

A guide to style guides

This month, I am focusing on various style issues:

- finding answers to questions of style
- creating accessible style guides
- working with multiple clients with different style preferences.

Finding answers

A recent post on the *Copy editors and proofreaders* group in LinkedIn (linkedin.com) alerted me to a new site – OnlineStylebooks.com. This site has links to about 40 online style manuals, which can be viewed alphabetically or by subject. All the major guides are there—although some are only available online by subscription (e.g. *The Chicago Manual of Style*). One publication that looks especially useful, particularly for those who write for the web, is the new *Yahoo!* style guide. This book started life as an in-house reference guide for writers and programmers at *Yahoo!*. It covers the basics of grammar and punctuation, but also has sections on creating clear structure, writing for an online audience, designing websites and creating text that works with other media (e.g. mobile phones).

Most of the *Yahoo!* guide can be accessed online (at styleguide.yahoo.com). I particularly like the *Editing 101* section of the site, which covers punctuation, abbreviations, capitals, titles and numbers. The information given is clear and concise, with many examples and helpful asides about web-related issues. For example, the section on dashes outlines the uses of ens and ems, but also explains that dashes need extra html coding to display correctly on the web. Even after this extra work, dashes may not appear correctly in some formats, such as text messages, so the guide recommends using a hyphen instead.

The OnlineStyle list also includes Wikipedia's *Manual of style*, which starts with the helpful advice to 'use common sense in applying it'! The manual is intended to give a consistent style to Wikipedia articles, but also includes useful general information on grammar and punctuation.

Creating and sharing style guides

Many organisations create an in-house style guide. When delivering training courses on writing and editing, however, I have found that few people realise that their organisation has a style guide, and even fewer make use of it. Often, the guide is a printed document, which is perhaps not the best format, because it probably just gets buried on a desk or bookshelf.

To increase the likelihood that the style guide will be used, organisations can make it a living document, such as a wiki. Wikis are simple webpages that users can edit together (Wikipedia is a well-known example). Usually, the point of a wiki is that people can work collaboratively on a document. In the case of a style guide, it is probably best to restrict the ability to change the content (to ensure that style remains set as intended!), but enable all users to add comments or queries. Thus, for example, a user could add a question about whether to hyphenate a particular term that is not in the guide, and other users would be able to respond. Whoever is responsible for the wiki

could then update the style guide in response to the comments. Wiki style guides have many advantages; for example, they are easy to use, searchable and always up to date.

Working with multiple styles

My clients have a range of style preferences; for example, one specifies 'appendices' and another 'appendixes', one prefers 'program' and another 'programme', and so on. I use *PerfectIt* (www.intelligentediting.com) to cope with this situation, creating a customised database for each client. I also use style sheets to track any decisions not covered by a client's style guide, and I create these in a wiki (from intodit.com). Thus, instead of sending a Word style sheet to the client or to anyone working with me, I simply provide the wiki address. This means that I can feel confident that everyone will be looking at the latest version of the relevant style sheet.

My system is set up so that anyone using the wiki can log in and either comment on the style decisions or add terms where necessary. The wiki also alerts me (by email) when changes have been made, so I can keep track of what's happening. When saving a change to a page within the wiki, a dialogue box appears that asks for a brief description of the changes. Adding this information means that the page has a history, so that users can look at the notes about why particular changes were made.

Conclusion

My editing business still depends on traditional tools such as style sheets and style guides. However, to some extent, I have been able to replace paper and books with web-based tools. I find it quicker and easier to use online style guides, customised spelling lists and wiki style sheets. An added bonus of this approach is that it allows me to work from anywhere, provided I have an internet connection.

Hilary Cadman
Cadman Editing Services

www.cadmanediting.com | ozeditor.wordpress.com

Published in the Canberra Society of Editors newsletter, September 2010
Reproduced with permission of Canberra Society of Editors