

Style Guide Analysis

Technical Communication 402

Technical Editing

Paul A. McWilliams

Winter 2004

Introduction

A style guide is a document, book, or website designed to be used by writers and editors within an organization in order to ensure consistent style across the documents of an organization. Style manuals, “save a copy editor from merely guessing or wasting time and effort thinking through each situation in order to make a decision.” (Rude, 2002, 132) Truly effective style guides will be used by writers before the editors ever see the document and will make the job of the editor much easier. No matter how complete and detailed a style guide might be, if writers decide not to use it, the documents of the organization will not present consistent style and usage. Writers will choose whether or not to use style guide based on several criteria. As Tarutz (2002, 185) points out, “writers love style guides that save them work. . .,” but “hate style guides that sound like junior high school English teachers.”

Accordingly, house style guides “usually pick up where general style guides such as *The Elements of Style*, leave off,” (Tarutz, 1992, 186) and they focus on “style mostly as choices of spelling, number use, capitalization, citation, and other such variables of language.” (Rude, 2002, 132) Because “most companies don’t have the resources to create their own versions of *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *The Elements of Style* . . . , the best style guides don’t try to duplicate good and readily available books.” Besides, including too many basic rules in a style guide can offend writers. (Tarutz, 2002, 191)

A style guide with appropriate scope, tone, and presentation is much more likely to be used by writers. According to Tarutz (1992, 185), “Good style guides give writers fast answers to easy questions and guidelines for handling more difficult, unusual questions.”

This analysis of four style guides and manuals will examine them in terms of three main areas of investigation:

- **Scope**—examination of the completeness of the style guide; whether and how the style guide references and builds upon comprehensive style resources (rude, 2002, 133), such as *Elements of Style* and the *Chicago Manual of Style*; whether and how audience issues are considered; and whether the guide covers organizational document process issues.
- **Presentation**—description of the user interface, organization, and overall usability of the guide.
- **Tone**—analysis of the tone that the guide takes toward the user/writer; whether the guide assumes the writers understanding of basic grammar and punctuation rules; whether decisions are described as right/wrong or preferred; how right/wrong decisions are justified; and whether the guide conforms to its own rules.

Answers to the above questions will guide an overall evaluation of the appropriateness, and usefulness of each style guide or manual. The evaluation will be largely based upon Tarutz's *Table 10-1. Characteristics of Good and Bad Style Guides*, and other specific criteria from throughout Chapter 10.

Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications

Available in book or online help system formats, the *Microsoft Manual for Technical Publications (MSTP)* is an expansive and detailed style guide that gives the preferred usage and spelling for many different technical and non-technical terms.

Scope

MSTP features a very expansive an expansive list of terms, punctuation, style, and their preferred manner of use, but it does not list basic rules for correct grammar. Instead the following list of resources is provided on the “Other Standard References” topic:

The following reference materials are the authorities for issues not covered in this guide:

- *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3rd ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992.*
- *Chicago Manual of Style, 14th ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.*
- *Harbrace College Handbook, 12th ed. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1994.*
- *Microsoft Press Computer Dictionary, 3rd ed. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Press, 1997*
- *Windows Interface Guidelines for Software Design, Redmond, WA: Microsoft Press, 1995.*

Audience considerations are accounted for by the designation, within specific entries, of certain technical terms as suitable or acceptable for technical documentation, or as “not for end-user documentation.” *MSTP* does not contain any document process information.

Presentation

MSTP is available in print and downloadable online help formats. This analysis is based on the online help version. The online help version, downloadable from the Microsoft Website, features three methods of access to the specific entries: contents, index, and search. The contents mode is arranged into sections with an introduction, and other front matter, preceding an alphabetically arranged listing of the various entries. Two appendixes are also included: “Acronyms and Abbreviations,” and “Special Characters.” The index mode features an extensive, purely alphabetical, list of terms. The search feature allows the user to enter a term in the search field and find a list of the entries that contain that word.

Tone

Because *MSTP* generally avoids discussion of basic grammar and punctuation rules, it does not treat the writer like a student of grammar school. However, in all cases the prescribed usage is described in imperative voice, with many examples labeled as “correct” and “incorrect,” even in many cases where the choice is based on company preference rather than strict grammatical or mechanical correctness. This tone is commanding and perhaps somewhat inappropriate. Justifications for “correct choices” are seldom provided.

Summary and Evaluation

MSTP is very exhaustive and covers many issues. The sheer size of this manual seems daunting and might prevent its fullest use. One can imagine a Microsoft Writer worrying that she must look up each and every word she typed as she composed a text. A good access structure, with three different methods of navigation is a positive feature and seems to be a good mitigation to the overall size of this manual. Beyond the size issue this manual meets most of the criteria for a good style guide rather well. For the most part this manual seems to take a good tone toward the reader and give good advice for preferred usage. Although many of the examples are identified by the terms “correct” and “incorrect,” rather than preferred, the introduction clearly states that the guide is “not a set of rules” and makes it clear that the indicated usages are recommended. Unlike most of the style manuals examined in this report, *MSTP* does not wander into the realm of covering topics that are “handled more thoroughly—in other books,” (Tarutz 1992) and that might run contrary to respecting the author’s basic knowledge. The entries on proper comma usage are a prime example in most of the manuals, but in *MSTP* only style issues regarding commas are covered and the user is directed elsewhere for correct usage.

Overall, *MSTP* appears to be a good style guide in most respects. The only major liability might be the sheer size of the guide. The thoroughness of this guide, and Microsoft’s powerful position in the software market, make it easy for me to imagine that *MSTP* is probably becoming a standard reference for the in-house style manuals of other software and computer companies—on the shelf right next to the *Chicago Manual of Style* and *Elements of Style*. More specifically, *MSTP* probably fits better into the category of discipline style manuals. (Rude, 2002)

Ohio DAS Publication Style Guide

The Ohio *Department of Administrative Services Publication Style Guidelines* consists of a brief web-page featuring a sparse list of varied instructions and entries that range

from very specific requirements for DAS documents to general guidelines for using commas.

Scope

This guide repetitively refers the user to the *The Associated Press StyleBook and Libel Manual*, but also restates many of the same rules that are presumably described in that document, especially those relating to comma usage. Interestingly this manual is the only one, of the four examined in this report, that does not refer to the *Chicago Manual of Style* or *Elements of Style*. Some process issues are included within this style guide in the section under the following headings: *In-House Publishing*, *Internet*, and *Office of Communications*.

Presentation

This guide is presented on a single webpage with entries listed alphabetically. The list of topics is very short and sparse and gives greater emphasis to some entries. The entry on commas is a prime example of such emphasis.

Tone

Writers may be offended by the tone of this style guide for a number of reasons. First it describes a lot of basic grammar rules, especially those related to the commas, in greater detail and with a grammar school tone. Second the some of the examples provided were chosen in poor taste and might come off as an affront to the writer. The following is a perfect example:

A nonessential clause must be set off by commas. A nonessential clause can be eliminated without altering the basic meaning of the sentence. Example: Reporters, who do not read the stylebook, should not criticize their editors. (The writer is saying that all reporters do not read the stylebook, and that all reporters should not criticize their editors. If the "who do not read the stylebook" phrase were deleted, this meaning would not change.)

Summary and Evaluation

The DAS style guide is very sparse and seems to perhaps be somewhat incomplete. However, the guide does seem to cover issues that are probably of real importance

for writers in the DAS, and the brevity of the guide in combination with the alphabetical arrangement make it very accessible. The “capitol/capital” entry is a good example of a problem that probably arises often in writings within state government. Some process issues are addressed in this guide, and punctuation issues are covered in greater detail than is probably necessary (commas, for example)

NASA Numerical Aerospace Simulation Facility Style Guide

The style guide for the NASA Numerical Aerospace Simulation (NAS) Facility is presented on a single long web page with an alphabetical list of topic jump-to links that serve as an index.

Scope

The NAS style guide refers writers to the following resources for basic grammar, style, and usage references:

refer to *The Chicago Manual of Style* (University of Chicago Press) and *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White (Macmillan Publishing Co.), available at the NAS Documentation Center. Also see the web sites listed in our *Resources on Writing* page.

Although the NAS style guide contains a few organization specific process issues, it has a thorough section describing how editing should be performed at the NAS with details including the preferred colors of pen to be used by editors, and some instructions regarding the use of the logo and illustrations. Appendix B also designates preferred style for proofreading marks. Audience considerations are well covered in an extensive entry listed under the title “Audience Analysis.”

Presentation

The NAS style guide is presented as two web pages. The first page contains an alphabetical list of topics covered by the guide. The topics serve as hyperlinks to the appropriate part of the other web page, which features all of the entries for the guide.

When a topic is chosen on the first page, the user is taken to the appropriate part of the entries on the second page.

Tone

A straight-forward imperative voice is used consistently throughout the NAS style guide. The terms “correct” and “incorrect” are seldom used to describe choices. Most of examples of the provided correspond to the preferred usage.

Summary and Evaluation

Although it contains some process information, and re-hashes basic issues in the punctuation section (commas, for example), the NAS style guide is fairly appropriate in terms of scope. The access structure is sufficient although less than ideal; for example, the user can go to the entry on word usage, but then he must scan or read a lot of text to find the preferred usage for particular issue at hand.

Energy Information Administration Publishing Style Guide

The *Energy Information Administration Publishing Style Guide*, offers a lot of information about publishing, but has precious little to offer about style. Process issues and a rehashing of basic *Elements of Style* type advice make up the bulk of this online guide.

Scope

The EIA style guide is intended to be a very comprehensive guide to the creation of documents within that organization. It does not refer the user to any other manuals or style guides except in the section under the heading “punctuation” in chapter 3 where the following extensive list is provided:

The Chicago Manual of Style, 14th Edition; the *GPO Style Manual*, 1984 Edition; *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Third College Edition; *The New York Public Library Writer's Guide to Style and Usage*; *American Psychological Association Editorial Style*; and several other sources.

This guide contains large amounts of organization specific process information. In fact, the first two chapters are almost entirely dedicated to process information. Writing and usage issues are mostly covered in chapters 3, 5, and 6. Even within

these chapters issues of correct grammar and punctuation are much more prevalent than any actual style preference issues. Curiously, a glossary of printing terms is provided as an appendix to this guide. Very little audience guidance is provided. Chapter 3 mentions that, “**An evaluation of the audience** will aid in determining the type of vocabulary to use so that you can be understood by your audience,” and that is all.

Presentation

This style guide is presented in website form with a homepage that has links to the individual chapters. Each of the chapters is contained on a separate single web page. Entries on each page are arranged with topical organization. The material is presented in a wordy text-heavy style that seems to demand reading by the user rather than quick reference to specific topics.

Tone

A conversational second person tone is used throughout this guide. In many cases imperative voice is used to instruct the user in the proper or preferred usage. Many of the provide examples are marked with the terms “wrong” and “correct.” Usually the wrong example is given first, before the correct example.

Summary and Evaluation

The EIA style guide demonstrates a lot of the qualities of a bad style guide as defined by Tarutz (1992): very few valid style issues are covered; most of the guide is dedicated to process rather than style issues; and provide detailed entries that ignore the writers basic knowledge and are sufficiently covered in referenced materials are needlessly rehashed (for example: comma rules—of course!) Additionally, no good access structure for looking ups specific usage issues is provided. The text heavy presentation in this guide is more suitable for being read and remembered than referred to. Chapter 6, “Abbreviations and Technical Terms” is a perfect example of making extra work for writers and editors. The page provides at least 12 different

hyperlinks to outside lists of abbreviations, and even makes this maddening suggestion: “see the GPO *Style Manual* (Chapters 9 and 10), other style manuals, or search the Internet- there is a wealth of information available.” As a primer to the document process at the EIA for new writers, this guide might be acceptable, but it falls far short of ideal as a style guide.

Conclusions

This survey of four different in-house style guides or manuals shows that very few style guides meet the good style guide criteria presented by Tarutz (1992). The temptation for style guide writers to rehash and spell out the basic rules of grammar and punctuation, especially commas, in their style guides must be great. Similarly, most organizations seem equally unwilling to resist the placement of process issues in their house style manuals. Ease of use is one of the most important factors in the success of a style guide. According to Tarutz (1992, 201), “Organize your styleguide so its users can find information quickly, or provide a *great* index. (If writers can’t find answers immediately they won’t use the style guide at all.)” The guides examined here run the gamut in accessibility from the extensive but highly accessible *MSTP* to the EIA’s rather text-heavy and hardly searchable presentation.

Of the style guides examined in this report, the *Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications* seems to most closely adhere to the standards for a style guide set forth in Tarutz. Its focus is upon true style issues, it refers to and does not rehash comprehensive style manuals, it features an excellent access structure with three different modes for access, and it has a uniformly respectful tone toward writers.

References

DAS Publication Style Guidelines. Columbus Ohio: Ohio Department of Administrative Services, 2000. <http://www.das.ohio.gov/publications/styleguide.htm>

ELA Publishing Style Guide. 5th Ed. Energy Information Administration, 1997.
<http://www.eia.doe.gov/neic/pubstyle/contents.htm>

Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications. Version 3.0. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2004. <http://www.microsoft.com>

NAS Style Guide. Moffet Field, CA: Numerical Aerospace Simulation Facility, 1999.
<http://www.nas.nasa.gov/Groups/TechPubs/style.html>

Rude, Carolyn D. *Technical Editing*. 3rd Ed. New York: Longman, 2002.

Tarutz, Judith A. *Technical Editing: A Practical Guide for Editors and Writers*. New York: Hewlett Packard , 1992.

Style Guide Analysis. Technical Communication 402 Technical Editing. Paul A. McWilliams Winter 2004. 185). . "writers love style guides that save them work." (Rude. and presentation is much more likely to be used by writers. including too many basic rules in a style guide can offend writers. house style guides "usually pick up where general style guides such as The Elements of Style.