, you should be doing everything you can to make your writing clear and free of distractions.

The time you invest in it will be more than paid back in time saved, which you can use to focus on crafting your story.

A writer's style should not place obstacles between his ideas and the minds of his readers.

— Steve Allen,
founder of The
Tonight Show



STYLE GUIDES

RELIABLE RESOURCES

Your House Style: Styling your words for maximum impact, 3rd ed.
Christina Thomas with Abi Saffrey, Society for Editors and Proofreaders (2018)

New Hart's Rules: The Oxford Style Guide, 2nd ed.
Oxford University Press (2014)

The Chicago Manual of Style: The essential guide for writers, editors and publishers, 17th ed.
University of Chicago Press (2017)

The Economist Style Guide, 12th ed.
Ann Wroe, Economist Books (2018)

The Guardian and Observer Style Guide
<https://www.theguardian.com/guardian-observer-style-guide-a>



DICTIONARIES

REFERENCE BOOKS

Collins Online English Dictionary (British English)

<https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english>

Oxford Dictionary Online (British English)

<https://www.lexico.com/en>

Cambridge Dictionary Online (British English)

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>

Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online (US English)

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/>

Macquarie Dictionary Online (Australian English)

<https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au/>

Oxford Canadian Dictionary

Katherine Barber, OUP Canada (2006)



GET IN TOUCH

NEED SOME HELP?

If you'd like some help in creating a style sheet for your business or organisation, please get in touch.

We can arrange a free discovery call to have a chat about what you need.



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