Be Consistent: Use a Style Sheet

When the calendar shifts to a new season, many of us create goals for what we want to improve or do differently. Here’s a suggestion for improving your business writing: be consistent. That is, render items (names, acronyms, typefaces, etc.) the same way each time you write. Although consistency may not be as sexy as a smaller waistline or a new attitude, it can save time for both writers and readers.

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For many months, I worked on a large writing project for the State of Washington. The topic was “smoking cessation” (quitting smoking), and the audience was medical professionals. Because the project involved a vital topic, a big client, and a demanding audience, everything had to be consistent, completely correct, and clear.

Being consistent, correct, and clear meant that it was not acceptable to write “secondhand smoke” in one sentence and “second-hand smoke” in the next. I couldn’t write “SIDS” here and “Sids” there, and I had to know when to spell out “Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.”

Also, I had to firmly decide whether to use “Web site,” “Website,” “web site,” or “website.”

Why was consistency so important? Without consistency, readers would have stumbled and wasted time. For instance, they might trip over “Sids” coming right after “SID’s,” or wonder why I capitalized “Web” in one sentence but not in another. That stumbling and wondering would have detracted from the essential content I needed to get across.

To ensure consistency, I created a style sheet—a list of decisions about how to render words, expressions, and punctuation.

Here are examples of style sheet entries as I listed them:

- Serial comma (always use with and or or)
- U.S. (contains periods, use as adjective)
- Web page (two words, capital W)
- Web site (two words, capital W)
- webmaster (one word, lower case)

Before you begin to worry about whether Web must be capitalized, stop! One purpose of the style sheet is to prevent just such worries. You see, I just checked Web page, Web site, and webmaster in the latest (2004) versions of the Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications and The Associated Press Stylebook. Both recommend what I have shown above. You can render them that way, or you can follow another resource. But make the choice, add it to your style sheet, and then don’t fret about it.

Here are suggestions for how to create and maintain a style sheet.

1. Start small.

It isn’t necessary to stop now and list every expression you need to look up and use consistently. Instead, each time you research a word or expression to determine how to render it...
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(for example, *Internet vs. internet, ten vs. 10*) record what you find. Make a list on paper, an electronic list, or both—just have it where you can access it easily. This list becomes your style sheet.

**2. Alphabetize your style sheet.**
As you add to your list, put entries in alphabetical order. That way, you will be able to immediately find *Part Number* (or *PN* or *Part No.*) under the letter *P*.

**3. Customize your software.**
If you decide to write *secondhand* rather than *second-hand*, add the word *second-hand* to your software’s list of words to automatically correct. In Microsoft Word, you would use the autocorrect feature to do this. By the way, Microsoft’s *Manual of Style* recommends the phrase “spelling checker” rather than “spell checker” or “spell-checker.” Also, it recommends “use the spelling checker” for the verb form—not “spell check,” “spell-check,” or “spellcheck.” (Add that information to your style sheet if you agree with it.)

You can also create templates so all your documents have a consistent professional look.

**4. Don’t be whimsical. Use a standard reference guide whenever possible.**
You might want to respond “Because I like it that way!” when someone asks why you have included or dropped a hyphen or made another style choice. But it’s easier to defend your decisions when you use a standard reference. Both the Associated Press and Microsoft Press published new editions in 2004. A new *Gregg Reference Manual* came out in 2005.

To review descriptions of various reference books, see the Syntax Training Web site: http://www.syntaxtraining.com/recommended_books.html.

**5. Add your own company references to your style sheet.**
A published style manual is not likely to include references to your company. That’s why they belong on your style sheet. List items like these:

- Our Company Inc. (no comma before *Inc.*)
- Our Company Limited (referring to our European companies)
- Our Company of Japan (referring to our Japanese company)

Even if current employees know not to use a comma before *Inc.*, new employees, contractors, and external editors benefit from the information.

**6. Share your growing style sheet with others.**
Share your style sheet with other people who write or work with you. For my tobacco cessation writing project, I shared my style sheet and invited input from the project editor, proofreader, and client. It’s more pleasant and efficient to get input on the style sheet than to have several people making different, sometimes contradictory edits on your final documents.

If you get caught being inconsistent, you may wish to quote the American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds.” Or try the words of American entertainer W.C. Fields, who said, “Anyone who can spell a word only one way is an idiot.” But if those quips don’t consistently succeed, use a style sheet!

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