



# How to Create a Content Style Guide

For Businesses, Nonprofits, & Other Organizations

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# About the Author

## Liz Murphy, Director of Web & Interactive Content at IMPACT

With more than 10 years of editorial and inbound marketing experience, Liz is obsessed with innovating new ways of creating absurdly helpful online content experiences. In her role, she works closely with in-house contributors and partners as an editor, content strategist, and sounding board to help them bring their own stories to life. [Learn more about Liz.](#)

# Introduction

Yes, clients hire us to create content style guides for them.

But the purpose of this guide is to teach you how to create your content style guide 100% on your own, **without** having to hire an agency.

## Who This Guide Is for:

- **You're the business owner, founder, or CEO** of a new brand -- or a brand making a pivot -- and you need your team on the same page about how your brand should be perceived.
- **You're a marketing leader** overseeing a website redesign project that will include rewriting most -- if not all -- of your website's woefully out-of-date copy.
- **You're a marketer** who is always on the hook for content mistakes made by freelancers or other members of your team. (And they're often the same mistakes, over and over.)
- **You're a content manager** who wants to get better work out of your writers and internal contributors in a way that makes creating content easier and more enjoyable for them.

## What You'll Learn:

- How to run a content style guide workshop with your team.
- How to write an effective content style guide for your brand.
- Dos, don'ts, and critical best practices for rolling it out to your team.
- **And whole lot more!**

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# Chapter 1:

## What Is a Content Style Guide?

### “OK, What’s a Content Style Guide?”

A content style guide is a **documented set of guidelines and rules** that break down your **brand personality**, and how it is (and isn’t) **expressed through your content**. It should be used by anyone on your team -- or freelancers who work with you -- who will be creating content for your brand.

That sounds straightforward enough, right? But while content style guides don't seem particularly sexy or complex, it will be **one of the most important documents you’ll ever create for your business**.

To understand why, however, you need to learn the true purpose of a content style guide, beyond its surface-level definition.

### You Can’t Tell People What to Think of Your Brand

Think about the last time you had to speak to a group of people you didn’t know too well. Maybe you were at a conference, a professional networking event, or a meeting at work.

#### **What did you want everyone to think of you?**

Perhaps you wanted your peers to think of you as smart, passionate, and knowledgeable.

Unfortunately, you can't just go up to people and say, **“Hey, I'm smart, I'm passionate, and I totally know what I'm talking about!”**

*(They'd probably just think you were kind of strange and very pushy.)*

**People fundamentally do not like being told what to think about anything -- especially about brands.**

For example, you may want to be perceived as a thought leader in your industry -- *who doesn't these days?* -- but if your audience ever believes that about you, it'll be because you proved it to them time, not because you told them to believe it.

You can, however, help them get there.

There are a lot of brands who know what they want to say, and what they want their audience to believe about them without having to tell them. On the other hand, some still suffer from a total disconnect between what they want to say vs. what they're actually communicating to their audience.

## What You Want Your Brand to Say vs. What You're Really Communicating

Let's go back to that moment in time where you had to present in front of a bunch of people, and you wanted the audience to think you were the bee's knees.

What if, instead of dressing like a competent professional, you showed up to that presentation or speaking engagement in pajamas? And maybe, just maybe, you had a little toothpaste on the corners of your mouth?

**No matter what you say or how compelling your ideas are, your physical presentation of how you showed up would be a complete distraction, sending an entirely different message than what you were intending.**

You're not smart. You're *sloppy*.

You're not passionate. You're *inappropriate*.

And it doesn't matter how good you are at what you do, it's clear that you're *completely unprofessional*.

**You need to have this same kind of situational awareness about your brand.**

Your brand is always sending messages and communicating with your audience about who you are and what you value, even when you're not explicitly saying something.

It's kind of like that old saying -- "*It's not just what you say, it's how you say it.*"

We're not here today to talk about what your message is or to flesh out your talking points. This guide is all about how you package up those elements and deliver them so they have maximum impact with your audience.

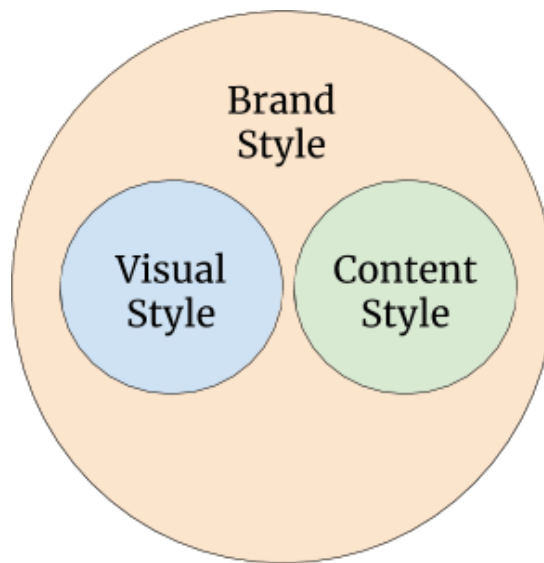
Your audience will fall in love with your brand, but only if what you want to say and what you're communicating are aligned.

**You do that with a content style guide.**

**Related:** [Building Brand Loyalty & How to Keep Your Customers Coming Back](#)

How to Tell the Story of Your Brand Through Style

Your brand's style has two components -- visuals and content:

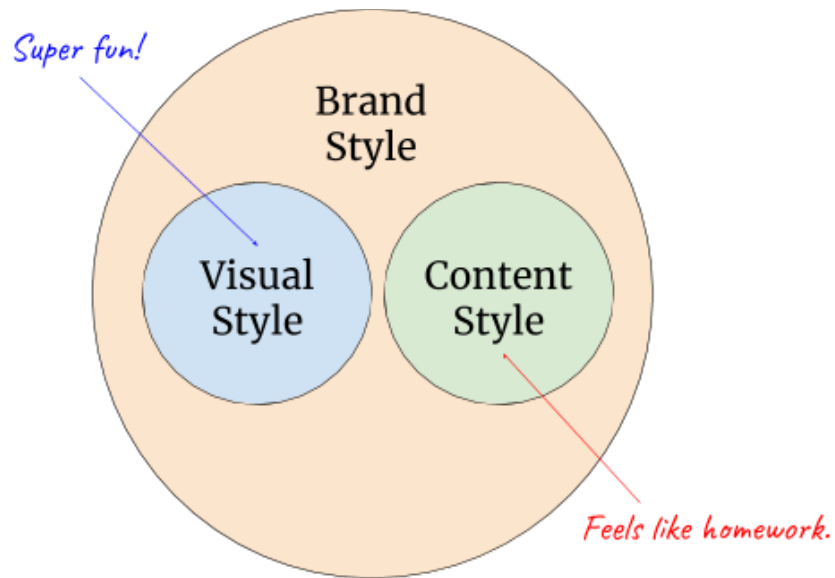


**The style conventions established in the visual and content style bubbles are how you tell the story of your brand.** Here's the thing, though -- many of the entrepreneurs and marketers we work with love to focus on the visuals -- the fonts, the logos, the colors.

It's the "fun part" of crafting a brand.

Sadly, the content component of a brand's style is often rushed through, if not completely overlooked, as a result.





As much as that sounds like a bummer, it makes sense -- the tools in your content toolbox may not seem terribly exciting or fun at first.

Instead of fonts and colors, you're working with word choice, phrasing, syntax, formatting, grammar, and punctuation. Gross.

But this content piece we're focusing on in this guide is what we want you to see differently.

**Words inspire emotion.**

**Ideas delivered with clarity move people to take action.**

That's why the choices you make with your content's style will make or break your ability to get your message out there and believed by the right people.

## **Free Toolkit: [Content Style Guide Template for Brands](#)** **[\(Updated for 2019\)](#)**

### Your Brand's Overall Style Must Be Consistent

Whether you're talking about visuals or content, there's one golden rule when it comes to brand style. You've got to be **maniacally** consistent with it, because someone may form a permanent, irreversible opinion about your brand based on a single piece of content.

*A blog post. A brochure. A website page.*

Yes, perfect is and always will be the enemy of good, but if you don't have a handle on your brand's content style, you can run into a lot of trouble:

- Disjointed website messaging.
- Sloppy, unfocused content.
- Inconsistent grammar and punctuation.
- Typos, error, and mistakes.

### **So, instead of focusing on your message...**

Yes, perfect is and always will be the enemy of good, but if you don't have a handle on your brand's content style, you can run into a lot of trouble:

- Disjointed website messaging.
- Sloppy, unfocused content.
- Inconsistent grammar and punctuation.
- Typos, error, and mistakes.

**...many of them will get stuck on the one thing you did wrong. (Gotcha!)**

Your message will fade into the background, like white noise.

Having a content style guide in place will guarantee your content always looks good and -- most of all -- what you're saying and what you're actually communicating to your audience are in sync.

## Chapter 2:

### What's Included in a Content Style Guide?

#### Well, That Depends on Who You Ask

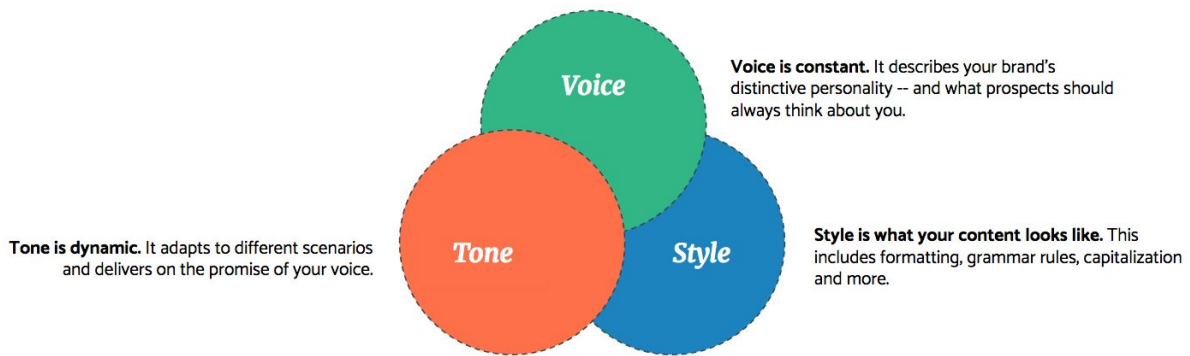
Generally speaking, the good ones include some form of all the following elements:

- Brand personality traits. (*"We're fun and approachable!"*)
- Brand-specific copy rules, suggestions, and preferences. (*"Don't use big words!"*)
- Basic editorial rules -- grammar, spelling, etc. (*"We're an Oxford Comma family!"*)

But what should **your** style guide include?

#### The 3 Essential Parts of a Content Style Guide

The style guide process and template we've built here at IMPACT -- the very same that gets us the best results for our clients -- has three distinct parts:



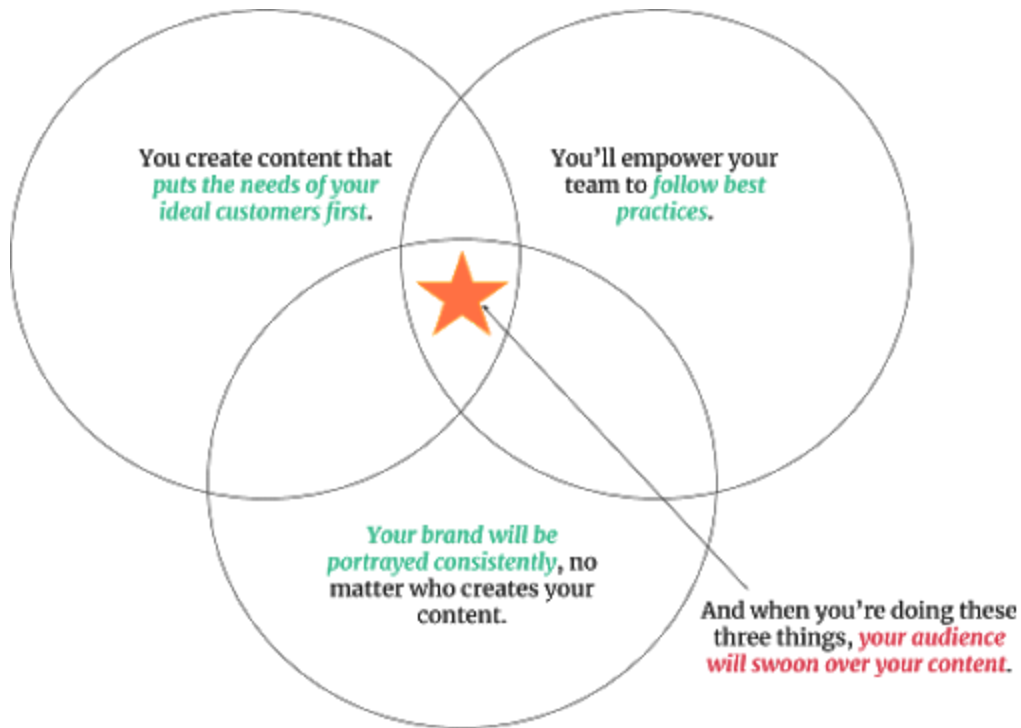
Voice, tone, and style each serve a particular purpose for your brand.

However, they are all very much dependent on each other to create the full effect of your brand's content style.

- **Voice:** These are all the attributes of your brand's personality; it's what people should think about your brand as a reflex, without you having to spell it out for them.
- **Tone:** This is a dynamic element. It's how you deliver on the promise of your voice. Your tone will be situational and should be adapted to accommodate different scenarios.
- **Style:** Finally, there's your style. In this context, style refers to what your content looks like. *Literally*. So, formatting, grammar, and punctuation rules all fall under this category.

Your voice sets the baseline of who you are. Your tone is how your voice is expressed and communicated. And your style makes sure everything looks consistent, all the time.

The benefits of this simple approach speak for themselves:



By design, your content style will **prioritize what your ideal customers want** -- not your team -- because it was developed for them, based on their preferences and what they need.

Internally, you'll also be able to **promote best practices** with your team around how your brand should be portrayed and perceived, which means your **brand presentation through content will be consistent**, no matter who's doing the typing.

*(If you're still not convinced, the team at GatherContent does a [great job of explaining](#) why style guides are so important to ensuring that consistency.)*

However, if you think certain ideas, rules, or preferences about your brand's style should be "obvious," you're opening yourself up to a lot of risk by not discussing them, agreeing to them, and documenting them in a content style guide.

Instead, you're making the assumption that individuals won't have their own personal ideas about your brand's personality and won't make unique choices to express it.

**Sadly, you probably won't catch those discrepancies until someone does something either you, your leadership, or worse, a potential customer or current client doesn't like.**

## **Email vs. email vs. e-mail vs. E-mail**

Finally, at a high-level, your content will be better across the board and more effective at attracting the right people. That's what it's all about, right?

*(Psst! We're going to spill the beans on exactly how you run a content style guide workshop in the next chapter, so you can make sure your content style guide will do all of these things.)*

## **What Doesn't Go into a Content Style Guide?**

Given that a content style guide is essentially a tactical, instructive manual of how to write like a particular brand, it can be tempting to put everything in there.

Of course, you shouldn't do that. **That's a bad thing.**

## **Brand Messaging Is Not the Same as Content Style**

For example, at IMPACT, we do include a slide with a [brand messaging strategy](#) primer within the content style guides we create for clients:

## Messaging: Overview

*We're **reframing** the market.*

- **The “given” that everyone competes on in the market today:**  
Custom code development. Everyone in the marketplace is currently competing on the ability to create custom code.
- **The reframing:**  
We are going to change the conversation and talk about the consultative approach. We will work with you from a strategic perspective to create you the right custom solution.
- **How do we do it:**  
We mitigate the risks involved with outsourcing custom development through our consultative, highly-experienced team of developers.



[Link to Example Messaging Strategy](#) 7

*Adapted example of a messaging slide from an IMPACT style guide.*

However, **your content style guide should not be where your full brand messaging strategy lives.**

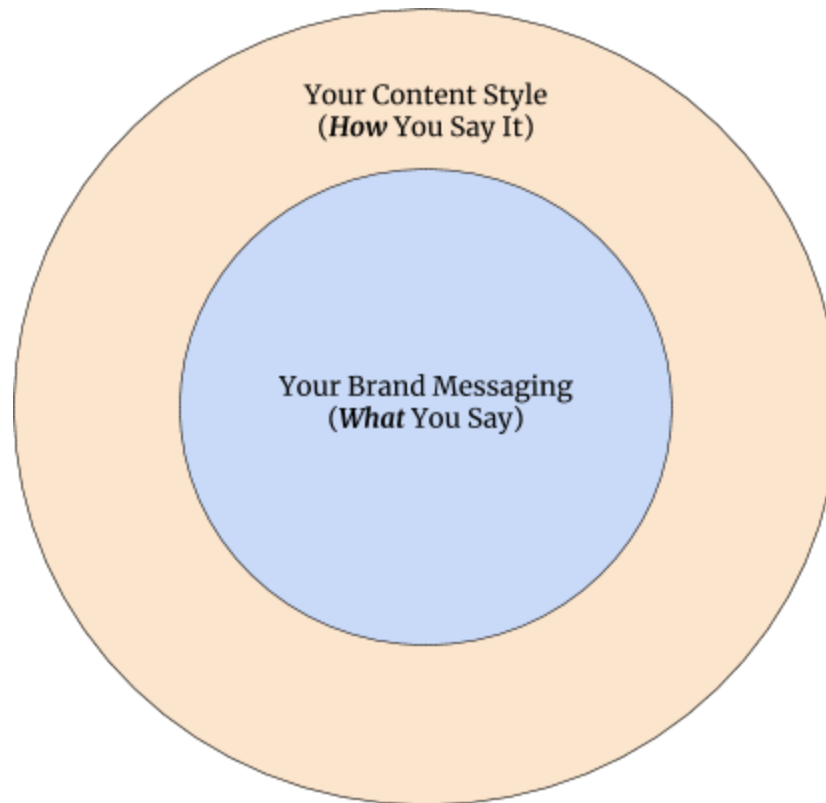
As you can see in the image above, this is merely an excerpt that links out to a [full brand messaging strategy](#), which is a massive document all by itself.

If a client doesn't have one, we may put a few notes here but, more than likely, we won't include it at all.

While messaging notes or a link to a full messaging strategy should absolutely be included as a reference in your style guide, you need to remember one thing:

**Your brand's messaging strategy and your brand's content style are not the same thing.**

That said, you really can't have one without the other. Brand messaging and content style go together like peas and carrots. Or Han Solo and Chewbacca.



Going back again to that old adage of, *"It's not what you say, it's how you say it,"* your messaging strategy is the **WHAT** and your content style is the **HOW**.

Put another way, your style is the packaging and polish you put on your strategic messages, not the strategic messages themselves.

*(That's why we typically have our clients go through a messaging strategy workshop first. Then they go through a content style guide workshop.)*

It's kind of like when people look at the HubSpot marketing automation platform and [expect it to be their inbound strategy](#), in addition to being the



mechanism by which their strategy is executed. In reality, HubSpot is only the latter.

You still need to research and document your own buyer personas, develop a messaging strategy for each of those personas, create your own strategy for content, email, conversion offers, etc.

### **The same holds true for your content's style.**

Your content's style isn't your blogging strategy. It won't tell you what your messaging should be -- again, [that's an entirely separate process](#). It also won't tell you how to win the internet.

**But having style is essential to executing an effective blogging strategy, guaranteeing your messaging is packaged for maximum impact, thus empowering you to win the internet.**

### **What Else Shouldn't Go in Your Content Style Guide?**

There are three other areas you may feel tempted to address in a style guide, but you shouldn't...

#### **Visual Notes**

While your contributors may often be responsible for choosing images for their own work -- we do that at IMPACT for our blog -- notes about visual preferences (like natural photography with bright colors or no text on featured images for blogs) should live in a visual style guide.

#### **Branding Guidelines**

Fonts, colors, and branding rules are, again, visual, so they should have their own home. Sometimes brands bundle this kind of information together

along with visual notes like the ones mentioned above, but sometimes they're separate.

### Content Layout Best Practices

**Some of you might disagree with us on this, and that's okay.** But obvious best practices like, "Don't make your content look like a massive word wall; break up your text with headings, lists, etc.," don't really belong in a style guide.

However, if you have rigorous rules like, "paragraphs should never exceed X sentences," or "We only use bullets for lists, never numbers," you **would** put them into a content style guide.

Where the first example is something your writers should already know -- or, if they don't, should be addressed through education at an editor-to-writer level -- the second two examples are hyper-specific brand preferences that no one would know intuitively.

### University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill Gets It

As we've talked about already, your content's style is only one piece of the brand storytelling puzzle.

**So, how do you organize all of it, if you shouldn't put it in a single document?**

The [University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill's brand identity presentation](#) is a great example of what you should do.

**We love their approach.**

Yes, the UNC Creative team developed exhaustive brand guidelines about everything -- logo, visuals, typography, stationary, color guidelines, content, etc. Given the complexity of their organization and its size, history, and tradition, however, that shouldn't be a surprise.

You may not go into this level of detail, but what you should take note of is how they built a centralized home for all of those style rules that's not only organized, it's also compartmentalized.

So, while you may choose to keep your style confidential -- for example, stored on a company intranet or in an invitation-only Google Drive account shared by your team -- take note of how everything is segmented.

You could probably put all of these items into a single document, but no one will want to use it. Ever.

## What Does a Content Style Guide Look Like?

**Again, it's going to depend on who you ask.**

*(I know, that's an annoying answer. I'm sorry.)*

If you're just starting out and not ready to take on something super complex, a one-page document with some basics might be the best approach until you get more comfortable.

In fact, going back the example from our friends in North Carolina, their [voice and writing guide](#) is really short.

Their messaging strategy is simple, so it makes sense to have it featured here. **We also love how they reference their core values.**

**Helpful Hint:** If your brand has a documented set of core values that also should influence how your content is positioned, consider adding it as a reference in your style guide.

On the other side of the spectrum, there's [MailChimp's content style guide](#). It's also public-facing, but much more comprehensive.

MailChimp Content Style Guide

Search

GO TO SECTION

- Writing Goals and Principles
- Voice and Tone
- Writing About People
- Grammar and Mechanics
- Web Elements
- Writing Blog Posts
- Writing Technical Content
- Writing Legal Content
- Writing Email Newsletters
- Writing for Social Media
- Writing for Accessibility
- Writing for Translation
- Creating Structured Content
- Copyright and Trademarks
- Word List
- Further Reading
- TL;DR

## Welcome to the MailChimp Content Style Guide

This style guide was created for MailChimp employees, but we hope it's helpful for other content and communications teams too.

### If you work at MailChimp

This is our company style guide. It helps us write clear and consistent content across teams and channels. Please use it as a reference when you're writing for MailChimp.

This guide goes beyond basic grammar and style points. It's not traditional in format or content. We break a number of grammar rules for clarity, practicality, or preference.

We've divided the guide by topic based on the types of content we publish, so you can reference it as needed or browse in order. The entire guide is searchable, so you can go straight to the item you're looking for.

### If you work at another organization

We invite you to use and adapt this style guide as you see fit. It's completely public and available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license. All we ask is that you credit MailChimp.

We welcome any feedback for improving the guide.

[MailChimp Content Style Guide on GitHub](#)

It has lots of different sections to sink your teeth into, including writing about people, pointers for email newsletters, writing for accessibility, and more.

Still, [MailChimp nails it by including a little section called “TL;DR”](#) -- a cheeky bit of internet shorthand that means, “*too long; didn’t read,*” for those unfamiliar.

The needs of your brand and the purposes and use cases for your style guide will dictate its complexity.

### What You Should Do

No matter what it looks like, your content style guide should be presented in such a way where the important stuff -- voice and tone attributes, style notes, etc. -- can be **easily understood and quickly digested**.

Your goal is to create a document that your people will want to bookmark (if it’s online) or keep a hard copy of on their desk, so they can come back to it again and again, because it’s such a valuable resource.

### What You Shouldn’t Do

**Do not, under any circumstances, give into the urge to create something overly complex for the sake of it.**

Yes, that's so important, I had to highlight it in a different color.

In our experience, some brand teams and leaders are ultimately shocked by how much discussion is required to create a piece of documentation that may end up being fairly straightforward and “simple.” As a result, they try to over-engineer the final product by making it longer, because they equate complexity and length with importance.

In their eyes, if it’s “too short,” it’s probably not enough and/or must be a disservice to the nuances of their brand.

**Wrong.** This kind of thinking results in content style guides people will never want to use.

No one is going to want to read *War and Peace* every time they need to write a 900-word blog post, especially if it could have been shortened to the length of a press release and been just as effective in explaining what they needed to know about content style.

Instead, you need to be clear, concise, and direct in your content style definition and direction.

The end result may end up being quite substantial, like MailChimp's. Or you might end up with a one-sheeter, like UNC-Chapel Hill.

**Your content style guide should be as long as it needs to be -- no more, no less.**

## What IMPACT Content Style Guides Look Like

The [template we use at IMPACT for content style guides](#) looks quite long, but it's still simple and designed to be easy to use.

[Here's a quick preview of what one looks like, at an 80,000-foot level.](#)

In addition to two slides covering positive and negative voice attributes, and two to four slides defining what we call "tone pillars," IMPACT content style guides include the following:

- Messaging overview and link to messaging strategy (if applicable);
- Formatting rules, which covers capitalization for titles, headings, and subheadings; how words are visually emphasized using bold or italics; and list formats;

- Brand-specific copywriting preferences or quirks everyone should follow;
- Exceptions to traditional AP Stylebook rules;
- Common AP Stylebook rules **and** login credentials for a client’s AP Stylebook subscription (if available); and
- Buyer persona profiles.

Depending on the unique needs of a client, we may also include other optional sections -- for instance, exceptions for social media, core values, how to handle competitor references, or examples of “best in class” blog examples or other types of content.

If you do [download our content style guide template](#), we encourage you to adapt it and make it your own. We believe it’s a fantastic foundational tool on which to build your content style, but don’t be afraid to take it in a different direction.

**Free Toolkit:** [How to Create Your Brand Messaging Strategy](#)

## Chapter 3:

### How to Run a Content Style Guide Workshop

So, we’ve reviewed what a content style guide is (and isn’t), why it’s important, and a few examples of what a content style guide can look like.

**But how do you actually extract the insights you need from the right people to create your content style guide on your own, without having to hire an agency?**

Unfortunately, most articles aren't very helpful in this regard, especially when it comes to developing your voice and tone guidelines.

Typically, they'll say something like, *"Talk to people in multiple departments!"*

While that's true, that doesn't give you any sort of structure that will guarantee the results you're looking for.

**At IMPACT, we solved this challenge by developing a two-hour content style guide workshop. And we're now going to teach you how to facilitate it on your own!**

This workshop has two goals:

- To **gather the intelligence you'll need** to inform your choices in building the style guide; and
- To create an **initial shared understanding** of your brand's personality and style between the participants.

## Before Your Content Style Guide Workshop

Before you jump in, there are two important strategic activities we consider mandatory prerequisites:

- You absolutely must have [complete buyer personas](#) before you build your content style guide. This is non-negotiable, because you



have to put yourself in the mindset of your personas in order to effectively complete the workshop.

- **After your buyer personas, we strongly recommend [developing your brand messaging strategy](#) first.** Technically, you could do this afterward if you really need some sort of style guide *right now*, while you're making larger decisions for your business.

That said, it's our experience that developing your messaging strategy in advance makes developing your content style so much easier, since they build on each other.

## Your Content Style Guide Workshop Participants

So, who should be involved in your content style guide workshop?

### 3 to 5 Participants

The easy path here is to assemble a group of all marketers or all executives -- or perhaps some combination of the two. **Don't do that.**

You'll get the best results when you curate a group with a mix of roles, responsibilities, and experience.

An example of a diverse group could include a seasoned sales rep, a project manager, a marketer, an executive, and a new engineer or account manager you just hired.

This will ensure you get a more accurate and holistic picture of your brand, and how it should be perceived.

**If someone agrees to participate, there are some ground rules.**

They cannot arrive late or leave early, and they cannot use their phone or other electronics during the workshop. They must also be present literally and figuratively for the duration of the workshop, so all they'll need are their brains, a pen/pencil, and a notepad.

### 1 Facilitator (to Rule Them All)

It's likely that if you're reading this, you're probably going to assume this role -- or you're in charge of the person who will be the facilitator -- so here's what you need to know:

**If you are the facilitator, you are not a participant. Period.**

Your entire focus should be on managing the discussion of the group, asking clarifying questions, encouraging participation, and guiding your participants through the exercises.

You cannot provide your answers, even if prompted.

Additionally, if you're the facilitator, you should probably also be the one to create the style guide documentation.

If that won't be the case, you should record the audio of your workshop (not video, it can make people nervous), take lots of notes, and work very closely with the individual who will.

A lot can get lost in translation.

## Content Style Guide Workshop Agenda

We use a structured facilitation presentation deck with a set agenda to facilitate our workshops. You'll also use three worksheets to run the branding exercises, but **don't give those worksheets out in advance.**

*All these materials are included in our [content style guide workshop toolkit](#).*

### First, Set the Tone for Your Workshop

This first part is optional but, depending on the group, having everyone take two minutes to write down their expectations for the workshop can be a fun way to kick things off.

When done, you can either have everyone share their answers, or you can have everyone save them until the end.

Next, share the agenda, which is:

- Reviewing the outcomes for the workshop;
- An overview of content style guide basics; and
- Four (4) guided branding exercises.

Before moving on, explicitly state that **the goal of the workshop is *not* to have everyone agree on the same answers.**

In fact, there are no right or wrong answers. Instead, as they go through each exercise, they should focus on providing honest opinions and having healthy discussions.

Finally, let everyone know what the next steps will be, even if their only involvement in creating the style guide will be their participation in the workshop.

*(“I’m going to put together a draft, and it will be shared with X, Y, and Z for feedback.”)*

### **Exercise #1: Brand Discussion (15 to 30 Minutes)**

You will lead a group discussion where participants are invited to answer questions about your brand.

This is the only exercise where participants will answer from their own perspective, rather than trying to step into the shoes of their personas.

#### *Purpose of the Exercise*

In addition to getting your participants comfortable talking with each other, this will help you establish a baseline about where the brand is now in contrast to where you want to go.

#### *How It Works*

If you’re using our workshop presentation deck, only show one question at a time. Unveil the next one only when you’re ready to move on. Also, if you’ve already created your brand messaging strategy, you’ll want to tailor your questions to the selected brand messaging style.

**We’ve created a pool of questions for each of the [four brand messaging styles](#) to help you get your conversation going:**

#### *Example Questions for Arm-Wrestling*

- Why do we do what we do?
- What makes us better than our competitors?
- Would our customers agree?

- How well are we communicating our why and what makes us better than our competitors right now?

#### *Example Questions for Big Fish, Small Pond*

- Why do we do what we do?
- Why did we choose this niche?
- Was this niche previously ignored or underserved? If so, why?
- What are we afraid ideal buyers don't get about our brand right now?

#### *Example Questions for Reframing the Market*

- Why do we do what we do?
- How should people feel when using or experiencing our product(s) and/or service(s)?
- What is it that, to this point, our competitors have failed to do?
- What needs to change about how we're communicating?

#### *Example Questions for Change the Game*

- Why is what we do so great, really?
- Before we came along, what was broken?
- Why had no one fixed it before?
- What's unique about our team that made us the ones who finally fixed the problem?
- How well do we are we communicating the answers to those questions right now?

#### *If You Don't Have a Brand Messaging Strategy*

If you haven't put together your brand messaging strategy yet, here are five basic questions you can use for this exercise:

- Why do we do what we do?
- What promise do we keep?
- What makes us great?
- What makes us better than our competitors?
- How well do we are we communicating the answers to those questions right now?

### *Facilitation Tips for This Exercise*

- Ask lots of clarifying questions. “*Why?*” and “*What do you mean by that?*” are two of our favorites.
- Without being a jerk, force people to rephrase answers in their own words if they rely on previously established brand mottos, slogans, or website copy.
- If someone is being shy, invite them to participate by asking them after someone else gives an opinion, “*What do you think about that?*”

### **Exercise #2: Brand Perception Scales (15 to 20 Minutes)**

Each person will complete a worksheet, which will reflect their opinions of how they believe the brand should be perceived by your ideal buyers.

### *How It Works*

First of all, we need to give credit where credit is due. We adapted this from a brand personality quiz originally developed by [Big Brand System](#).

**Ours is a little simpler, and its purpose for the workshop is slightly different -- we'll explain how in a moment.**

But first, how will you run the exercise?

Participants will have five minutes to complete the worksheet below on their own, based on the following instructions:

**“On the worksheet in front of you, you will see a set of four scales. Place an X on the line for each where you think it best represents how your brand should be received to the public. Do not share or discuss your answers. You have three minutes.”**

### *Brand Perception Worksheet*

Traditional	A ----- ----- B ----- ----- C ----- ----- D ----- ----- E	Modern
Thoughtful	A ----- ----- B ----- ----- C ----- ----- D ----- ----- E	Spontaneous
Proven	A ----- ----- B ----- ----- C ----- ----- D ----- ----- E	Cutting Edge
Exclusive	A ----- ----- B ----- ----- C ----- ----- D ----- ----- E	Inclusive



### *Brand Perception Exercise Worksheet*

Afterward, have everyone take turns sharing their answers, and why they chose them.

### *Purpose of the Exercise*

This exercise creates an opportunity for the group to see that they don't always have shared definitions of the same words; something that's critical for the voice and tone exercises.

**Additionally, this will allow you to spot a classic problem we see with lots of brands:**

They want to be bold, reframe the market, or change the game, but their instinct is to play it safe and not rock the boat, lest they accidentally turn off a potential buyer. This manifests itself when one or more people have their **answers clustered almost exclusively around the middle.**

If you think this will not be an issue for your team, still, do not skip this exercise. You may be wrong about your assumption, and it's still a great calibration exercise.

*(When we adapted and tested this exercise, we found that it's the only way to be sure that you quash any tendencies to only give safe answers early on in the process.)*

### *Facilitation Tips for This Exercise*

- There's a good chance people will pick opposing answers for certain scales even though they agree; find ways to guide them to that realization, although they'll usually get there on their own. **Let it happen.**
- **If one or more people fall into the “playing it safe” trap described above,** gently point out why that's an issue. Again, there are no wrong answers, but it's good to share with them that it's a common fear of



brands who want to stand out in the crowd to still instinctively want to play it safe or be everything to everyone.

In this scenario, we usually say at the conclusion of the exercise (so no one person is singled out):

*“If you’re so agreeable to everyone -- where you’re spontaneous, but also thoughtful; exclusive, but somehow also inclusive; modern, but still traditional at the same time -- **you may not make anyone mad, but you won’t stand out in any way, either.** You’ll be that guy at the party last night who everybody liked, but no one can remember his name or anything about him. So, keep that in mind as we go through the remaining exercises.”*

- **If someone asks what a word means**, tell them however they want to interpret it, and they should do so for ALL exercises. Do not define any words for them.
- **If you’re performing the workshop in person**, collect all of the worksheets, but take notes during the discussion period. Listen for key phrases (beyond the ones on the page) that stand out to you or ideas where there’s a lot of consensus. Also, note any consensus around negative words and the why behind them. This is where the magic happens -- the words on the page prompt participants to share their real feelings.
- **If you’re performing this workshop remotely**, record all of the answers on a single set of scales, so you can easily spot patterns. Additionally, you should take notes as described in the previous point.

- Again, **ask clarifying questions** and challenge people to go deeper, as appropriate.

## **Related:** [The Psychology Behind Brand Loyalty](#)

### **Exercises #3 & #4:** Brand Voice & Tone (30 to 60 minutes)

Through these two exercises, participants will choose positive and negative attributes for their brand's voice and tone, based on the needs and preferences of their buyer personas.

#### *Purpose of the Exercises*

To your participants, it's obvious.

You're gathering their ideas about what their brand's voice and tone should be. For you, the facilitator, that's still true, but there's a little more to it.

Again, your goal is not to walk away with words you'll plug into a Mad Libs-esque content style guide template.

Instead, you are trying to get them to explain the *why* behind the words they chose. You may experience some pushback, but that's okay.

**Pushback, in this case, is not a negative; it's by design.** But in order to understand what we mean by that, you first need to see how it works.

## How It Works

### Voice Worksheet

Yes	No
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____



First, you will pass out this worksheet.

**(The only difference between the above worksheet and the one for tone is that the one for tone says “Tone Worksheet” at the top. Otherwise, the instructions and facilitation for both exercises are exactly the same.)**

Next, you’ll remind them of the definition for voice and tone ahead of each exercise:

- **Voice:** These are all the attributes of your brand’s personality; it’s what people should always think about your brand as a reflex, without you having to spell it out for them.
- **Tone:** This is a dynamic element. It’s how you deliver on the promise of your voice. Your tone will be situational and should be adapted to accommodate different scenarios.

Then, you will recite the following instructions, which are (again) identical for both the voice and tone exercises:

**“On the following slide there will be a word cloud -- put yourself in the shoes of your ideal buyers and choose the five words you like the least and the five words you like the most, in relation to your brand.”**

Bring up the word cloud on the next slide of the presentation deck...

## Voice Exercise

FRIENDLY – PROFESSIONAL – APPROACHABLE – POLISHED – ESTABLISHED  
CASUAL – FUNNY – SAVVY – CONTROVERSIAL – DIPLOMATIC  
RELATABLE – VISIONARY – RELAXED – CANDID – EXPERT – SMART  
HIP – TRADITIONAL – MODERN – SERIOUS – CALM – CLEVER  
ASSERTIVE – SOPHISTICATED – CONFIDANTE – INNOVATIVE – FRESH  
DIRECT – STORYTELLER – DREAMER – HIGH ENERGY – REBEL – LEADER



*Word cloud for voice exercise.*

# Tone Exercise

CHATTY – DESCRIPTIVE – PERSUASIVE – CRISP – TECHNICAL – CLEAR  
CONCISE – SIMPLE – LYRICAL – CONVERSATIONAL – POLISHED  
TACTFUL – DECISIVE – ENTHUSIASTIC – BALANCED – MEASURED – WARM  
THOUGHTFUL – RESPECTFUL – OPINIONATED – RATIONAL – ABSTRACT  
SERIOUS – IMPARTIAL – POSITIVE – CRITICAL – BOLD – CHALLENGING  
REASSURING – CONFIDENT – INSPIRATIONAL – WITTY – POETIC



*Word cloud for tone exercise.*

Read the directions once more, with the word cloud up on the screen, and then ask if they have any questions.

Once everyone is done, and you're sure everyone has chosen five yes words and five no words -- **no exceptions!** -- you'll have everyone share their answers and the why behind each.

*What Kind of Pushback Will You See in These Exercises?*

You might not have any, but here are the most common we've seen and how to handle them:

- **Someone wants to change the rules.** Either they want to be able to select more than five or fewer. They can't, they must choose five for each, and you can't have multiple words tie for a particular spot. Let them know, however, that they don't have to rank the words.

- **Someone doesn't like the words.** They either want to change the tense of a word or use a different (but similar) one they like better in its place. They can't do that either. They can only use the words presented to them, as-is, but they are encouraged to expand upon their thinking when it's their turn to share their answers.
- **Someone wants to know where these words came from.** That's a great question, but you want to keep them focused on the task at-hand, and you don't want to accidentally influence their choices by pivoting the discussion to the methodology behind the workshop. You'll let them know afterward.
- Again, you might not run into any of these issues -- that's also okay. It's not a sign of failure if you don't push anyone's buttons.

But if you hear any of these objections, you cannot cave.

**You must enforce the rules.**

*“Why? Why Can't I Give Them a Little Wiggle Room?”*

Getting a reaction in these exercises is by design -- that's how you get to the good stuff; the real insights that will inform the style guide.

**Even if there are no fireworks or real objections, your participants will be forced to explain the emotional decisions behind why they do or do not like certain words.**

Yes, they may see a few of these words appear in some form in the end product, but the magic happens through the other words and phrases not given to them that they choose to describe why they feel the way they feel about their selected answers.

**That's why you want people to feel something about the words that they chose.**

They shouldn't be ambivalent when they do or do not like something. They should be passionate.

In fact, we've tweaked those word clouds numerous times over the years, sprinkling in and testing different words to ensure we're creating opportunities for honest discussion and to allow authentic, unfiltered feelings to take center stage.

*(For instance, "Lyrical" from the tone word cloud has sparked many a lively debate with our clients.)*

#### *Facilitation Tips for This Exercise*

- Of course, ask clarifying questions.
- Has your group has chosen a lot of the same words for the same reasons? No problem, save time by asking subsequent participants (usually starting with the third participant) only to explain their answers for the words that were either unique to them or if they chose the same word as someone else, but for which they had an opposite reaction.

For example, one person might say "controversial" is good, and then later, someone else says it's bad. In that case, ask them what was different for them about "controversial" that led to a negative reaction.

- Encourage those who are shy to share their opinions and don't let others interrupt them. They should have their chance to shine.

- Allow other participants to respond first to the answers of others -- that dialogue can be really helpful for extracting the unfiltered, unguarded intelligence you need.
- When taking notes, do so on a single sheet -- a copy of each word cloud will work. Make a mark every time a word is chosen (so you can spot patterns), and take notes on key words, phrases, or ideas that come out.

### “Wait, What About the Editorial Style Stuff, Like Formatting?”

Let’s be honest. No one wants to force people to sit around a conference room table and ask people where the commas should go, so that portion of the style guide will not be hashed out during your content style guide workshop.

In **Chapter 4**, we’ll discuss how you pull that part of your style guide together, but there’s no need to dedicate a part of the workshop to grammar rules and formatting conventions.

Just let whomever will be reviewing a draft of your style guide know they will have a chance to review a base editorial style section and make change requests.

**Free Toolkit:** [Everything You Need to Run Your Own Content Style Guide Workshop](#)



# Chapter 4:

## How to Create a Content Style Guide

Before you get your hopes up, this chapter will not be as instructive or hand-holding as the previous one.

When it comes to “how the sausage gets made” with your style guide, how you pull together your findings into a single, cohesive style guide will depend on two things:

- **Your personal working style and preferences.** You might prefer to rely on your notes exclusively or you may be someone who will want to listen to the audio recording again, before you start pulling your style guide together. There is no right way to synthesize the data, so do it in a way that makes the most sense for you.
- **How “scattered” your results were.** In a lot of cases, you’ll still need some serious thinking time to bring it all together, but you’ll probably have a good idea during the workshop about some of the choices that need to be made. We have, however, worked with brands where we had to do more heavy-lifting than usual in the drafting phase based on the results of the workshop.

*That’s not a knock on the brand.* We typically see this with new startups, where they’re having these conversations for the first time -- which totally makes sense.

Additionally, it’s fairly common with established brands who are

pivoting from outbound to inbound marketing for the first time, and they're not used to having these discussions.

With those two caveats in mind -- whether you're working with our workshop toolkit and content style guide template or building your own from scratch -- let's dive in.

Fill in the easy stuff first, like your messaging strategy (if you have one) and buyer personas.

Next, you'll want to approach your voice and tone.

What's fun about this is that while the exercises for both were the same in the workshop, the output is quite different for each.

## Defining Your Brand's Voice

Again, your brand's voice is essentially defining the constants of your brand's personality. Meaning, this is how your brand should always (and never) be perceived.

It's important to keep in mind, however, that while what you put in this section should heavily influence the creative choices your marketers, copywriters, and others make in content, this is not where you provide explicit, tactical guidance on writing.

**Think of this section on voice as table-setting.**

You're laying the foundation for everything else by establishing the boundaries of your brand personality sandbox. You should include specific

notes on positive and negative voice attributes that will allow your team to adopt the right mental posture with your brand's content.

Here's an example of voice attributes to illustrate what we mean:

## Voice: Positive Attributes

How we should *always* be perceived:

- We've earned our reputation as *clever, world-class* game designers.
- We lead with a *service-oriented mindset* in everything we do and say.
- Like the experiences we create, we are *always thoughtful and inclusive*.
- We're *engaging, funny facilitators* with *keen situational awareness*.

## Voice: Negative Attributes

How we should **never** be perceived:

- We're not **aggressive or pompous** when we seek to be persuasive.
- We don't undermine our professionalism with **inappropriate informality**.
- We're not **tied to the past**, where tradition limits potential.
- We're not cerebral **over-explainers**.



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*These examples have been heavily adapted.*

We like to **bold key phrases and words** that should stick in the memories of those using the style guide, which has the added bonus of making the style guide easy to skim.

Looks easy, right?

Don't be fooled. You'll find that you'll need to spend your time with your notes to prioritize the right ideas with the correct wording.

*"Wait, how is that enough guidance to convey our brand's voice?"*

Remember, if you feel compelled to write a novel in order to adequately delve into the nuances of your brand's personality, **please don't be surprised when no one wants to read it.**

So, keep it simple.

No matter how you format this section -- our way isn't the only way -- **your goal is to create a moment where the brand comes to life**, as if it were a person, and speaks directly to your team to say:

*“This is who we are, and this is who we aren’t. Period.”*

## Establishing Your Brand’s Tone

Your tone is how you deliver on the promise of your voice.

Meaning, if you’ve done a good job of defining who you are and aren’t as a brand, you now have to serve that up in the form of a well-defined tone.

In some cases, people create a laundry list of tips, rules, and suggestions for people to follow as they’re crafting content.

We believe in doing the same, but we’ve added a little more structure to it by creating what are called **tone pillars**.

### What Is a Tone Pillar?

A tone pillar groups together tactical copywriting and content creation instructions under a larger tonal “theme.”

This theme should tie directly back to the story of your brand’s personality and values that you’re trying to convey.

Here’s an example of a tone pillar set, heavily altered for confidentiality purposes:

## Tone: Pillar #1

**We are *confident, straight-talking professionals.***

*Our audience doesn't want to be sold to; they want the facts.*

### How You Do It

- Be clear, concise and direct in your messaging.
- Use simple, straightforward language.
- Content should be easy to read, both in word choice and layout.

### How You Don't Do It

- Long sentences, adverbs, repetition and jargon.
- Protracted exposition and meandering introductions.
- Positioning the science behind what we do ahead of the value we provide.



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## Tone: Pillar #2

**We are also *approachable people.***

*Our audience avoids "blowhards" and "preachy" know-it-alls who talk down to them.*

### How You Do It

- Be conversational and relatable.
- Add a dash of respectful wit, should the opportunity arise.
- Demonstrate understanding of their challenges and acknowledge them.

### How You Don't Do It

- Word choice that is too informal or communicates that we view fire service as a "casual" business.
- Inappropriate or ill-timed humor that demonstrates a lack of situational awareness.
- Over-complicated, theoretical explanations that show we don't know our audience.



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Your tone pillars should not only be a seamless, natural extension of your brand voice, they should also complement each other.

If you opt to use our tone pillar model, here are the **four key components of a tone pillar**:

- A first-person statement that clearly establishes the theme for the pillar's recommendations and rules;
- A subtitle that establishes why this is important -- typically, why your audience desires this style;
- How you effectively craft this tone in your writing; and
- And finally, what you shouldn't do in your content.

There are no rules around how many dos and don'ts you should include, although don't include rules for the sake of it. Additionally, you can have as few or as many tone pillars as you'd like.

We've found, however, that the sweet spot is **between two and four tone pillars for a style guide**.

Two is a nice minimum, because it allows you to create a balance between two tonal qualities that can be scaled or differently weighted, as needed, depending on context.

If you build out more than four tone pillars, you'll create confusion. Plus, you'll run the risk of people tossing your style guide to the side in frustration, because you're giving them way too much to consider.

**If tone pillars seem too complex, don't panic.**

A simple list of dos and don'ts will work fine as a first draft. Come back to tone pillars when you're ready to create more organization within the structure of your brand's tone.

## Okay, So What About the Editorial Style Part?

How much work you put into this section is entirely up to you, because there's good news.

**There are scores of editors out there who have already done most of the heavy-lifting for you.**

So, grab yourself a style guide book (or online subscription), determine what your exceptions are, then document those exceptions in your style guide, along with your external style guide access.

*“Wait, what am I supposed to do?”*

### Step 1: Choose a Style Guide

- **The Chicago Manual of Style (CMS)**

Beloved by book publishers, and fiction and nonfiction authors. Available in print and with an online subscription.

- **The Associated Press Stylebook (AP style)**

The standard for many newspapers and magazines. Available in print and with an online subscription.

- **The Modern Language Association Stylebook (MLA)**

The preferred style guide for academics in the liberal arts (and the nemesis of most college students). Available in print and ebook editions.

- **The American Psychological Association Stylebook (APA)**

The style guide for behavioral and social science researchers and scientists. Available in print and with an online subscription -- although the latter is geared in pricing toward institutions, such as universities.



- **GPO Style Manual**

The official guide for the United States federal government, which is particularly useful for government contractors, as well as official agencies.

**What you choose will depend on your industry.**

### Why We Use AP Style at IMPACT

- Since it is designed for journalists, it's not only versatile and neutral, it's always being updated in real-time -- you don't need to wait for new editions -- based on current events. (*Who can forget the [great "Internet vs. internet" shift of 2016?](#)*)
- It's clean, without a lot of stylistic bells and whistles.
- It's cost-effective. An annual, one-user online subscription is \$35, usually with a 20% discount offered for automatic renewal options.
- Its online access allows us to include those login credentials in our style guide, so our staff can access a full set of the rules, beyond the common rules we include as an appendix.

### Step 2: Review & Document Your Style Exceptions

Typically, a style guide will include the following:

- Basic editorial rules, such as the spelling out of numerals, how and when you capitalize job titles, rules for abbreviations, how times of day should be expressed, etc.
- A punctuation guide, covering the use of the Oxford (or "serial") comma, hyphens following a prefix, apostrophe usage when denoting possession, spacing, in-text quotations, and more.

- Style guidelines and references for general fashion, food, religion, sports and business knowledge. For example, the five different chapters of bankruptcy or common baseball terminology.
- Style guidance for places (addresses, cities, states), academic degrees, names, and acronyms.
- Definitions, as well as usage, spelling, formatting and capitalization standards for words and phrases. A lot of ground is covered here, as this includes everything from newsworthy terms (e.g., Affordable Care Act vs. Obamacare) and slang (e.g., normcore), to industry-specific lingo (e.g. eBook vs. ebook) and other common terms (e.g. internet vs. Internet).
- Additional guidance that's often used by journalists on media law, social media use, data reporting, etc.

Obviously, style guides are dense. However, if you're panicking about how you're going to cherry-pick the exceptions you want to document, don't.

**You don't need to memorize the style guide in order to effectively understand it and determine your exceptions.**

You can easily find free "style guide overviews" online for the big style guides we listed above, which will give you primer on the most common rules and standards for each one.

If you're going to take our advice and use AP style, here are the most common exceptions our B2C and B2B clients select:

- AP style says not to use an **Oxford comma** following a conjunction in a series; the exception is to always use an Oxford comma in a series.

- AP style says that there are a lot of cases where **job titles are not capitalized**, even with a name; the exception is to always capitalize job titles or, at the very least, always capitalize job titles with a name.
- AP style broke the collective brain of editors all over the country when they [announced](#) in 2016 that “**internet**” **should no longer be capitalized**; the exception is to pretend that didn’t happen and to always capitalize “Internet.”
- AP style says you **spell out “percent”** instead of using the % symbol; the exception is to always use the symbol.
- AP style says only the first word and proper nouns are capitalized in **article titles and headlines**; exceptions vary wildly, but most use [some version of title case](#) is adopted as an exception.

(If you’re looking for a shortcut, our content style guide template has an appendix with common AP style rules, which will make it easier for you to pull out your exceptions, if you have any.)

## Chapter 5:

### Content Style Guide Adoption & Governance

Once you have your style guide finalized, it’s time to put it out into circulation for use. Of course, as with organizational changes of any kind, that’s easier said than done.

So, when it comes to rolling out your style guide...

#### What You Should Do

- **Make it available in an online format.** If you plan to have it available in print, that’s fine, too. But having it available online (either in an

internal intranet, in a Google Slide Deck, or available publicly online, like MailChimp), will make it accessible and easy to update, when you need to make changes.

- **Conduct an official training** to walk-through it with your writers and marketers, so you can ensure they understand it, and you can address any questions or concerns that may come out of that discussion. This training should also include an overview of the benefits of having a style guide. (Review **Chapter 1** of this guide, if you need a refresher!)
- **Make reviewing the style guide an official onboarding step** for new staff members; especially freelance writers. We did a video conference call walkthrough with a copywriter for a website project, and they said afterward, *“Wow, I wish all of my clients did this.”*
- **Enforce your style guide.** This is the not-so-fun part, but you should send back work that doesn't adhere to the new style guide. The first few times, send content back, and kindly let the writer know what needs to be changed and why. After you get to a point where you know they should be accountable, just send the work back and circle what's not up to style and have them correct it.

***Pro Tip:** If you don't enforce the style guide, your staff will not take the time to learn it.*

- **Announce updates.** Whether it's via email, Slack, smoke signal, carrier pigeon, training, or company meeting, let people know when things change and why.

## What You Shouldn't Do

- **Expect people to onboard themselves and start using it.** While it doesn't need to be fancy, you still need to have a proactive and defined rollout strategy for your style guide that includes trainings and follow-up, as well as a start date of when you will begin using it.

If your roll-out strategy is “send the style guide as a link in an email,” expect to be underwhelmed by the number of people who save it to read for later... and then never do.

- **Make it only available as a hard copy.** Hard copy-only style guides get put in drawers and ignored, thrown away, or used as coasters. Moreover, they're also impossible to keep updated; you'll never have any version control, and your job will be harder.
- When it comes to your content style guide, the two most important things you can do is make it easy for people to learn and access your style guide, and be consistent with your enforcement of it.

**If you remember nothing else from this section, remember those two things.**

## Don't Forget to Update Your Content Style Guide

**The most important thing you can do with your content style guide is to update it when things change.**

Sometimes those changes might be small, like a pivot in certain editorial or style rules. Other times, those changes might be significant. For example, let's say you see a big change in leadership at the top of an organization -- a company founder leaves and a new CEO steps up to take the reins.

That's when you'll want to go through the content style guide workshop exercise covered in this guide, to determine if there are any changes that need to be made to your voice and tone.

Outside of large, planned or unplanned changes (leadership, ownership, mergers, etc.), you'll want to review your style guide at a high-level for tweaks and updates quarterly, with a more in-depth review with your team annually.

**Just like your organization, content style guides are not static. They should grow and evolve along with you and your team.**

**Ready to Level-up Your Brand's Style or  
Messaging Strategy?**

[Talk to Us. We Can Help.](#)