

CORPORATE STYLE GUIDE

In writing, *style* relates to the distinct vocabulary and patterns of a particular writer, company, or organization; *house style* describes a set of style guidelines specific to a company or organization.

By using written style guidelines to present outsiders with a single, unified “voice”—regardless the employee or department spinning the copy—businesses of all sizes can cast a polished professional image that fosters brand credibility, which fosters customers and investors. Written style guidelines also provide clear communication direction that brings accuracy and proficiency to employees’ writing tasks.

Here I’ve provided the basics of a corporate communications’ style guide that addresses copy errors I encounter most frequently. Adopt as is or build upon this foundation to include key messages and house styles unique to your company, industry, or both. Overwhelmed with the details? Contact me, and together we can sort your style guide needs to scale.

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PUNCTUATION

DOUBLE PUNCTUATION

Avoid use of double exclamation points or question marks to convey emphasis. Use strong, distinct words that inherently demonstrate emphasis.

QUOTATION MARKS

Use quotes in the following circumstances:

- When writing someone's exact words.
Example: "I'm honored to be among the winners," she told reporters.
- When referencing a word or phrase extracted from another source.
Example: The article mentions spring as the "gardener's ideal season" for planting a wild flower meadow.
- Around titles of chapters, lessons, topics, sections and parts within a book; the titles of articles and columns in newspapers or magazines, the titles of essays, short poems, lectures, sermons, and conference themes.
- Around the definition of a word or term.
Example: The word *tomfoolery* means "silly or foolish behavior."
- Around a slang expression, the use of poor grammar, or a deliberate misspelling to indicate that such usage is not part of the writer's normal way of writing.
Example: Her version of the story "ain't necessarily so."
- Upon first reference of technical terms, business jargon, or coined words not likely to be familiar to your reader.
Example: The doctor told the family that "hypoxaemia" refers to a blood oxygen deficiency.

QUOTES AND PUNCTUATION

- Periods and commas – inside closing quotation marks.
- Question mark or exclamation point –
 - outside the closing quotation when it applies to the entire sentence.
Example: When will she say, "You can walk to school on your own"?
 - inside the closing quotation mark when it applies only to the quoted material.
Example: I asked my new neighbor, "How long have you lived in the neighborhood?"
- Single quotation mark – use the apostrophe for a single quotation mark when you have a quotation within another quotation.
Example: "I told her not to submit the 'How to Get Rich Fast' article until someone had a chance to proofread it," she explained to her boss.

EXCLAMATION POINT

Reserve use of exclamation points for true exclamations or commands not in an attempt to emphasize simple statements.

HYPHEN

Do not hyphenate adverbs, which typically end in *-ly*. An adverb is a word that modifies a verb, adjective, or other adverb. Because the inherent purpose of an adverb is to modify these types of words, an adverb automatically triggers understanding of what word it modifies; therefore, no hyphen is needed.

Example:

NO: The brightly-colored fireworks decorated the evening sky.

YES: The brightly colored fireworks decorated the evening sky.

ITALICS VS. UNDERLINING

Italics are preferred because of their cleaner appearance, but both italics and underlines can be used interchangeably in the following circumstances. Never use both italics and underline at the same time.

- To signify emphasis.
- When referencing a word as a word, often introduced by the expression *the term* or *the word*.
Example: The leadership discussed the meaning of the word *innovate* when creating their mission statement.
- When referencing titles of complete, published works such as books, pamphlets, long poems, magazines, newspapers, movies, plays, musicals, operas, television and radio series, long musical pieces, paintings, and works of sculpture.
- When using foreign expressions that are not considered part of the English language.
Example: You're welcome at the club any time, *amigo*.

PARENTHESIS AND PUNCTUATION

Punctuating when parenthesis falls within a sentence

- If the item in parenthesis falls within a sentence, any punctuation should fall outside the closing parenthesis.

Example: If no reply within three business days (by August 1), I'll consider the project complete.

- Do not use a period before the closing parenthesis except with an abbreviation.

Example:

NO: You should stay with us (we live 15 minutes from the venue.) after the concert.

YES: You should stay with us (we live 15 minutes from the venue) after the concert.

- Do not use a question mark or exclamation point before the closing parenthesis unless it applies solely to the parenthetical item and the sentence ends with a different mark of punctuation.

Example: At the next meeting (will you be there on Thursday?), we'll address the budget. (Question mark used in parentheses because the sentence ends with a period.)

Example: May I still purchase tickets (are four tickets even available), or is it too late? (Question mark not used in parentheses because the sentence ends with a question mark.)

Punctuating when parenthesis falls at end of sentence

- Place punctuation needed to end the sentence outside the closing parenthesis.

Example: Please respond with any edits by Monday (May 5).

- Do not use a period before the closing parenthesis except with an abbreviation.

Example: The market opens early on Tuesdays (at 6 a.m.).

The market opens early Tuesday mornings (vendors should be there by six).

- Do not use a question mark or an exclamation point before the closing parenthesis unless it applies solely to the parenthetical element and the sentence ends with a different mark of punctuation.

Example: My new boss is Sue Smith (didn't you used to work for her?).

Punctuating parenthesis as a separate sentence

- Punctuation needed to end the sentence is placed before the closing parenthesis; no other punctuation mark should follow the closing parenthesis.

- The preceding sentence to the parenthesis should close with a punctuation mark of its own.

Example: My Grandfather paused for his speech before he carved the turkey. (He does this every Thanksgiving.) He always has great words of wisdom to share.

SERIAL COMMA

To avoid any ambiguity and misunderstanding, use a comma before the conjunction to separate three or more items in a series.

Example: She looked out the window to a beautiful day of sunshine, warm air, and pleasant breezes.

SPELLING AND WORD CHOICE

- **Use traditional spellings**
Avoid spelling shortcuts such as “thru” for “through,” “nite” for “night.”
- **Define acronyms**
Spell out acronyms on first reference and place acronym in parentheses after the full spelling.
Example: United States Department of Agriculture (USDA).
- **Spell out numbers less than 10; use numerals to write numbers 10 or greater**
Example: One, two, three; 10, 11, 12
- **Use numerals when referencing percentages, even with percents less than 10**
Example: The coupon offers a 5 percent discount.
- **Don’t prettify numbers by adding *-ly***
It is not *firstly*, *secondly* or *thirdly*. Use first, second, third, and so on.
- **Write dates correctly**
 - When the day precedes the month or stands alone, express it either in ordinal figures (1st, 2nd, 3rd) or in ordinal words (first, second, third).
Example: We grilled burgers on the 4th of July.
 - When the day follows the month, use cardinal figures (1,2,3).
Example: My birthday is March 8. (NOT: March 8th or March eighth)
- **Avoid the abbreviation *etc.***
Etc. is an ambiguous catchall. Write what you mean rather than making the reader define *etc.*
Example:
NO: Everyone should gather shovels, sand buckets, *etc.* for a day at the beach.
YES: Everyone should gather shovels, sand buckets, and any other supplies to keep your kids busy for a day at the beach.
- **Avoid using *and/or***
Write what you mean rather than use the shortcut *and/or*, which requires readers momentarily to interrupt reading in order to decipher and often leads to ambiguity and misunderstanding.
Example:
NO: Students take classes in fine art *and/or* multi-media.
YES: Students take classes in fine art, multi-media, or both.
- **Chose positive words**
Affirmative, up-beat words enhance the writing’s tone by being more acceptable to the ear than negative words. Prefer *can* to *cannot*, *do* to *don’t*.
Example:
NO: Don’t use negative words.
YES: Choose positive words.
- **Resist coining new words by adding the suffix *-wise***
Example: *costwise*, *sizewise*, *foodwise*

STATE STANDARD ABBREVIATIONS VS. STATE POSTAL ABBREVIATIONS

There's a difference between state postal abbreviations (AZ) and state standard abbreviations (Ariz.).

- Use state standard abbreviation in written text when referring to city and state; use a comma to separate city and state.

Example: We visited Philadelphia, Pa. on Independence Day.

- Spell out name of state if referencing the state without referencing a city.

Example: We visited Pennsylvania this summer.

- Use state postal abbreviations only in reference to mailing addresses.

STATE ABBREVIATION TABLE

State Name	Standard	Postal
Alabama	Ala.	AL
Alaska	Alaska	AK
Arizona	Ariz.	AZ
Arkansas	Ark.	AR
California	Calif.	CA
Colorado	Colo.	CO
Connecticut	Conn.	CT
Delaware	Del.	DE
Florida	Fla.	FL
Georgia	Ga.	GA
Hawaii	Hawaii	HI
Idaho	Idaho	ID
Illinois	Ill.	IL
Indiana	Ind.	IN
Iowa	Iowa	IA
Kansas	Kans.	KS
Kentucky	Ky.	KY
Louisiana	La.	LA
Maine	Maine	ME
Maryland	Md.	MD
Massachusetts	Mass.	MA
Michigan	Mich.	MI
Minnesota	Minn.	MN
Mississippi	Miss.	MS
Missouri	Mo.	MO

State Name	Standard	Postal
Montana	Mont.	MT
Nebraska	Nebr.	NE
Nevada	Nev.	NV
New Hampshire	N.H.	NH
New Jersey	N.J.	NJ
New Mexico	N.M.	NM
New York	N.Y.	NY
North Carolina	N.C.	NC
North Dakota	N.D.	ND
Ohio	Ohio	OH
Oklahoma	Okla.	OK
Oregon	Ore.	OR
Pennsylvania	Pa.	PA
Rhode Island	R.I.	RI
South Carolina	S.C.	SC
South Dakota	S.D.	SD
Tennessee	Tenn.	TN
Texas	Tex.	TX
Utah	Utah	UT
Vermont	Vt.	VT
Virginia	Va.	VA
Washington	Wash.	WA
West Virginia	W.Va.	WV
Wisconsin	Wis.	WI
Wyoming	Wyo.	WY