

As you create your web content, you and your colleagues may have questions about grammar, spelling, punctuation, and writing style.



Organic = Don't spend a year writing a book. Start with whatever decisions you already have. Set it up as a mini web site with an index card for each topic. Add to it over time. Let it grow from authors' and editors' questions.

Use a style guide for consistency

All groups – businesses, government agencies, nonprofits, online communities, social media groups, universities – have personalities and cultures. Language choices are an important part of culture: How formal or colloquial should the style be (“cannot” or “can’t”)? What is acceptable usage (“each person ... they”)? Which way do we spell words that are new to the language (“website” or “web site”)?

A style guide helps everyone keep content consistent within and across sites, apps, and social media. The style guide is part of your content strategy.

Even if you are the only contributor to your web site (your blog, your site as a consultant or author) a short “cheat sheet” style guide is useful. I’ve created one for this book, so I don’t have to look back at other chapters to remind myself that, for this book, at least, it’s “web site,” “web,” “Internet,” and “intranet.”

One reason for a style guide: Words in transition

At any given time, some aspects of every language are in transition. For example, many words come into English with a hyphen, like “e-mail,” and over time lose the hyphen.

But different people and different organizations are at different places in the transition. Some still use the hyphen; others don’t. To have consistent content, you have to decide where your organization is in that transition.

Use a style guide to remind people

A style guide is also useful for people to check on grammar, spelling, and usage that they aren’t sure about: “affect” versus “effect,” “that” versus “which,” “its” versus “it’s” (Figures [Interlude 5-1](#) and [5-2](#)).

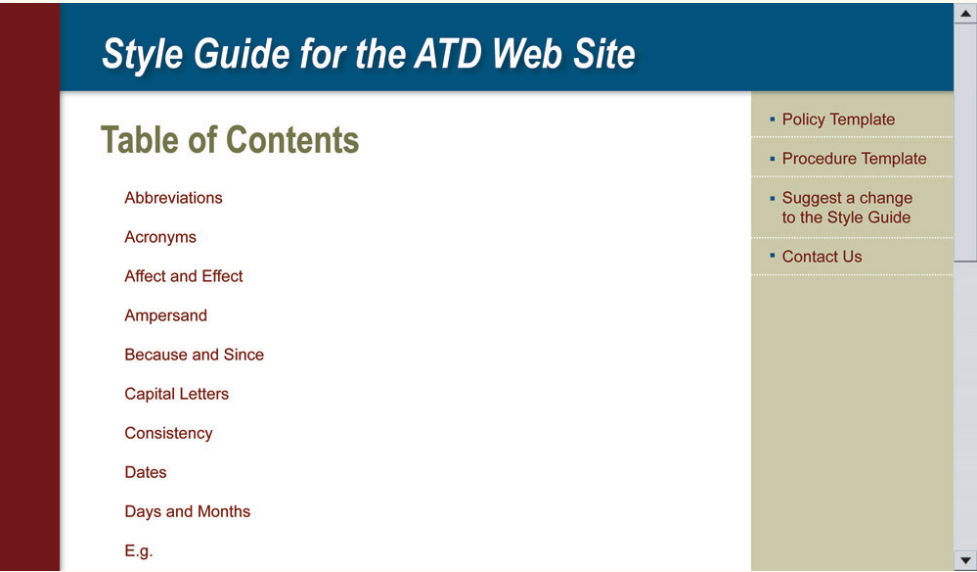


Figure Interlude 5-1 Part of the table of contents (pathway page on the intranet) for one company’s style guide. (ATD is a made-up name, but the screen is based on a real example that I developed with a client’s web team.)

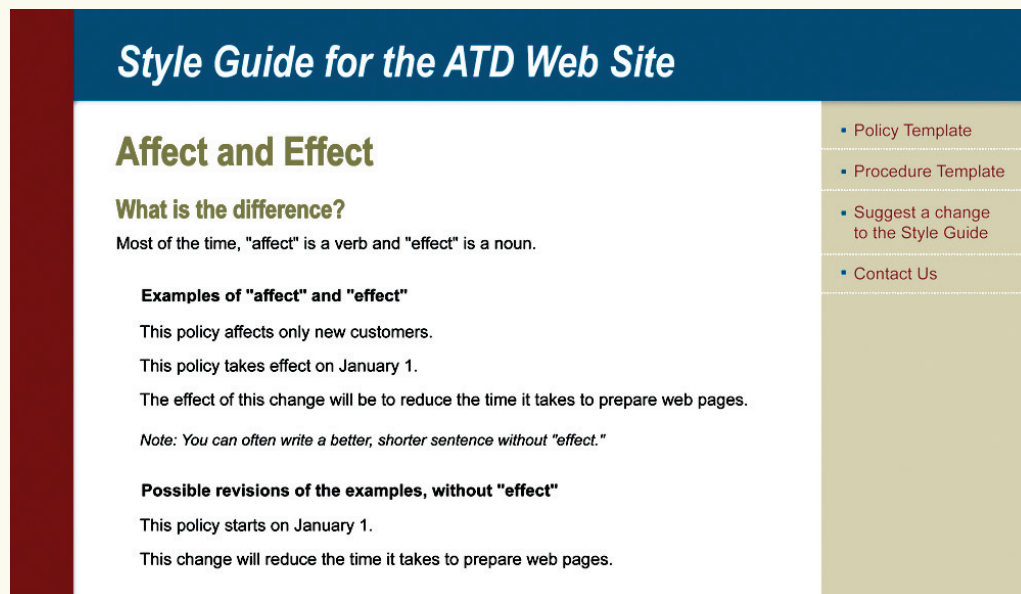


Figure Interlude 5-2 One topic in the style guide

Don't reinvent

If you work in an organization, first find out if other groups already have a style guide. If the organization has adopted a particular general guide or has its own style guide, consider how applicable it is for online writing.

Don't just ignore what is already being used elsewhere in the organization. Work with whomever owns the style guide to turn it into the guide for online writing that you need. If the organization's choice of a general style guide is too formal, too old, not appropriate for the new content strategy, find the right way in your organization's culture to get it changed.

Don't repeat the entire universe in your style guide. Many excellent general style guides exist. Pick one and have all the content contributors use it. In your specific style guide, focus instead on what the content contributors aren't sure about or what they argue about.

Appoint an owner

As with any content, the style guide needs an “owner.” Someone must be responsible and accountable for writing and maintaining it. The owner might convene a committee that represents different groups within the organization so that good conversations occur among content contributors, editors, and the style guide owner.

Get management support

The style guide also needs a champion, a sponsor. This should be someone with the interest to endorse it fervently and the clout to make people follow it.

Make it easy to create, to find, and to use

Here are several tips for creating a usable and useful style guide:

- Put it online where people can find it easily.
- Start small. Don't try to write it all before you get it out there.
- Make it organic. Let it grow from authors' and editors' needs.
- Keep it small. Include only what people need.
- Allow different styles for different media and situations if that makes sense in your organization's culture. (For example, the style guide might allow “Thx” in a tweet or a Facebook post, but require “Thank you” in an email.)
- Use the database model that we discussed in Chapter 6. Make each topic its own small index card. Don't write a book!
- Make it easy to find topics – both by searching and through links.
- Write it clearly, using all the guidelines for clear web writing.
- Show as well as tell. Give examples.
- Do usability testing to make sure that authors and editors can find and use it.
- Have an easy-to-use feedback mechanism that allows and encourages people to ask questions and suggest new topics.