

Style Guides and Style Sheets – What is the difference?

As copy editors, we aim for perfection, and a key contributor to that perfection is imposing consistency across a document. Style guides and style sheets contribute substantially to this.

Before starting to edit, every reputable copy editor should ask their client for their **house style guide** and, no matter how cranky or quirky it is, follow it faithfully. **House style guides** give pointers on general stylistic preferences: font and font size, margin sizes, colours, dictionary, not using italics for certain Latinisms in legal texts...

But what is a **style sheet**? What is it for? And how is it different from the house style guide?

For each text we work on, **house style** decisions have to be made that are unique to that organisation. **Style sheets** are to record style decisions for the specific document: spelling *sub-Saharan* and *southern Africa* correctly and, in medicine, spelling *microorganism* as one word, not hyphenated...

Another key difference between the two is that **a client develops a house style**, and **the copy editor compiles a style sheet** for a particular work and then submits it with the edited text. This is important because the style sheet decisions are not for the copy editor's eyes only: they must be shared with the other contributors to the end-product, including the typesetter, the proofreader and even the indexer, if there is one. When everyone sees the copy editor's style sheet, this helps to reduce queries and the unnecessary reversal of the copy editor's decisions, and to speed up the process.

The **house style** and the client's preferred dictionary will always be the first port of call when making new style decisions for a text. If any deviations from the house style are necessary, copy editors need to stop and ask themselves whether they are valid, and answering themselves could entail consulting the author about their preferences and then recording them.

If there is no guidance from the dictionary, house style or author, the copy editor must:

1. scan the entire document for any inconsistencies in spelling, punctuation, hyphenation and capitalisation, etc.
2. determine the majority use of a particular style (usually the author's preference)
3. note it in the style sheet, and

4. make the necessary corrections across the document as a whole (probably using either a macro or software such as PerfectIt or Word's own Find & Replace function).

The layout of a style sheet is according to the copy editor's preference, but a style sheet could record style decisions in a table something like the one below (note the ABC order from left to right and then top to bottom):

AD (small caps) Alpha Male (title case)	BC (small caps)	coordinate, cooperate counterintuitive <i>coup de main</i>	fait accompli (lowercase, roman)	intext references: (A & B 2009:213) Jakobsz, not Jacobs
microorganism	no-one (hyphen)	Pasteurisation pram, not stroller	'single quotes, "doubles" inside singles' Quotes > 40 wds to be displayed, no quotation marks	time in s, not h; 14:30, not 14h30 or 2.30 pm tonne, not ton

Refer to [PEG's guide](#) on house style and style guides: *Consistency, consistency, consistency* (2020). There are also 7 pages of information [here](#) about achieving consistency: the role of a house style and style sheets.