What is a Style Guide?

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Why even use a Style Guide?

A style guide is an official document for a company that uses rules and suggestions for writing styles and different document presentations. These guides also specify which option to use with different projects. They include items that are specific to the company. The guide is there to show you the different possibilities when making a decision with your employer or client. Style guides serve as several purposes such as:

The Purposes:

Ensure that documents keep to the corporate image and policy, including legal requirements

Inform new writers and editors of the existing style and presentation decisions and solutions to problems

Define the style issues are changeable and which are unchangeable

Improve the consistency within all documents; designs especially when more than one person is involved

Remove the want to invent something new

Remind the person of style decisions they may have to make for each project

Do You Need One Style Guide or More Than One?

There are organizations that may need only one style guide that covers all of the styles set within their company. The decisions about the style of writing will most likely be the same for all the work that will be done within the company, but some details may vary. The differences will be design issues, the product type, the publication or even client specific style guides may change. The examples are as follows:

Examples of Reasons:

A company’s style might have a different numbering style when a style may call for different numbering.

Documents might not have numbered headings, while many others do use numbered headings.

There may be words that are ok with the audience the company is reaching out towards but there may come a time where the wording used is unacceptable for another audience. These changes need to be addressed and written for the people working on the product.

The hardcopy has its own requirements as does the online copy of projects.

How Detailed Should a Style Guide Be?

Style guides can be as short as a single page and as lengthy as it needs to be, depending on how detailed the specifications of the content. Companies may adopt a style guide such as The Chicago Manual of Style, and only note the changes and additions they make in the company style guide. Other companies may summarize the key points from major style guides into their own style guide to keep their guide smaller and more likely to be followed and read.

The detail of your company’s style guide depends on how much your company deviates from the commercial style guides. The type of information about your products and how your company delivers these products, there are key points in every style guide and points where the style needs to be kept. Keeping the font and type correct within all the company documents make the concept flow throughout all the documents and design. The way a business card is laid out and how it shouldn’t be laid out can be put within the style guide, how each product can and cannot be done. Having these points make the style guide longer but the design and style kept close to how the company is done and kept.

Straying from a style guide can be dangerous ground, because the company has spent time and money in designing this guide to keep the concept fluid and close at all times. Having a document look different from all the others can throw off not only what people are looking at but how the whole layout of the product looks. Style guides may be short, or long but it is key to have everything you want uniform within the guide.

Summary and Style Guide Example

Style guides include rules and suggestions for writing style and document presentation. Style guides often specify which option to use when several options exist, and they include items that are specific to the company or industry and items for which a “standard” or example does not exist through commercial style guides. As you develop a style guide, keep in mind that the specific content in the style guide is not usually a matter of “correct” or “incorrect” grammar or style; instead, it’s a compilation of decisions that you, your employer, or client have made from among the many possibilities.

Style guides can be of any length and level of detail; however, they should exclude process and design information, tutorials, and decision rationale that are best included in documents separate from the style guide. Instead, the style guide should include only as much information as is needed to meet the particular goals of the style guide at your organization. The information in this article and the style guide example outline (in PDF format) should provide a good starting point for planning and developing a style guide.