

How to Maintain and Update Outdated House Style

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This session offered a comprehensive, step-by-step approach to updating an outdated house style guide. Peter J. Olson first underscored a house style guide will *always* need to be updated: it must evolve alongside changing style manuals and expectations. There are three main manuals of style for writers in the sciences: *The Chicago Manual of Style*, *Scientific Style and Format*, and the *AMA Manual of Style*. He discussed the practical reasons for having a house style guide: to cover items not already included in the “big three” style manuals; to tailor the guide to meet the needs of a particular journal; to provide guidance when editing different types of articles, each with their own style rules; to have a standard format to use for author queries; and to be different from a style manual, out of preference or necessity. Olson then presented specific examples of the above-mentioned reasons to maintain a house style guide.

An effective style guide includes three important components: categorization, cross-references, and examples. Categorization is the process of filing the item under the most logical heading for the user. Use of cross-references throughout the style guide will help with navigation, reduce discrepancies, and allow for flexibility in organization. A style guide is easier to update when there is a single location for the style description itself (as opposed to listing it multiple times throughout the guide). Finally, the use of examples in a style guide promotes the proper application of house style rules. Examples should be clear, concise, comprehensive, and realistic.

Olson also described the importance of the centralization of a style guide. He explained a single person should have ownership of a guide’s maintenance and updates. In addition,

he recommended making frequent updates to a guide to simplify maintenance and minimize confusion—it is easier for users to assimilate the changes when there are fewer changes to absorb. Olson also described the benefits of online hosting: an online style guide enables users to find information quickly (related documents can be hyperlinked), provides improved version control (it reduces risk of discrepancy), and allows for more flexibility in the organization of the guide. In closing, Olson summarized the benefits of a house style guide: to communicate style customizations, promote uniformity in a publication, reduce confusion and editing time, and simplify the implementation of style changes.

Carrie Wright covered the second half of the house style update presentation, citing a recent style guide update in her own workplace as a helpful reference. She listed some of the logistical constraints (e.g., time, staffing, and budget) and tradeoffs associated with the update process. Wright recommended determining goals for style guide use, including versioning and ease of updates, as well as whether to outsource style guide updates or to do it in house. She recommended editors audit their house style guide against an external style manual (such as the *AMA Manual of Style*) and remove unnecessary deviations. Editors should also anticipate the upkeep process, together with ways to improve it: identify areas that may require more frequent updates, consider removing workflow instructions from the style guide, and reduce the opportunity for error introduction. Wright also reinforced the importance of using cross-references and removing areas of redundancy in the style guide. She recommended Google Docs for managing and storing a house style guide: the table of contents will automatically update to match the document headings, changes are saved and tracked online (along with the complete revision history), and it is easy to establish and invite users and set their permissions.

Wright noted the style guide update process can be difficult to complete because it is usually subordinate to the staff’s regular workload, but there are several ways to make sure the project continues to move forward: having an “accountability buddy” who checks in periodically to see what progress has been made, including the style guide update in formal performance review goals, and scheduling uninterrupted time to perform the update.