

# Style guides that refuse to go away

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**One-sentence summary:** Questions the relevance and utility of the minutiae that style guides insist on.

In giving final touches to the manuscript I copy-edited an hour ago, I made the following changes

- Changed Materials and methods to Materials and Methods
- Added a full stop after a few table titles
- Deleted the space between Fig. and the number that followed it (Fig. 4 to Fig.4, for example)
- Removed the full stop at the end of each numbered heading
- Set the heading Abstract in all caps and made it bold

And I wondered whether anybody will notice these efforts at making the manuscript consistent with the style followed in a few of the papers – not all, mind you – in the most recent issue of the journal. Not any of the those who read the journal for its contents, for sure: they do care whether the authors of the paper used industrial-grade chemicals or analytical grade chemicals in making up the reagents they used in their experiments, whether they spun the centrifuge at 1000 rpm or 2000 rpm, and whether they heated their samples at 50 °C for 1 hour or at 40 °C for 2 hours but would never notice the missing full stop at the end of a table title even if the dot jumped off the page and bit them. Not any of the members of the editorial board of the journal, for sure: they do care whether any of the papers carried by the journal was presented at a conference earlier, whether the paper that reports outstanding results with Chemical A is based on solid data to support that contention, and whether the journal's impact factor is lower than that of a competing journal. Not the librarians either—so long as the promised number of issues are delivered, more or less on schedule; so long as the journal is physically satisfactory; so long as the title is retained year after year by the committee that reviews the library's journal subscriptions annually.

Who, then? Perhaps a fellow copy editor or two with time on their hands. Perhaps a supervisor looking for more copy edito at an agency that provides copyediting services. Perhaps a programmer looking for tweaking a software package that runs consistency checks. None of the three could be considered, evenly remotely, to be among the target readers or users of the journal.

As style guides continue to expand, each edition bulkier than its predecessor, and as copy editors struggle to keep up, it is time to re-consider the role and utility of style guides. Perhaps an electronic version is worth aiming at – electronic not so much as a handier alternative to print but as a software package in its own right – a customized version of a generic style checker as it were; run your manuscript through it and the package spits out a version with all the i's dotted and all the t's crossed as stipulated. We already have tools such as Reference Manager and EndNote, which take data on references and citations and organize the data any which way you like: names of all authors inverted or only the first author's name inverted, names in all caps or caps and small caps as you wish, volume numbers in bold or normal, the year of publication immediately after the names of authors or just before the journal's volume number, and so on.

However, the real question is whether it is time to reconsider the role of style guides, especially the extent of style specifications. The debate on spaced en dashes versus unspaced em dashes to mark off parenthetical insertions, for example, continues unabated in copyediting- and typography-related forums; it is a moot point whether a number and the percentage symbol that follows should be set closed up or separated with a gap; and I wonder what difference, apart from a keystroke, it makes whether items in run-on lists are introduced with letters of the alphabet enclosed within brackets or only with right-hand brackets. And yet, style guides continue to come up with explicit guidance on such issues. It is hard to find any ergonomic justification for choosing among the alternatives. Surely the energy spent in making a manuscript 100%-compliant with a particular house style is better spent on making the text simple, lucid, and – dare I say it – euphonious, the three prime virtues of prose as enunciated by Somerset Maugham?

Agreed that in most cases, points of style are arbitrary; however, where possible, do style guides consider usability and ergonomics, technological changes, or changes in other spheres? Take a trivial example of insisting on small caps for such abbreviations as a.m. and p.m. At one point, the practice was discouraged because using true small caps required a separate font (the so-called expert set): now, with OpenType and appropriate subroutines in page layout software or even word-processing software, using true

small caps is no longer a constraint. Other changes include turn-around time (much shorter now) and outsourcing of copy editing. Then there is the question of the form in which text is read: e-book readers impose a set of limitations (in terms of the typeface you can choose, for example) that may not render a block of prose exactly as it appears in print, and audiobooks by definition dispense with the visual form altogether: gone are the curly quotes and the elegant dashes, the nuanced spacing, the obdurate hyphens. Web pages, of course, do their own thing, although cascading style sheets, Unicode, and web-safe fonts continue their rearguard action to impose the iron-clad consistency of print on the exuberant HTML. There are well-known web style guides too, although I am not aware of any for audiobooks or e-books.

What style guides are undoubtedly successful in achieving is securing unremitting attention to detail for any text that is being made compliant with a given style. Although there is a real danger, a professional hazard for copy editors, of missing the wood for the trees, stories also about of blunders picked up as a result of such scrutiny. The question is whether style guides in their current form have a place in the world of sound bites and progressively shorter attention spans, of 160-character tweets, and of re-purposed texts.