

Chapter 9

House Styles



The aim of style is to avoid inconsistency or confusion that may hinder the reader or listener

HOUSE STYLES ARE THE LANGUAGE and grammar conventions set by any newspaper, web site, publication or broadcaster for use in all reports and by all writers to ensure internal consistency.

Since the point of any publication is to convey clearly as much information with the least effort, a uniform style is one tool to achieve that. The aim is not to homogenise tone - clearly every author has his or her style of writing - but rather to avoid inconsistency, awkwardness or confusion that may hinder the reader or listener. The audience can expect information always to be presented in the same consistent way, and the publication “speaks with one voice”, helping its credibility.

Sometimes this style and tone is part of the identity of a publication and is carefully cultivated. In Britain, for instance, the tabloid newspapers employ very short headlines and sentence structures. *The Economist* also has a very distinctive tone that is consistent throughout all its different sections, irrespective of content.

A firm set of rules also saves time, helping authors submit copy

which is closer to the requirements of the editors and providing editors ready answers for frequent spelling, grammar and other questions.

If using a language which has different dialects or spelling, the newspaper will decide which one is to be used, and will stick to it. Proper names are often transliterated into other alphabets with varying spelling, and again choices have to be made to maintain consistency and clarity.

Sometimes these decisions involve political discussions - the Serbian-language spelling Kosovo or the Albanian-language spelling Kosova? The editor has to make a choice both to ensure consistency and to forestall such debates getting in the way of the deadline.

Because of all these reasons, nearly all printed publications, agencies and broadcasters have clearly defined house styles.

Typically, editors first refer to their own in-house style guide for a ruling; this is then supplemented by reference to a broader, generic guide (for example both The Associated Press and *The Economist* have well known and widely used guides); finally, if needed, reference is made to an agreed dictionary.

Examples of Style

A simple example of the need for an agreed style is dates. Most countries use a solar calendar. But Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Jews use different calendars based on different periods in their history.

Muslims using their traditional lunar calendar will have a different year date than the internationally used western calendar. Which one will your audience feel more comfortable with? Which is the most appropriate for your publication? When is there a case for providing both?

While the western calendar states the year as 2003, the Muslim religious calendar would use 1421/22 AH (after the Hejrah).

The West generally uses BC and AD (Before Christ and Anno Domini, or *In the Year of the Lord*) as base marks. Western historians seeking to be neutral when using a western calendar might use BCE (before the current era) and CE (current era). This avoids the use of a Christian symbol.

What calendar does your publication use? If quoting someone using one calendar different from the one the publication normally uses, it might have to be either converted or explained.

Foreign words may also require specific style rules, especially where they may have a special use or may be new, perhaps scientific, vocabulary. Should they be translated or used in the original with or without explanation? These are the sort of things decided by house styles.

Another complication comes when an English language publication has to distribute its material both in the United Kingdom and the United States. “English English” and “American English” spellings and journalistic style are very different and some organisations end up having to rewrite copy into two versions to make it acceptable to each audience.

Some media organisations steer clear of words or phrases which can be particularly problematic. Reuters news agency avoids using words such as “promise” or “threaten” when paraphrasing what someone has said. Both carry different meanings - one positive and one negative - that indicate a particular attitude to what was said. Reuters style aims to ensure that its stories are viewed as being objective and impartial.

Reuters also avoids the use of the words “terrorist” and “terrorism”, a policy also adopted by IWPR. The terms are

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imprecise and emotive and can usually be substituted by more accurate and descriptive phrases. Some people find this style rule quite controversial and also somewhat hard to maintain given the prevalent usage of the terms. IWPR seeks to avoid using these terms unless in direct quotations.

Style also covers punctuation. Two publications may have different styles, for example, on the use of single (') or double (") quotation marks. English and American publications differ in the placement of punctuation at the end of a quotation, with the UK generally leaving punctuation outside quotation marks, while U.S. editors tend to place punctuation within quotation marks.

The Economist always uses an honorific like Mr or Ms to describe people it is writing about. Some publications never use such titles, or only when the name is first used.

Some publications always use italic font for the name of publications. Others put the name in quotes. Others do neither.

Much of this is a matter of choice. But once made, the publication and its staff must always use the same style for the sake of consistency.

EXERCISE

Discuss some style issues with your colleagues:

1. Does your publication have a house style?
2. Can you think of examples of usage at your publication that need to be regulated by a consistent house style? Are there inconsistencies?
3. When writing in English, do you use English or U.S. spellings of words such as labour/labor, homogenise/homogenize etc?
4. Think of some examples of inflammatory words which are not consistent with an impartial and objective style of news reporting.
5. Take three publications and see if you can identify differences in their house styles.

ADDITIONAL READING & REFERENCES

For further information in IWPR's house style, see:

www.iwpr.net/index.pl?development/resources/training_styleguide.html

An good dictionary is essential. *The Cambridge Dictionary of International English* is available online:

dictionary.cambridge.org

For the U.S. media market, the Associated Press stylebook is often the benchmark:

www.ap.org/pages/order.html

The Economist style guide:

www.economist.com/research/StyleGuide/index.cfm

Amazon.com sells digital versions of *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*, conveniently laid out in dictionary format.

One of the most widely regarded general texts on English writing style is *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk, Jr., and E.B. White. The updated version, with White's additions and introduction, is well worth obtaining. The original version, by Strunk alone, is available at: **www.bartleby.com/141**