

Harmer
Editorial

Making
words
work
harder.



The essence
of style

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The Essence of Style is designed for businesses that recognise the need for a style guide to make their communications clearer and more consistent, but haven't got around to it yet or don't know where to start.

It's not comprehensive. For that, you need a copywriter or editor who can create an in-depth guide tailored specifically to your company's house style and the tone of voice you require.

This guide provides some practical rules to help you present anything you write for your organisation in a consistent, accessible way, that's as free of spelling mistakes, grammatical errors and jargon as you can make it.

You can also give it to anyone outside your organisation hired to write or edit your business communications.

Believe me, they'll thank you for it.



Alison Harmer: style credentials

So what do I know about style? As a professional editor with more than 27 years' experience, there's always at least one organisation's style guide open on my desk.

I might be editing the work of reporters at London agency AB, where I'm the freelance chief sub-editor, or articles from various design and communication agencies I work for. I also edit material and read proofs for Primary Care Commissioning, parts of the NHS and St John Ambulance.

If you'd like to know more about words, grammar, spelling and style, email me at alison@harmereditorial.co.uk or follow me on
◆ [Twitter @AlisonHarmer](#) ◆ [LinkedIn](#) ◆ [Facebook](#) ◆ [Google+](#)



Why you need a style guide

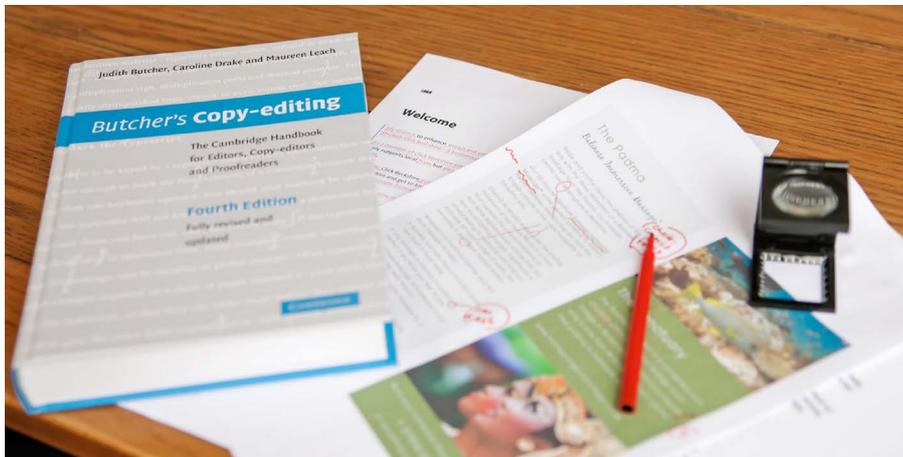
If you hire a copywriter or an editor for anything from the simplest leaflet to a complex website, one of the first things they'll ask you for is your style guide.

A style guide lays down rules and standards that writers use to ensure your communications are clear, consistent and free of jargon. This encourages your audience – whether customers or colleagues – to read about your company and gain the right impression.

Without a style guide, a writer or editor will have to muddle along using their experience to match the style of whatever you've produced before. This will waste time, add to the bill and hold up publishing your communications.

You also run the risk that inconsistencies will creep in, which will make your organisation look slapdash and uncaring about its image; in other words, unprofessional.

That's a description no organisation aspires to.



Alphabetical list

Here is a list of some suggested style suggestions and dos and don'ts.

Abbreviations

An abbreviation takes the first letter of each word and you pronounce each one.

If the abbreviation is not well known it should be written in full the first time it is used, followed by the letters in brackets. For example: English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

After first use, the abbreviation can be used on its own or referred to in other ways. For example, in the case of EFL, you could describe it as 'this teaching method'.

Well-known organisations like the BBC or NHS do not need to be written in full.

Do not use full points in common abbreviations. It's kg, not k.g.; GP, not G.P.

Use full stops in e.g. and i.e. but try not to use them at all by using: For example.

Acronyms

An acronym is a single pronounceable word created from the initial letters of other words: IKEA, Laser, NATO, UNICEF.

Each word does not need to be written out in full.

Active voice

Write in plain English, as naturally as possible, using an active, not passive, voice.

Alison wrote the style guide. (Active)

The style guide was written by Alison. (Passive)

Keep your sentences short. Don't use long words when a short one will do.

Ampersands

The ampersand should only be used in abbreviations that are recognised everywhere or in company names. For example, M&S.

Do not use them to replace *and* when you're trying to shorten a sentence.

And

To avoid confusion, limit the number of times you write *and* in each sentence. Use an Oxford comma (a comma after 'and') if the sentence does not make sense without one. For example: These napkins are available in red and yellow, black and white, and blue and green.

It is now considered acceptable to write *And* at the start of a sentence but use it sparingly.

Bullet points

If you are writing a list of bullet points:

- Each bullet starts with a capital letter
- There is no need for punctuation at the end of each bullet
- Do not add semi-colons or words such as *and* or *or* at the end of each line
- End the list with a full stop.

Bullets should be short. Do not use bullet points if the sentences become too long – turn them into a paragraph.

After the introduction, the bullets should follow on from the sentence.

For example:

The managing director sent a letter to staff saying he plans to:

- Increase pay
- Provided a new staffing structure
- Re-think the marketing department.

In the above example, the second bullet is wrong because it doesn't complete the sentence correctly. It should be: The managing director sent a letter to staff saying he plans to *provide* a new staffing structure.

Capital letters

Modern newspapers use lower case as much as possible because capital letters interrupt the flow when reading a sentence and make it harder to understand.

Ask yourself if capitals are really necessary. Use an initial capital letter for a person's name, street name, town, county or city (proper nouns). Everything else can take lower case, including job titles – the few exceptions are noted below.

Job titles

Except on business cards, jobs are all written in lower case – whether you are writing about Joe Bloggs, office administrator, or Joanna Bloggs, chief executive.

There are some exceptions, including the Queen, God, the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Duke of York. If the name and job go together, like President Obama, the job title is capped.

Organisations

Unique, formal organisations, such as HM Revenue & Customs, the National Union of Journalists or the Ministry of Defence, use initial capitals.

You do not need to use upper case when talking generically about the county council, committees, commissions, or government reports.

Headlines and book/document titles

Use sentence case, so it's:

Reporters in shock as editor uses incorrect grammar

Not: Reporters in Shock as Editor Uses Incorrect Grammar

Book titles are also fine in sentence case:

How to be a better communicator

A practical guide for busy managers

However, titles within text look odd if they're not written in title case. So it would be:

When you request The Essence of Style by email we'll send you this free guide by return.

Commas

Use them for clarity:

For the family day on the beach he took buckets, spades, a sunshade, sandwiches, suntan lotion and lots of cold drinks. It was his charisma, not his wealth or connections, that first made him such a good presidential candidate.

Beware of using them if they make a phrase unclear, as in Lynne Truss's famous example of the misplaced comma:

A panda eats shoots and leaves.

Not: A panda eats, shoots and leaves.

Contractions

Use contractions sparingly. Avoid words like don't, won't, and can't.

Dates

Like this: 27 March 2015.

Do not add th, st, rd or nd after the date, or include the day itself (unless it is necessary for clarity). Commas in dates add confusion, so avoid them.

Footnotes

If the document is going to be in Word or a PDF, use embedded hyperlinks rather than writing out a whole web page. For example: See more on Alison Harmer's website, not see more on www.harmereditorial.co.uk

Full stops

Forget what you learned at school – in publishing there is one space after the full stop, not two.

Geography

The UK includes England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
Britain consists of all the nations except Northern Ireland.

Lower case for regions or areas: south London, north England.
Initial caps for specific counties: North Yorkshire, West Sussex.

Hyphens

Use hyphens for clarity:

An unwanted-hair remover is quite different from an unwanted hair-remover.

Use hyphens in adjectival phrases:

A hard-hitting play

A fun-filled holiday

An action-packed film.

Hyphenate compass references when used before a country, region or city.

For example: south-west England.

Avoid hyphens in words that are now in common use:
email, not e-mail.

Adverbs ending in -ly do not need hyphens:

Gently swaying trees, not gently-swaying trees.

Italics

Italics are hard to read so are best avoided. Some style guides make an exception for the titles of magazines, books, films and TV programmes when referred to in printed text.

For example: The woman bought *The Radio Times* so she could read about films on TV on her day off. Her favourite movie is *The Great Escape* with Steve McQueen.

But you would still read this sentence correctly without the italics as long as you retain title case:

The woman bought The Radio Times so she could read about films on TV on her day off. Her favourite movie is The Great Escape with Steve McQueen.

Justification

Range your text left. Justified text can create unintended rivers of space and is also difficult to edit.

Language

This style guide uses British English, so write programme not program (unless you are referring to a computer program), use s (not z) in words such as capitalise, authorise and organise, and refer to events being under way, not underway.

Latin

Unless you're writing legal or medical reports or journals on plants, birds and animals, you cannot risk using Latin as it may not be understood by your readership.

Replace Latin phrases such as per annum with 'a year' and tempus fugit with 'time flies.'

If necessary, write out scientific names followed by the common name: *Erithacus rubecula*, commonly known as the robin, is a pretty garden bird.

Numbers

Use figures when referring to numbers from 10 onwards. One to nine should be spelled out. Use million or billion for people or animals and m or bn for money or things. For example: One million readers read our Google+ page regularly but our online marketing generates £2m.

Avoid starting a sentence with a number: spell it out. Ninety per cent of people agree with our policies.

Per cent

Use two words after starting a sentence with a figure, as above. Always spell it out in copy but use the symbol (%) in headlines and tables.

Quotations (and speech marks)

Use double quotation marks if you are reporting direct speech and single quotes for indirect speech:

"I went to my managing director and asked for a promotion but he said 'wait until the end of the year,' which wasn't what I wanted to hear," said Amy.

Avoid inverted commas around document titles. Since they are already in title case you do not need to emphasise further.

Quotation marks should not be used to emphasise a point as it implies doubt.

For example: The company is not 'biased' in any way.

If you are quoting someone you interviewed, use past tense and a colon after 'said':

She said: "It's good to know your house style."

But use 'says' when referring to events happening now:

She says: "The house style looks great."

Singular or plural?

All organisations and countries take a singular verb and are referred to as 'it'. For example:

The NHS is about to have a review.

The team is planning a Christmas party. It is asking for helpers.

Sports teams are the exception and take a plural:

Woking football team are making good progress in the league.

Use plural for data, media, couple, pair, staff.

Tense

Use past tense for events that happened in the past (he was made redundant last year) and present tense (he is out of a job) or perfect tense (he has taken redundancy) when appropriate, such as creating a sense of immediacy in a news section.

See Quotations.

Times

6pm not 6.00pm.

For sporting stories, reference times as 12hrs 10mins, not 12 hours 10 minutes. And ignore the seconds, unless it is essential to distinguish between two very close finishing times or in a table of results.

Underlining

Do not underline text unless it's a hyperlink to a web page.

Words and phrases to avoid (and alternatives)

Never use long words when short ones will do. Don't use old-fashioned words or Latin phrases. And avoid clichés like the plague!

For example: Value-add, game changer, thinking outside the box.

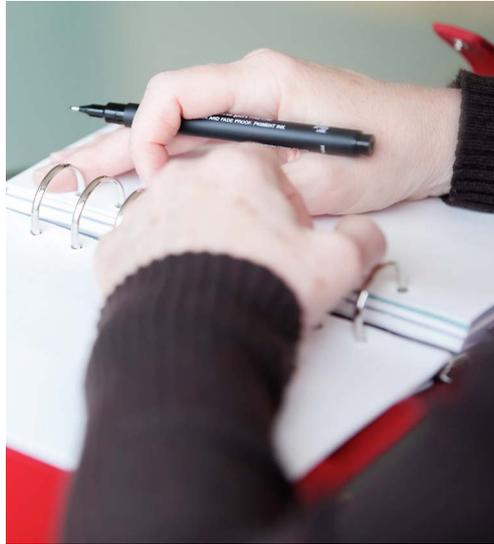
Avoid	Use
A large proportion of	Many
Amongst	Among
Assistance	Help
Going forward	In future
In addition to	As well as
Set to	Will
Underway	Under way
Utilise	Use
Whilst	While

Who's right and who's wrong?

In the introduction I said this guide is not comprehensive. If your organisation has a particular convention that must be included, feel free to include it.

The guide uses British English and is intended for countries that use it in everyday business language.

Whatever additions you make to this guide, my advice is to stick to them – there should only be one house style in an organisation.



Useful resources

Journalism style guides

UK

On the web:

The Guardian and Observer Style Guide
The Telegraph Style Book

Books

Guardian Style
The Economist Style Guide

US

The Chicago Manual of Style

Spelling and grammar

Dictionaries on the web:
Collins
Oxford

Books

The Oxford English Dictionary
Roget's Thesaurus
The Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors
The Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar
Troublesome Words
Eats, Shoots and Leaves
Nil Desperandum: A Dictionary of Latin Tags and Phrases

Editing

Butcher's copy-editing: The Cambridge Handbook for Editors, Copy-editors and Proofreaders
The Copyeditor's Handbook: A Guide for Book Publishing and Corporate Communications

Others

The Plain English Campaign website
Between You and I: A Little Book of Bad English
Mind the Gaffe: The Penguin guide to common errors in English
A Steroid Hit the Earth: A Celebration of Misprints, Typos and other Howlers



Do you need your own
tailored style guide?
Let's talk!

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