Style Sheets: The Abbreviated Answer

Tracy Dalton

As a project moves from writer to editor to designer and back again, style sheets (abbreviated versions of style guides) offer quick access to answers during documentation development. Style sheets provide consistency, give a quick-reference point, set a project's style from the beginning, eliminate confusion on major style points, and serve as a double check during revision. Designed specifically for a project, style sheet formats include laminated sheets and standees, and content ranges from grammar references to contact information.

WHAT ARE STYLE SHEETS?

As technical communicators, we strive to create consistent, professional documents. Relying on style guides gives a means to maintain these standards, but what if a field-specific or an in-house style guide isn't available? Creating a style sheet may be the answer:

- **Saving time:** Style sheets are valuable tools for writers and editors when time to complete a project is too limited to compile a detailed style guide. Style sheets include quick answers to document-specific questions, ranging from format choices and heading styles to grammar issues and contact information.

- **Maintaining consistency:** Style sheets also help maintain consistency when documents are passed among multiple writers and editors who may not use a similar style. According to Carolyn Rude in *Technical Editing*, style sheets give "other people working on the document a basis for answering questions and making decisions" (138).

Whether style sheets are compiled before, during, or after the document is written, they can accompany a project and supply answers that would otherwise be inconvenient to find, providing more time to concentrate on document content. This article explains the benefits of style sheets, makes suggestions about the content of style sheets, and suggests formats for their design.

WHO USES STYLE SHEETS?

Anyone involved in writing or editing documents can use style sheets. Writers, editors, and designers who are able to collaborate from a project's start can design the style sheet's content, allowing style to be set from the beginning; document team members can then refer to the sheet at any time during the production process. A writer working alone on a project can use a style sheet to outline choices for a document's design and style, which can serve as a reminder during composing. I use style sheets with students in my editing classes to help them envision projects before they begin. Because style sheets are document specific, they can be assembled quickly and can serve several purposes.

WHY USE STYLE SHEETS?

Useful style sheets provide answers—which can become time consuming to track down—to questions that arise during document production. They list information useful in composing or editing specific documents. Even one-page sheets give answers to situations faced during most composing processes. Several benefits for using style sheets illustrate how they can be employed during document production.

Provide Project Consistency

Just as style guides would do, style sheets provide places to record information that needs to be consistent throughout a document. Style guides provide writers, editors, and designers the same information about an abbreviation or a heading style. However, style sheets can give this information without the time and effort involved in composing an entire guide. Style sheets allow all members of a production team—especially those who work at separate work sites—the same information to refer to as they work to maintain a document's consistency.

Set Style and Eliminate Questions

Style sheets list all decisions about style for a document, including grammatical choices and text and heading typefaces. This allows anyone working on the document to look at the style sheet instead of trying to decipher the document; the document style is set from the start.

Since style sheets outline the format of a document, questions about style are at least diminished if not eliminated. With less confusion about points of style, a writer or editor can concentrate on the tasks at hand and not worry about minute stylistic details.

Serve as a Quick-Reference Tool

Because of their brevity, style sheets can be used as quick-reference tools. During writing and editing, users would not need to rely on various reference books, which may not be available between offices or work

sites. If a company relies on a large, in-house style guide, information relevant to the current project can be extracted and compiled on a style sheet, making information more readily available.

Once a style sheet has been established and passed along with a document, revising and editing that document become easier and more efficient, since there is no need to search for answers. If answers to questions accompany the document, the document development process, from writing and designing through editing and proofreading, becomes more effective and consistent.

Help Students with Projects

Style sheets help students develop ideas and plan projects before the writing or editing process begins. Planning text, heading, and layout styles beforehand allows them a chance to envision their work before it starts and gives them a guide to refer to for consistency. In an academic setting, style sheets can also list errors students need to recognize in their own writing; the sheets also help them maintain project consistency, serving as good training for the workplace.

WHAT CAN BE INCLUDED?

Since style sheets are document specific, planning the content allows recurrent questions and repeated formats to be outlined from the start. Here are suggestions for information to include on a style sheet.

Format Specifications

Whether a document is designed for standard 8½ by 11-inch paper or requires other size considerations, format specifications can be outlined thoroughly on a style sheet. List these kinds of specifications:

- Margins
- Paper size and style
- Binding considerations
- Cover choices
- Layout specifications

Typeface Choices

Some typeface choices may not be apparent to an editor or a designer without scrolling through a document. Simply listing choices cuts down on the time necessary to format the document, especially if choices are available at the beginning of the project:

- Body text
- Heading styles for each level of heading
- Headers and footers
- Figures
- Captions

Grammar and Style Reminders

No matter how experienced writers become, grammatical and mechanical questions still crop up from time to time. A style sheet lists rules and accompanying examples, especially if the problems exist in the document and need to be corrected during editing:

- Punctuation use
- Number use
- Gender-specific language
- Parallel structure
- Hyphenation
- Active voice

Word and Abbreviation Lists

Word choices and their uses can vary between disciplines and companies. Style sheets provide answers:

- Preferred spellings
- Abbreviations
- Recurrent spelling problems

In-House Style Guide References

If an in-house style guide is available, style sheets can list important rules from the guide that apply to a specific document for quick reference:

- Full company name
- Logo use
- Site-specific word definitions

Project Contacts

Though a business card for other project participants may be in a planner close by, listing everyone who works on a project is more convenient:

- Name and project role
- Address
- Phone number
- Email address
- Hours of availability

WHAT DO THEY LOOK LIKE?

Style sheets can be simple or elaborate, depending upon production time and the complexity of the project. Several design options offer helpful formats for several work situations. (A style sheet example [Figure 1] follows this article.)

Paper Sheet Accompanying a Project

A simple paper page of information that goes with a document lists the information a writer or an editor will need to work on a project. Users can even write on this version if they encounter recurrent errors or style situations that need correction.

Laminated Sheet with a Project

Obviously, laminating extends the life of a style sheet; laminated style sheets can resist even rain and spills on the desk.

Standee for a Workstation

A desk standee, like those A-shaped signs seen on restaurant tables, makes the style sheet more visible at the workstation. This design works best made of cardstock. The style sheet is designed with information on the top and bottom halves of the page to allow for folds at top, bottom, and center. A one-half-inch slit cut in the center of the sheet's top and bottom allows it to be slipped together after folding. (Of course, content for this version of a style sheet would need to be formatted and planned, so all information could be read on one side or the other.) The style information for a project is then readily visible, standing on the desk near the workstation.

Electronic version

Compilation of a style sheet can take place during a document's composing process, and an efficient way to compose one is to keep a style sheet file open on the computer desktop as work takes place on the main document (Rude 137). Choices about style and matters of consistency can be listed as they are encountered during composition or editing. Then, the online version of the style sheet can be printed or shipped with the document electronically.

CREATE A STYLE SHEET

Using a style sheet helps writers, editors, and designers maintain document consistency and saves time during document development, especially if an in-house style guide is not available or if the in-house style guide is large. Various formats for style sheets can be tailored to many writing situations, from student use in the classroom to professional application between work sites. Style sheets provide easy answers to potentially time-consuming questions.

REFERENCE

Rude, Carolyn D. *Technical Editing*. 3rd edition. Allyn & Bacon Series in Technical Communication. New York, NY: Longman Publishers, 2002.

Tracy Dalton
English Department
Southwest Missouri State University
901 S. National Ave.
Springfield, MO 65804 U.S.A.
417-836-6806
tld057f@smsu.edu

Tracy Dalton has been teaching technical writing and editing at SMSU in Springfield, Missouri, since 1999. Previously, Tracy spent several years as an editor, and she holds a master's degree from Truman State University, Kirksville, MO.

VIZUALITY STYLE SHEET

Typography

Comic Sans MS bold 24 pt.
(preferred heading choice)

Times New Roman 12 pt.
(preferred body text choice)

Abbreviations

CA   cap
FHS   Fordland High School
SH   shirt
SHS   Strafford High School
SMS   Southwest Missouri State University
UPS   United Parcel Service
VIZ   Vizuality

Paper Use

Business Cards: 10 pound vanilla card stock
Stationary: vanilla with logo in the upper left corner

Logo Use

Color letters according to these guidelines:
Colors: **Green**: V
          Yellow: izu
          Orange: ali
          Red: ty
Color hue should remain vibrant and clear.
(No percentages are available.)

Grammar and Style Points

Commas
          -If you use an introductory phrase, use a comma.
          -Use commas between items in a series.
Example: bacon, eggs, and toast.

Gender-specific language
Avoid word choices that are gender specific, like UPS man. Choose nongender-specific nouns, like UPS driver, instead.

Numbers
          -Use words when referring to numbers between zero and ten.
          -Use numbers for money and for figures 11 and up.

Parallel Structure
Express ideas in parallel formats in lists and text. *Example:* We came home, ate dinner, and watched television.

Point of view
Choose second person "you" and first person "I" to address the audience in a familiar manner, person to person.

Tone
In correspondence, allow for an informal business tone. Avoid pompous word choices.

Location and Contact Information

Address: 1003 Saddle Club Rd.
          Fordland, MO 65652

Phone and fax: (417) 767-2532

Email: vizuality@aol.com

Web address: www.vizuality.net

Contacts: Randy Dalton, Boone Wilford