



UXPin

Style Guides Web UI Design

An overview for
Modern Designers

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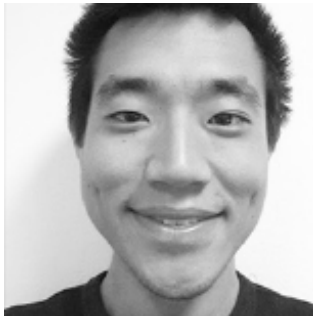
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With a passion for writing and an interest in everything anything related to design or technology, Matt Ellis found freelance writing best suited his skills and allowed him to be paid for his curiosity. Having worked with various design and tech companies in the past, he feels quite at home at UXPin as the go-to writer, researcher, and editor. When he's not writing, Matt loves to travel, another byproduct of curiosity.

Exploring Style Guides & Why They Matter

How big do we make our headers? What hue of blue is our logo?
Where's the reusable code base for new pages?

Website and app building is full of minutiae that even Rainman couldn't keep track of, and for designers it gives new meaning to the phrase "the devil is in the details." Style guides help maintain consistency throughout brands and all their digital and offline entities. Because they are living documents, they provide enough structure without strangling creativity.

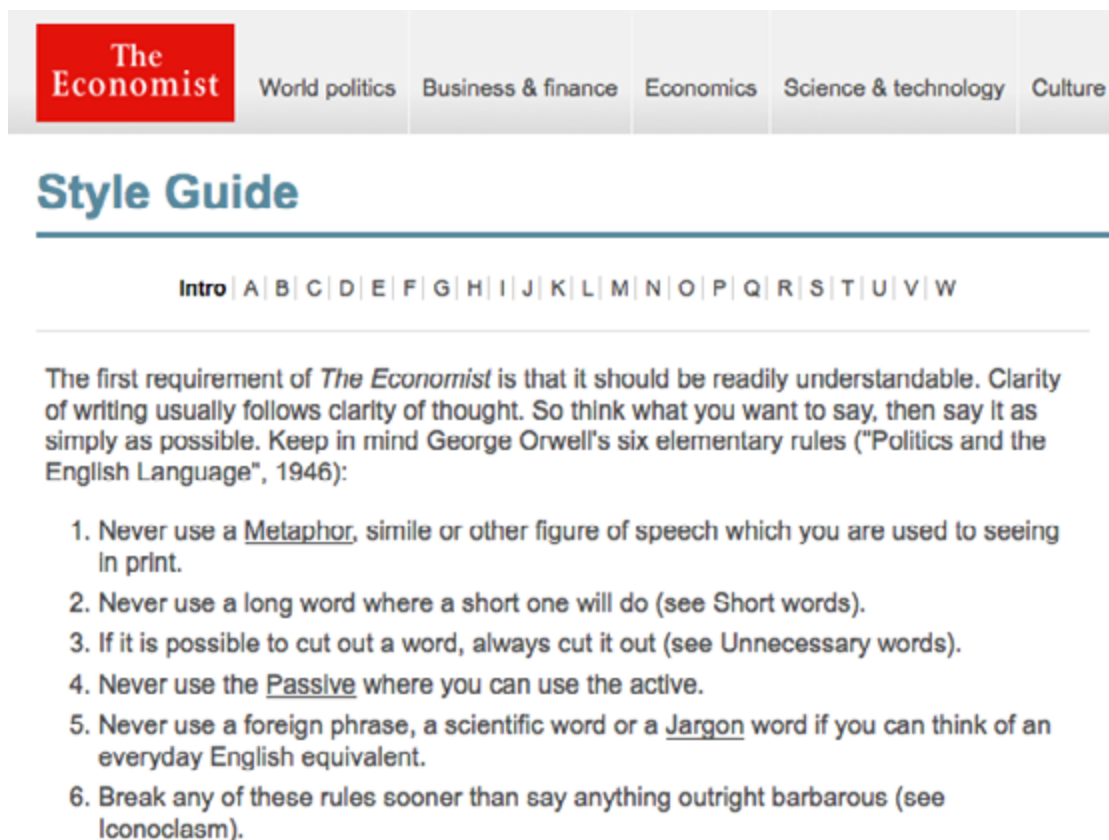


Source: “Switch.” *VFS Digital Design*. Creative Commons.

Let's start with the basics.

A style guide is a comprehensive document that keeps track of all the repeating elements for a project, ranging from branding rules down to the amount of beveling for call-to-action buttons.

Style guides also often reference rules and suggested practices, including dos and don'ts. On a more holistic level, they're also a great place to state motives and missions statements for a company.



Source: [The Economist](#)

Yes, style guides require extra work to create, especially at the beginning, when you're busiest trying to flesh out the design itself. But in the long run, that extra work goes a long way. Because the power of

a style guide comes from the sharing of knowledge, even small companies with just a few designers and developers can use style guides.

Think of style guides not as an academic PDF only for onboarding new hires, but as a collaborative tool that evolves as you improve your design and development processes.

In general, style guides are recommended for the following reasons:

- **Visual consistency** – At the most basic level, style guides help you create a cohesive design that reflects a common visual language. As we described in [Visual Consistency in UI Web Design](#), visual and interaction design elements like color palettes, typographies, animations, and load times all contribute towards a unified user experience.
- **Context** – Great style guides won't just provide a visual overview of a tab-based page and scroll-based page, but explain why the designer may want to switch between the two. For example, Jawbone uses a [scroll-based page](#) for storytelling, and a [tab-based page](#) for product customization.
- **Collaboration** – Having a set reference manual for each member of the team will ensure that everyone's on the same page. Collaboration is easier, with less repeated questions and back-and-forth emailing. Style guides also streamline communication through creating a singular vocabulary (i.e., defining what a “widget” or a “module” might be).

- **Code standardization** – Front-end style guides help standardize the (X)HTML, CSS, or Javascript, so designers and developers can see if a new design deviates from established standards, quickly discovering if something already written can be easily expanded.
- **Consolidation** – Designers only need to look one place to reference all components, as opposed to losing time sifting through different notes and questioning which documents say what.
- **New employee orientation** – Rather than repeatedly teaching new hires the standards, you can send/give them a style guide for reference as they ramp up. With the style guide as an anchoring document, follow-up conversations will be more meaningful.

These, of course, are simply the broad advantages to style guides. By specializing the type of style guide you use, you'll further improve your workflow and creativity. In fact, just the process of creating a style guide may stimulate new ideas for improving existing UI patterns.

To see a design process that uses mood boards, style tiles, and style guides, check out this [thorough piece](#) from designer Steven Bradley.

The 4 Practical Types of Visual Style Guides

In reality, you can create a style guide in whatever way best fits your company, product, team size, and design process.

That said, there are several common types of style guides, though we won't discourage customization, being creative, and mixing-and-matching elements. The four mainly used types, however, are mood boards, style tiles, brand style guides, and front-end style guides.

We'll mention here an important distinction between the four. The first two, mood boards and style tiles, are far more simplistic, while the latter two, brand and front-end style guides, are closer to thorough lists and manuals (and likely what you think of when you think of style guides).

That doesn't mean that pages and pages of detail are better or worse – each type of style guide has its own advantages and recommended uses. It's important to note that mood boards and style tiles can feed into a front-end style guide, almost as a seed that later grows into a tree.

1. Mood Boards

Mood boards are the most artistic, but likewise the most abstract, of the types of style guides. They specialize in setting an project's atmosphere and artistic style – its mood – but little else aside from that. What they lack in technical details, they make up for in concept exploration.

Popularized by industries such as fashion and interior design, these stylistic collages have been proven effective across many visual industries, including web UI design.



Source: “[Discussing the mood boards](#)”. foam. [Creative Commons](#).

As an example, let’s take a look at [this mood board](#) made by UX agency ClearLeft.

Their mood board is more than just a Pinterest-style collage – it’s a canvas that shows (rather than tells) the typography, colors, and overall feel for the site. [Web Designer Depot](#) explains that mood boards show clearly the aesthetic feel of a site, and act as a quick reference guide for the design’s visual elements. You can think of mood boards as a succinct and abridged style guide, in poster form for easy reference.

As recommended in [Web UI Best Practices](#), mood boards work best at the beginning of the design process because they aid in inspiration and exploring ideas when there's nothing else to go on. An eye-pleasing mood board will keep the entire team moving in the same direction before more substantial style decisions come into fruition. However, as more consistent frameworks develop throughout the design process, the mood board will lose effectiveness.

In addition to helping you think about consistency early in design, mood boards are also great for design collaboration. Since clients and stakeholders may have difficulty articulating the details of their ideas, mood boards provide a clear visual direction for productive feedback.

To learn more about mood boards, check out this [list of 24 pro tips](#). When you're ready to start, here's a [list of helpful tools](#).

2. Style Tiles

Style tiles are a transitional style guide more specific than mood boards, but lacking the intricacy of brand or front-end guides.

The inventor of style tiles, designer Samantha Warren, [describes their use as a way to](#) “...establish a direct connection with actual interface elements without defining layout,” and that they, “work well for clients who have established brands and need them to translate smoothly to the web.”

As you can see in [this example](#), style tiles maintain the same collage look and feel of a mood board, but with more concrete information. Notice how the style tile provides details like typeface, font treatment, and examples for texts and icons. The style tile itself is designed with the same style and color scheme as the intended site, and you could even add some adjectives to describe the emotional spectrum.

While style tiles cannot take the place of more thorough style guides, their simplicity and ease have their advantages. Because they're quick to make, style tiles are recommended for first determining a site or app's visual style, or when considering a redesign. When done right, style guides can even replace mockups as a visual representation of the site or app's theme.

[This style tile example](#) for the Tuts+ redesign has all the basic requirements, and more. Not only does it list their predetermined standards for various elements, it shows them as vivid samples: buttons, colors, textures, and typography standards for headings, links, titles, and text. You can also see the thematic key words generated in the second step, and presented in the site's style.

Even if you need something meatier, this [Compass extension can help you turn style tiles into a more complete style guide](#). Installation instructions are on the site.

3. Brand Style Guides

The first of the manual-type style guides, the brand style guide lists out all the rules and standards for a company's brand. Extending far beyond simply the logo, it will affect the entire brand identity on websites/apps, advertising, business cards, public forums – anywhere, really.

Brand style guides will include design details such as fonts, colors, sizes, iconography, and logo placement. Aside from consistency, their overarching purpose is defining the personality of the brand – whether the tone is smart or sassy, or whether the first impression should be rugged or refined.

The brand style guide is like a Magna Carta that protects your identity, preventing less familiar employees from diluting your impact through poorly executed visuals. They cover any usage specifications concerning the brand, including:

- **Logo Usage** – Logos may lose their effects at certain sizes, or sometimes require a certain amount of empty space surrounding them for maximum impact. Sometimes logos use different colors depending on the background, or have different variations depending on context (i.e., website vs. app). If you don't know these details, you risk stepping on the company's toes.
- **Color** – Companies are strongly identified by their colors – can you imagine a blue Coke can? Not only should you outline the brand's preferred color scheme, but also the values of the spe-

cific hues. Include both HEX codes for web use, and CMYK (or Pantone) for print.

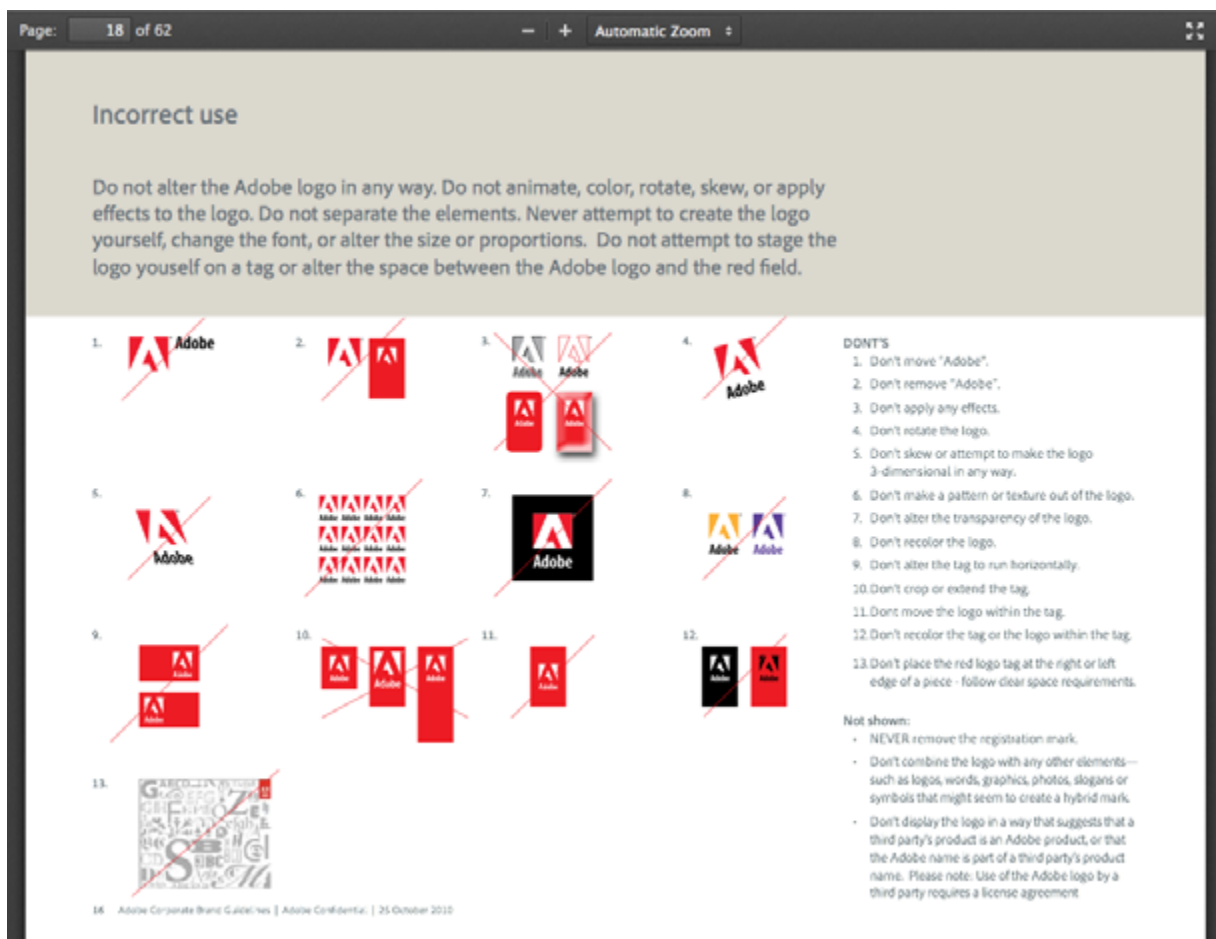
- **Typography** – Aside from typeface, you’ll also want to specify weights and treatments, and any specific styles that designers should be avoid. Brands may sometimes create highly customized typefaces ([ever notice that the Ls in Kellogg’s are different sizes?](#)).
- **Iconography/Imagery** – If the brand has its own specialized set of icons or images, include them (or a link) here. Chances are they’ll have multiple variations, each with their own individual rules for usage.

These are the essential fields that almost all brand guides cover. To go the extra mile, though, you can also include sections on:

- **Copywriting** – The tone and language style any writing associated with the brand should have. This can include specific phrases to include, appropriate slang, or any words that are off-limits.
- **Medium-specific Instructions** – While these are typically covered in the front-end style guide, it may be worth mentioning any rules that apply only to web, mobile devices, various types of ads, brochures, etc.
- **Brand Background** – To paint a fuller picture of the brand, include its history, mission statement/vision, and personality. For example, you might say that “Distillr is human. We are

familiar, friendly, and intelligent. All of our assets are lean, stripped down, with not one element extra.”

Feel free to customize your brand style guide to include anything relevant to you, and ignore the sections that are not. Now, let’s take a look at a few examples.



Source: [Adobe](#)

The brand style guide for **Adobe** features 62 pages of instructions on the proper usage of its brand identity. Covering everything from visuals, typography, and usage across different mediums, this brand guide is proof that you can’t be too meticulous about brand identity.

Talking About Facebook

in Web, Print or Broadcast

Sometimes you may need to refer to Facebook to discuss it, describe your presence on Facebook, display your Facebook web address, indicate that your product is integrated with Facebook, or describe your products or services as they relate to Facebook.

Learn more in our [Do's and Don'ts](#) section.



Do

Capitalize the word "Facebook", except when it's part of a web address

Do

Display the word "Facebook" in the same font size and style as the content surrounding it

Don't

Use the Facebook logo in place of the word "Facebook"

Don't

Pluralize the Facebook trademark, use it as a verb or abbreviate it

Source: [Facebook](#)

Facebook takes a different approach.

The have [a boiled-down version of their brand guidelines on a public webpage](#), with the option to download a more comprehensive manual on how to properly use their brand. This webpage is designed for quick reference, featuring digestible sections for downloading and using their different icons and screenshots, the general dos and don'ts, and download links to PDFs with more specific rules on using their brand in various scenarios.

For further information on brand guides, read designer [Cameron Chapman's post for Web Designer Depot](#) that describes the basic elements of every brand style guide.

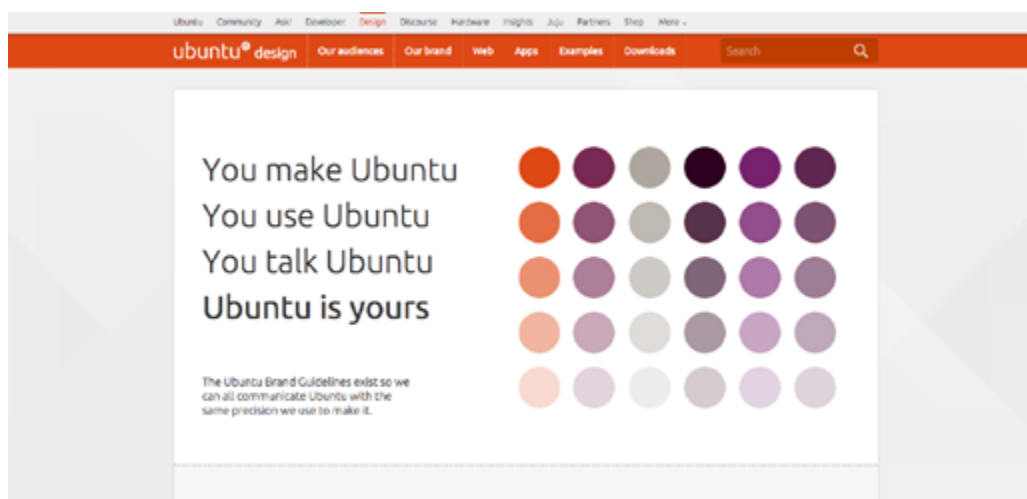
4. Front-end Style Guide

Most relevant to web and mobile UI designers, the front-end style guide is what most people think of when they hear the term “style guide.”

These are the largest and most detailed of the guides, covering all the ground of the previous guides combined, and then some. These robust manuals usually live as a section on a company’s internal or public website, including snippets of code alongside more common guidelines about typography and branding, etc.

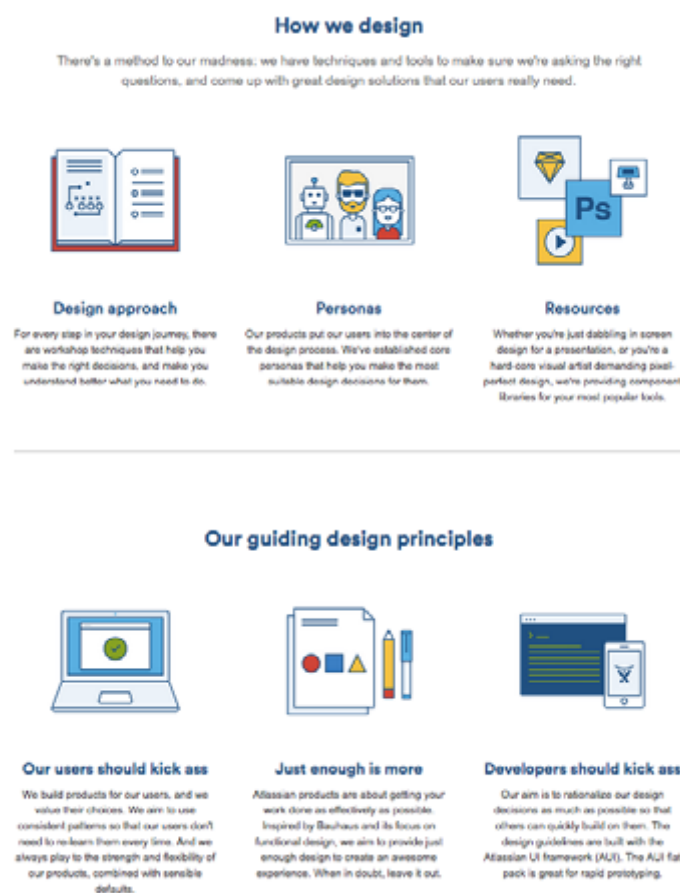
Front-end style guides are useful because they help [connect design with development](#).

For example, if you’ve already created a style tile and a brand style guide, you already have the design foundation for a front-end style guide. Just iterate and include any reusable code and UI patterns created along the way.



Source: [Ubuntu](#)

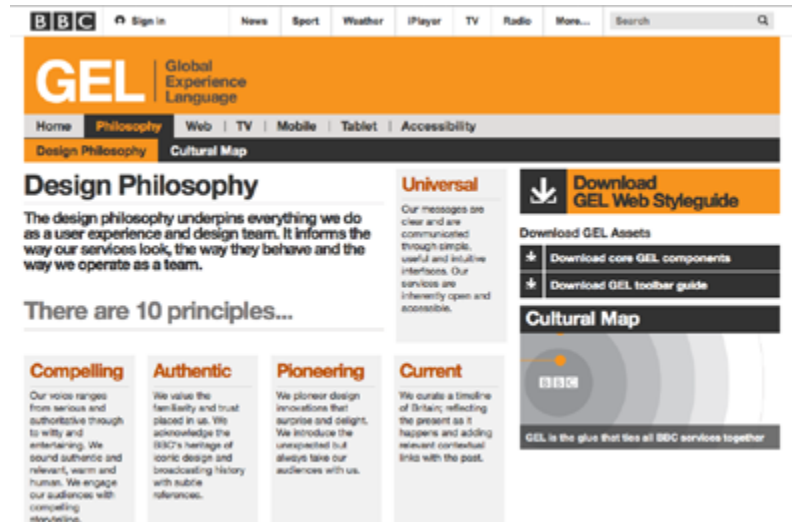
The front-end style guide for [Ubuntu](#), for example, divides itself into several smaller guides for the brand, web contexts, and mobile contexts. In doing so, it's able to cover everything in highly structured detail. The style guide includes everything from a slider that determines tone based on audience, to reusable sections of Javascript code.



Source: [Atlassian Design](#)

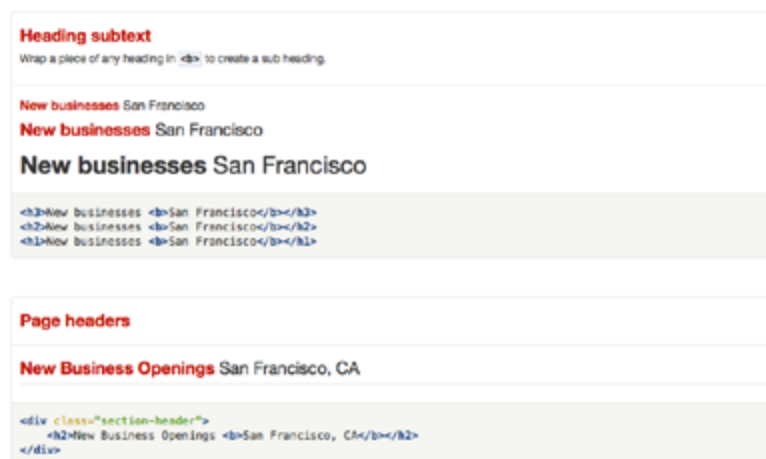
The [Atlassian Design style guide](#), too, is beautifully organized while still functional. In addition to technical details for product design, user interface, and branding, they provide extra information such as their step-by-step approach to design, core personas, and additional resources for visual design. As if that weren't enough,

they also include basic descriptions of their design principles to give their style guide a philosophical edge.



Source: [BBC GEL](#)

Even **BBC** features a [hybrid style guide](#), listing their design philosophies first and foremost before the technical details for use on web, TV, mobile, and tablet devices. It should also be noted that the platform sections each contain subsections for discussing the detailed philosophy for that medium, the technical details, and downloadable assets.



Source: [Yelp](#)

Of course, style guides can also be purely technical reference guides.

In their [style guide](#), **Yelp**, for example, lists out their HTML coding alongside other purely black-and-white details. Their style guide is a good example to follow – they outline all the relevant information they need, whether typographical to stylistic, and accompany each with the proper coding.

Colour Palette

Find closest color

This is the primary and secondary colour palettes as described in the PSD styleguide and in [colour_palette.sass](#)

GRAY PALETTE

#2c3643	#3b444f	#67747c	#99a9b3	#dbe6ec
\$darkgray	\$titlegray	\$bodygray	\$lightgray	\$subduedgray

PRIMARY PALETTE

#142b44	#1d508d	#297cbb	#288ad6	#0fdebd
\$darkblue	\$navblue	\$lpblue	\$linkblue	\$teal
#16c98d	#feef6d	#ffc83f	#fa5c5b	#bf538d
\$green	\$yella	\$orange	\$red	\$plum

Source: [Lonely Planet](#)

Lonely Planet, too, sticks just to the facts. As you can see by the above example, their section on color leaves no room for error, with coding-specific hues. Each page of their elaborate style guide is equally detailed, including several pages listing out all of their icons.

It's always nice to be as thorough as possible, but that depends on your company size and availability of resources. We recommend that front-end style guides include enough detail for developers and designers to build functioning sites from the design principles, technical guidance, and included code base.

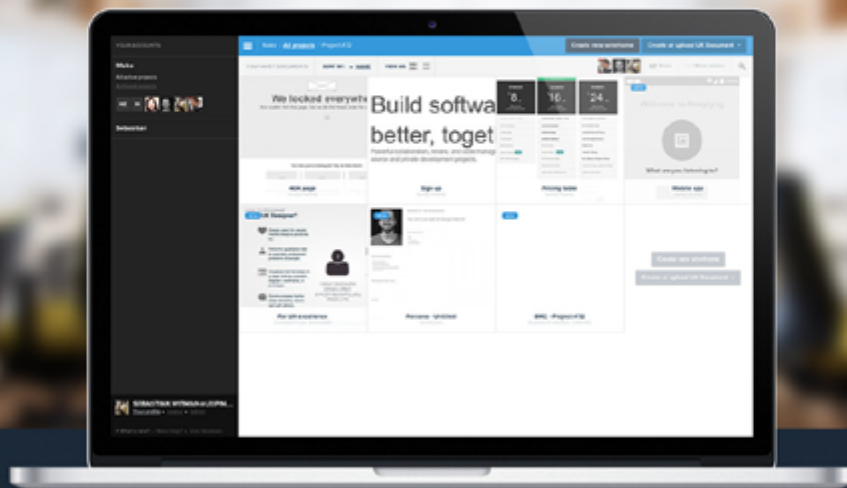
Conclusion

At heart, style guides are design and development aids meant to make the lives of you and your team easier. With that in mind, don't do more work than necessary. Browsing through example style guides, it's normal to feel overwhelmed by the wealth of detail some companies include. Remember, though, that you only need to include what's useful to you.

Simple style guides like mood boards and style tiles are great because they're easy to make, but fall short if you need something more meticulous like a front-end style guide. On the bright side, creating a mood board or style tile at the start of a project will help you answer some (but not all) of the fundamental questions, and can be a good first step towards creating a fuller style guide later – so they're rarely a waste of time. If all you need is a simple and atmospheric reminder of only the basic details, build a few style tiles and keep to that.

Depending on how strong your brand identity is, you may or may not need a separate branding style guide – sometimes a minimal section within a greater front-end style guide is enough. The front-end style guide is recommended for every major project or substantial company, but how in-depth you make it depends solely on your individual needs.

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