

The Case for Journal Style Guides

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Style guides. I've spent the better part of my 28-year career conceiving, constructing, and curating them—and although I've formed some strong opinions about what makes a good guide, the more I work with them, the more I realize there isn't one, perfect formula. The one thing I do know, though, is that an in-house style guide is an indispensable element of any journal that aspires to achieve consistent, coherent presentation while publishing high-quality content.

Let me be clear: I'm not necessarily advocating for an in-house guide alone. Indeed, most journals subscribe to at least one of the major style manuals. Whether it be ACS (*The ACS Style Guide*), AMA (*AMA Manual of Style*), Chicago (*The Chicago Manual of Style*), CSE (*Scientific Style and Format*), or any combination of these and/or other references, it's wise to defer to a higher order; doing so establishes a firm, widely known standard that manuscript editors are more likely to know and that authors are more likely to accept when their precious prose has been undone. Furthermore, because these manuals are cited so prevalently within the scientific journal community, to endorse them is to demonstrate that your organization is an invested member of that community. All of this being the case, you may very well ask:

Why, then, do I need an in-house style guide?

Making the Case

Questioning the necessity of an in-house guide is understandable given the considerable breadth of the aforementioned manuals. Regardless of how strictly a general manual is followed, however, it's usually insufficient to rely on it as a singular source—because once the editing begins, any combination of the following factors will come into play.

Inadequacy

Voluminous as they are, none of the major manuals can act as a comprehensive resource for any one journal. Many components and editorial aspects of a journal either will not be covered in a general manual or will be addressed only sparsely; these can range from the mundane (In what order should the title page footnotes appear? Is it *Supporting*

Information or Supplemental Data?) to more sensitive, policy-oriented style points that extend into the editorial domain (e.g., author contributions, conflicts of interest, and claims of primacy). Documenting these requirements in a style guide is the best means of ensuring consistency and compliance from article to article and issue to issue.

Adaptability

In many cases, the guidelines laid out in a general style manual may need to be tailored to the subject matter of a particular journal. For example, AMA style requires that the abbreviations COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease) and RBC (red blood cell) be defined at first mention, but a chest medicine journal may elect to consider them standard to avoid patronizing its target audience.

Individuality

To a certain degree, we all want to stand out in some way, and scientific journals are no exception. Many journals have characteristics that are unique by design, and as such are nowhere to be found in a general style manual. This often manifests in purely superficial ways, as when a journal's page layout affects an editorial style point—but similar idiosyncrasies can extend to the journal's online hosting platform, which may include components that are not present in print but need to be handled delicately and precisely by a manuscript editor nonetheless.

Technology

Speaking of online hosting platforms, manuscript editors are increasingly being required to learn and apply web-based editing programs and XML coding systems to facilitate the presentation of online content, and these technological requirements almost always cross over with editorial style in some way. Whether you integrate these requirements into your editorial style guide or provide them as a supplement is up to you, but they need to be documented somewhere.

Article Types

Article types vary from journal to journal, but different article types often have inherently different style rules that would be difficult to apply correctly or consistently without clear direction. The distinctive characteristics of "special" article types—such as those pertaining to footnotes (e.g., to link companion articles), headings (e.g., for case reports), and reference citations (e.g., for letters and replies)—are often

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critical for reader comprehension, so carving out a place for them in an in-house guide is advisable.

Author Queries

The author query is an art form unto itself, and the way in which a query is worded can often make or break the answer. Establishing standard query language for recurring conundrums, clarifications, and confirmations not only ensures that each author receives the same message, it more often yields the desired response. This goes beyond preferred phrasing—the precise, calculated wording of an author query is often necessary to convey labyrinthine journal policies clearly or to request workflow-dependent information, and the major manuals simply do not (and cannot) delve into such detail.

You'd be hard pressed to find a journal for which none of the above tenets is relevant. Yet agreeing that an in-house style guide is a good idea isn't even half the battle. The task of wrangling these rules into a manual that is at once efficient, efficacious, and user-friendly is a formidable one—but with the proper approach and attention, the payoff can be considerable.

Categorization Is Key

This may go without saying, but the way in which a guide is structured is critical to its usability and efficacy, and the ease and speed with which information can be found can have a profound impact on editing quality. When organizing and categorizing the elements of an in-house guide, always consider the perspective of your users: How and where are they most likely to look for certain information? This is relatively easy to predict for rules that are broad in scope, such as author affiliations or reference types, which can be found easily when deposited in namesake sections; however, other, more subtle style points can be lost in the shuffle if not categorized with care. For example, if a comma is to be used in 95% confidence intervals, remember that a user who is unaware of this rule will not necessarily turn to the "Comma" section of the guide; they will more likely seek guidance in a "Statistics" section given that they don't yet know how (or if) to punctuate these values. Focusing on the user's question—rather than the answer—when categorizing certain style points increases the chances that those points will be discovered.

Careful Cross-referencing

Even with the most effective categorization methods, you can't always predict how any one user will go about looking for answers. For certain article components, though, you can anticipate the different angles from which a user may approach a search, then add cross-references that direct the user to the appropriate section of the guide. For example,

a user who is editing a table with abbreviations that need to be defined in a footnote could conceivably consult the "Abbreviations" and/or "Footnotes" sections of a style guide, when the answer actually resides in the "Tables" section. One temptation would be to simply replicate the information from the latter section in the former two sections; however, adding cross-references in those latter sections (e.g., "See the 'Tables' section") is more efficient and allows you to centralize the information in a pertinent location. Effective cross-referencing not only strengthens the search process, it minimizes the amount of repeat information—which ultimately reduces the potential for introducing discrepancies whenever the guide is updated, since there are fewer places where the same information needs to be revised in the same way.

Effective Examples

I've provided a handful of examples to accompany the points I've made thus far, and for good reason: Examples bring clarity to a concept. No matter how clearly you think you've penned a rule, the smallest subtleties in language can open that rule up to interpretation. Providing a rule that is followed immediately by a concise yet comprehensive example of that rule in action will help your users apply it correctly—but bear in mind that those examples should be realistic and at least somewhat representative of your content. Quirky, tongue-in-cheek examples or example "templates" will only get you so far if they don't resemble your content closely enough for your users to comprehend and implement them. If you'd rather not have to devise your own examples, or if you just want to keep the size of your style guide in check, you can always refer your users to published content—though whether you hand-pick that content or simply refer your editors to your website may depend on how confident you are in the accuracy of what you've published.

Trimming the Fat

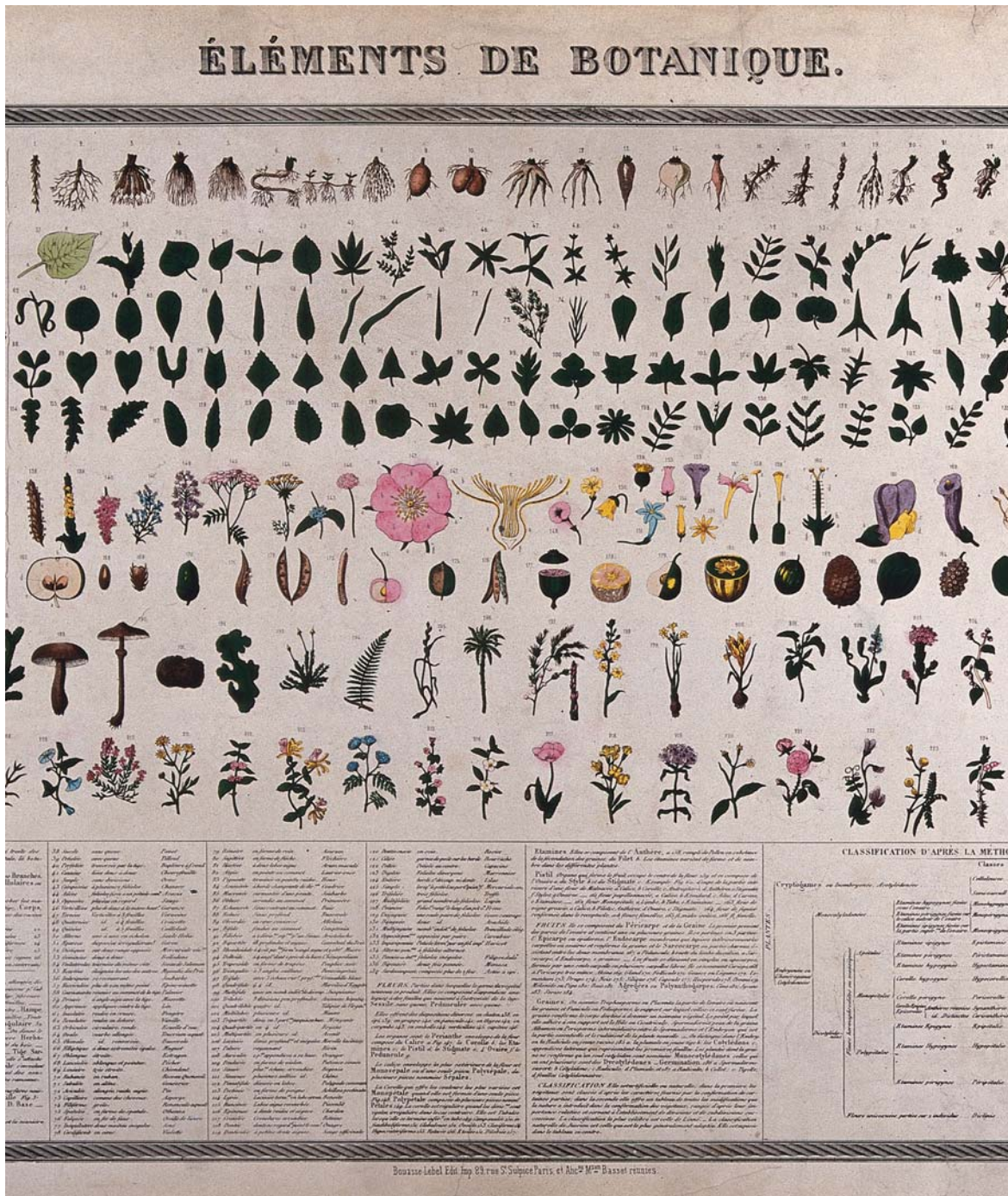
Finally, consider your user base when determining just how much information to include in an in-house style guide. Assuming your users are professional manuscript editors, it's more than reasonable to expect that their knowledge of the English language precludes any reminders of the fundamentals. Do you really need to tell your users that *ensure* and *insure* are not interchangeable, that you should capitalize the first word of a sentence, or that commas should be used to offset a nonrestrictive clause? Doing so is not unlike explaining the difference between a nail and a screw to the contractor you've hired to fix your roof, and it can distract your editors from more nuanced, journal-specific guidelines that require their attention. On the other hand, if you want to free your authors from some of the more prescriptive, deep-seated rules of grammar and usage, it may be prudent

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to include nonconformist precepts such as “Do not change passive voice to active voice” or “Allow split infinitives.”

Benjamin Franklin, in his infinite wisdom, left us with the proverb “For every minute spent in organizing, an hour is earned.” Truer words were never spoken. In my experience,

spending the time up front to carefully plan, construct, and implement an in-house journal style guide not only leads to better editing practices and higher quality, it makes the guide itself easier to update and maintain. And in the end, this investment will turn your minutes into hours—in a good way.



Detail from Botanical classification; 227 figures of plant anatomical segments with descriptive text. Credit: Wellcome Collection. CC BY 4.0 <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/kgjzhuqz>