

RB Editing & Writing

Why Create an Internal Style Guide?

Because rules for communications and correspondence will make your life easier.

If you already know what an internal style guide is and why you want one, skip to page 2 to get started.

What is a style guide?

In short, it's a reference for how to write anything you can think of – from the difference between principal and principle to the exact words you use to describe what your organization does.

Professional writers and editors constantly reference style guides such as the AP Style Guide, Chicago Manual of Style or the MLA Guide. While many of us devote a lot of brain space to remembering grammar, punctuation and other writing rules, we also know there's no reason to memorize everything. When we need to know, we look it up.

An internal style guide is your organizational or personal cheat sheet. There are dozens of questions a content style guide can answer. And it saves you from having to remember “how we write that.” Rather than looking through old documents to see how something was written, or just guessing, you can quickly look it up.

What might an internal style guide include?

Your internal style guide should answer questions such as:

- What is the preferred short form of your organization's name?
- How do you describe what your organization does?
- How is the organization's top executive referenced in written communications?
- Do you indicate morning times by using am, AM, or a.m.?
- Does your organization use a serial/Oxford comma?
- Are there words that should never be used in written communications?
- Do certain industry terms have special meanings in your communications?
- In addition, your internal style guide might include reminders about frequently confused words or frequently misspelled words, as well as references to external dictionaries, grammar websites, etc.

Why do I care about an internal style guide?

There are a few reasons:

- Consistency is one of the most important ways to make sure your message is getting across clearly.
- Inconsistencies will subconsciously pull the reader out of your content.
- Sometimes, there is more than one correct way to write something, but your audience will understand better if you're consistent.
- Other times, there is only one correct way to write something (for instance, principal and principle have totally different meanings), but it's hard to remember it.
- It will save you the time of having look up certain internal basics.
- It's a fast and efficient way to improve the writing of everyone in your organization.

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How to Create an Internal Style Guide

If you don't know what an internal style guide is and why you want one, go to page 1 to learn.

5 Steps to Creating Your Internal Style Guide:

1. Begin by answering the questions below.
2. Make the answers available to everyone in the organization, preferably via an online or Intranet document that's easy to update.
3. Designate one or two people who will make changes and additions as the style guide "keepers."
4. Provide a way for everyone in the organization to ask style-related questions.
5. The style guide "keepers" should regularly update the style guide, including answering questions.

When we create internal style guides for our clients, we often use a Google Doc. One or two people have "editor" and "owner" permission, and can change the Doc. Everyone else can comment, which is a great way for people to ask questions.

Internal Style Guide Questions

Begin your style guide with the answers to these 20 questions:

1. What is the official, full name of the organization? When is this used?
2. What are the official shortened name(s), abbreviated name(s) and/or acronyms for your organization? Are different ones used in different situations? Are some abbreviations used only internally?
3. How do you describe what the organization does?
4. What is your top executive's name and title?
5. If your industry has specialized terms, is there a website or other location where they can be looked up?
6. Are there industry acronyms that should be written out when they're used in a document?
7. Are there industry acronyms you can always use without writing out what they mean?
8. Are there certain words that should never be used in company communications and correspondence?
9. Do you use the serial/Oxford comma before "and" or "or" in lists?
10. How should dashes be used? E.g., The bunny—which was hopping rapidly—disappeared; The bunny – which was hopping rapidly – disappeared; The bunny~which was hopping rapidly~disappeared.
11. Do you write out percent or use the % symbol?
12. Do you capitalize Internet?
13. Do you write website or web site?
14. How do you refer to people after first reference in various types of writing? E.g., by first name only, by last name only, by courtesy title + last name, etc.
15. Do you write "Dr." before the name of physicians? What about PhDs? Do you instead indicate a doctoral degree after the name? Or do you not indicate it at all?
16. When Sr., Jr., II, etc. is part of a name, do you write a comma before it or not?
17. Do you use italics or quotes around the names of major works like books, plays, movies, TV shows, etc.?
18. How should United States be written? E.g., United States – always spell out; abbreviate U.S. with periods; abbreviate US without periods, etc.
19. How should United Kingdom be written? E.g., United Kingdom, U.K., UK, etc.
20. How should European Union be written? E.g., EU, European Union, E.U.