



STYLE MATTERS

A style guide is more than just a set of guidelines or an ornamental addition to a brand manual. It is a working document that helps an organization communicate clearly and consistently across all of its publications. For business schools, NGOs, startups, think tanks, and other organizations focused on an international audience, that consistency is especially important because their communications often span teams, countries, and formats. Although they may serve various functions, websites, policy briefs, press releases, social media posts, annual reports, and fundraising materials must all sound like they originate from the same organization.

For many European organizations, this challenge is heightened by the realities of multilingual and international communication. English is often the language used for external communication, which increases the likelihood of inconsistencies when drafting or editing texts: A translator or AI agent might replicate source-language syntax, a specialist may provide terminology that has never been standardized, a commissioned agency could produce copy in British English, whereas an in-house copywriter might apply American spelling and punctuation standards. Taken together, these things make an organization appear fragmented.

These issues can be addressed with a reliable in-house style guide. It provides a consistent point of reference for writers, editors, translators, publications managers, and communications teams while expediting production, minimizing uncertainties, and safeguarding the organization's public image. Most importantly, it turns language from a secondary concern into a strategic asset.

WHAT GOES IN

A style guide supports clarity and consistency by documenting the organization's internal decisions about how texts should be written. Some guides focus on the more technical aspects of writing, such as spelling, grammar, and referencing styles, while others prioritize content and emphasize tone, language, and audience.

For example, technical aspects might include the following rules:

Abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms: Define first-use rules, whether periods are allowed (e.g., WTO / W.T.O.), when terms must be spelled out again, how abbreviation lists are handled, and how articles such as “a” or “an” work before initials.

Capitalization: Set rules for sentence case vs. title case, headings, job titles (Assistant Professor / assistant professor), departments, academic subjects, programs, official bodies, and words following colons or in lists.

Citations, references, and source notes: Define the house citation system, in-text citation style (e.g., author-date), bibliography / reference formatting, DOI/URL handling, and footnotes vs. endnotes.

Dates and times: Specify date order, punctuation in dates, year spans (2020-2022 / 2020-22), decade style, time style, and how date ranges should be written.

Headings, subheadings, and title treatment: Specify how titles, subtitles, section heads, publication titles, as well as titles for reports, articles, books, journals, and programs should be formatted.

Numbers, numerals, percentages, and ranges: Decide when numbers are spelled out (eight, nine, 10), when numerals are required (5 km), how percentages appear in text vs. tables, and how number ranges and large numbers are formatted.

Punctuation: Define house rules for comma style, quotation marks, commas with quotation marks, colons, semicolons, slashes, full stops, when to apply en dashes vs. em dashes, and punctuation around footnotes.

Spelling standards: Choose a primary standard such as US or UK English, define preferred spellings, and explain how to handle exceptions when the names of organizations use another variant.

More content-focused concerns could include:

- Audience, purpose, and channel adaptation
- Brand, organizational, and product naming
- Gender-inclusive and non-discriminatory language
- Social media and platform-specific writing
- Terminology and frequently used vocabulary
- Tone of voice

STYLE IN PRACTICE

Even when two organizations write about the same event, their house styles can produce noticeably different results. Spelling, punctuation, capitalization, abbreviations, dates, and numerals all influence the final output, even if the underlying facts stay unchanged.

A US-based organization may write:

On July 9, 2024, at 3:00 p.m. EDT, Europe's new Ariane 6 rocket lifted off from the Guiana Space Center in Kourou, French Guiana, on its first test flight—a mission European Space Agency (ESA) Director General Josef Aschbacher called a “historic return” to independent access to space. The 56-meter launcher carried 11 small payloads—8 CubeSats, 2 reentry capsules and 1 experiment—and capped a 2020–24 development program reported to cost more than €4 billion, or about \$4.3 billion.

Whereas a UK-based organization reporting on the same event might offer:

At **9.00 pm CEST** on **9 July 2024**, Europe's new Ariane 6 rocket lifted off from the Guiana Space Centre in Kourou, French Guiana, on its maiden test flight – a mission **ESA director general** Josef Aschbacher described as a '**historic return**' to independent access to space. The 56-**metre** launcher carried **eleven** small payloads – **eight** CubeSats, **two re-entry** capsules, and **one** experiment – and concluded a 2020-24 development **programme** put at more than **EUR** 4 billion, or roughly **£3.4** billion.

Readers rarely pause to appreciate consistent capitalization, well-managed abbreviations, or properly formatted dates. They do, however, notice when a publication feels uneven. A report that fluctuates between UK and US spelling, uses professional and colloquial language, or treats titles and acronyms inconsistently causes distraction and can undermine confidence in the material.

This is important for organizations whose reputations are built on trust. A business school's publications should be authoritative and polished. An NGO's papers and advocacy materials must be credible and professional. As a startup grows, it is critical that its website, investor deck, social media, and product pitch remain consistent in language and style. In each case, the impression created by the text influences how the organization is seen.

This is why standard reference works, though necessary, are only part of the solution. The Chicago Manual of Style, New Hart's Rules, Oxford Style Manual, APA, MLA, and similar reference works provide established editing standards, but they do not take an organization's audience, brand, or publication requirements into consideration. A customized style guide addresses the gap by adapting generic standards to the organization's specific needs.

WHERE TO START

An in-house style guide is one of the most efficient ways for an organization to improve the quality and consistency of its communications. It creates a common standard, assists internal teams and external contributors, and ensures that publications represent the organization's level of professionalism. It is especially important for multinational organizations to provide publication guidance in an environment where numerous English standards, writers, and audiences intersect.

Organizations do not need a style guide because language must be monitored. They need one because using clear, consistent language saves time, avoids inconsistencies, and maintains confidence levels. A well-designed guide collates hundreds of editorial decisions that might otherwise be made without a common standard, ensuring that the organization's voice is not left to chance.

As a result, many businesses will benefit from hiring a professional copyeditor or proofreader to help them develop their style guide. An experienced editor can assist in translating broad preferences into clear working standards, applying those rules consistently across publications, and ensuring that language quality is built into the process rather than checked at the end. In this regard, a style guide is more than just an editorial tool – it is a practical investment in the organization's future.