

# Sample Style Guide for an Organization

This is a sample style guide that can be used as a starting point for creating your own organization-specific style guide. Corporate style guides help ensure consistency across all documents by including specific guidelines for the following:

- Brand usage
- Writing
- Grammar and style
- Formatting
- Graphics

We've included many possible items that could be in your style guide. You should consider what is most important to your organization, corporate identity, and branding, and include those items in your style guide.

---

## **Brand Usage**

*Your marketing department may have an extensive branding style guide that doesn't include grammar guidelines. It is okay to have two separate—but complementary—guides until both departments align.*

Anyone creating documents for your company should know your brand to create a consistent look and feel. Whether your documents were created by the marketing or the documentation team, a customer should be able to identify that the documents came from the same organization.

## **Color**

Audiences can sometimes identify a company just by its combination of colors. Give writers and designers your corporate color palette—with primary and secondary colors—and describe which colors should be used for what. Include formats for both print (CMYK and Pantones, if they exist) and web (RGB).

## **Fonts and Typography**

Whether you have a corporate font that is unique to your company or not, tell designers and writers what fonts they can and should use for each document element (e.g., body text and headings).

## **Logo**

Tell designers and writers how to best use your logo. You might consider including these types of guidelines:

- Maximum and minimum size
- Colors and black and white usage
- Placement (e.g., required distance from other items)

---

## Writing Guidelines

*If documents in your organization have different audiences, it is good practice to create project-specific style sheets that describe unique rules and decisions or exceptions to the larger style guide.*

### Trademarks

If your organization has trademarks or patents, you want to make sure you protect them by using trademark and registered symbols properly. Tell writers all your trademarked and patented terms and how to use them. For example, should they include the trademark or registered symbol every time they use a specific term or just on the first occurrence?

Writing style can also build your brand. While writing isn't as visual as your colors or logo, a reader should still get a consistent feel from all your documents' content. These guidelines cover voice, audience, and diction.

### Voice and Tone

What attributes do you want your readers to think of as they read your documents? That you are innovative? Steadfast? Dynamic? Approachable? Once you identify these attributes, tell your writers and designers so they can keep them in mind.

Similarly, describe the tone of your documents. Should they be professional, academic, optimistic, concise, witty, clever, or straightforward? Should writers embrace or avoid using jargon?

### Audience

Remind writers and designers to always consider their audience. If your audience is the same for all documents, include audience attributes here:

- Education level
- Needs and wants
- Background or experience with the content
- Cultural or geographical information

### Diction

The words you choose (diction) determine whether your writing is informal or formal, interesting or stale, precise or ambiguous. Describe your style preferences to your writers. You might include preferences for some of the following:

- Active or passive voice
- Articles (a, an, the) for tabs, buttons, or pages
- Conciseness
- Gender neutrality
- Point of view (first, second, or third person)

---

## Grammar and Style

Grammar and style are just as important as the tone of your corporate writing so make sure that all writers are following the same set of guidelines.

### Style and Grammar Guides

Many widely accepted style and grammar guides are available on the market (such as *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *AMA Manual of Style*, *The Elements of Style*, etc.), so no company needs to create one from scratch. Choose a style guide that best meets your needs, and instruct writers to reference this guide if they can't find an answer in your corporate style guide.

### Other Rules

The rest of this section should include exceptions to the established style guide, specific points that you want to emphasize, or the choices your company has made in cases where the style guide offers more than one option. Here are some examples of what you might include:

- **Abbreviations.** What can be used? What type of punctuation do they require?
- **Acronyms.** What should be used? Do you spell them out on the first occurrence of the document or section?
- **Bulleted lists.** Should they always start with a capital letter? How should they be spaced? Should they be introduced with a full sentence and a colon?
- **Capitalization.** What should be capitalized? Headings, prepositions in headings, job titles, company names, chapters, sections, plans, figures, reports, etc.?
- **Numbers.** When should they be spelled out?
- **Punctuation.** What rules will you follow for colons, commas, ellipses, en dashes, em dashes, exclamation marks, hyphens, quotation marks, semicolons, etc.?
- **Serial comma.** Should there be a comma before *and* or *or* in a list?
- **Trademarks.** How will you handle the trademarks and registered symbols for the products and services of other companies?

## Word Rules

You may also want to include guidance on how to use some commonly confused words, as well your organization's preferred terminology and your rules for words that can be spelled or capitalized in more than one way. For example, you might include some of these commonly misused words:

*Every organization has preferred terms for employees, customers/clients, and partners. Include these in your style guide.*

- Affect or effect
- Already or all ready
- Alternate or alternative
- Among or between
- Because or since
- Because of or due to
- Can, may, or might
- Comprise, compose, constitute
- Continual or continuous
- Discrete or discreet
- e.g. or i.e.
- Ensure, insure, assure, or make sure
- Farther or further
- If, when, or whether
- Last or past
- Lay or lie
- More than or over
- Principal or principle
- That or which
- Who or whom

## Words to Avoid

Similarly, you may want to include a list of words to avoid such as the following examples:

*In marketing materials or proposals, steer clear of certain words that promise something you can't prove.*

- Best, strongest, ideal, perfect, etc.
- Ensure
- It is, there are
- Partner, partnership
- Recent
- Safe
- The only
- This, that, these, those
- Unique
- Us, them

---

## **Content Formatting**

Many organizations have templates that define fonts, styles, colors, and formatting. This information is useful in a style guide in case someone uses a different template or would like some reasoning behind your choices. Include items such as the following:

- **Bulleted and numbered lists.** How far should they be indented? What is the line spacing for lists?
- **Captions.** What format should captions follow? What items should be labeled as tables, figures, or charts?
- **Consistent organization.** Should each type of document contain specific parts?
- **Page layout.** What page layouts can or should be used? Provide details. This is a good place for screen captures of sample layouts.
- **Spacing.** How much spacing should be between paragraphs? How much spacing should there be in tables? Remind writers to include one space between sentences.
- **Styles.** What fonts, sizes, and colors should be used for each element of your documents? List the particular style names (e.g., Normal or Heading 1) used in your documents or authoring tools (e.g., Word or PowerPoint). Note the style name and the characteristics of the style (such as the font name, size, color, etc.).
- **Tables.** What color and style should tables follow?

---

## **Graphics, Images, and Figures**

Describe the overall graphics style for your designers, and give information about where they can obtain approved images. You should include photo and illustration guidelines, including acceptable file sizes and formats.