

Dear reader:

This "writing samples" page comes from an electronic column I write for Integrated Enrollment Services, a student retention consulting services company in Texas. Their monthly newsletter features articles or columns by professionals they partner with to provide various services to colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada. This column covers electronic communications, including editorial and strategic services.

You can find Integrated Enrollment Services online at www.enroll2grad.org.

If you would like me to write a column or other article for your business or organization, please e-mail me at: EMessenger-Consul@aol.com.

Style Sheets — What are they and do you need one?

What happens when different people write content for the same publication? Besides differences in writing style, quite often different people use different spellings and publishing standards. (For instance, some people spell "web site" as "website." Others use "web site" or "Web site." No one spelling is the standard.)

The result is a mish-mash of techniques that can leave your students (and potential students) with a less than positive impression of your organization. Consistency is key to creating familiarity between your students and your institution. Building an understanding of common terms and phrases, by consistent use, adds credibility as well.

This can be a special challenge when building a website. Most colleges assign content development to a variety of content-experts... all of whom have distinct writing styles. Posting the narrative as it is provided to you can leave readers with a disjointed view and understanding of your college.

Many organizations turn to a style sheet as an answer. But what is a style sheet, and do you really need one?

What is a style sheet?

A style sheet is a set of guidelines you prepare for content providers that sets and explains rules and spelling specific to your publication or website. These are often in addition to guidelines you may follow from professional stylebooks.

I highly recommend that you select a professional stylebook for overall publishing guidance. You should look over several and choose the one that makes the most sense to you. Most newspapers, newsletters, and websites use the *AP Stylebook*. Most magazines and many universities use the *Chicago Manual of Style*. And many other colleges and universities rely on the *MLA Handbook*. Other reputable sources are the *APA Style Manual* and *WIRED Style*, which uses a more "with it" style. There are others as well. The important thing is that you pick one and stick as close to it as possible for making decisions.

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Do you really need a style sheet?

If a professional stylebook takes care of all your publication standards, you don't need your own style sheet. However, if you deviate in any way from professional standards, you should prepare a style sheet that lists what and how you deviate.

In particular, you should have a style sheet if words specific to your organization or topic area are unique to you. For instance, if you use the term "morning glory" (a weed) but you spell it "mornnglory," you need to tell your writers. Or, if instead of writing out "percent" you use the symbol (%), you should say so. Perhaps you don't like to use periods with abbreviations – tell your writers to use "pm" instead of "p.m." and "in" instead of "in." or even "inch".

Also, if your publication or website uses terms unique to a discipline or profession, in particular words the average writer wouldn't know, you should provide a list of trouble terms. For instance, if you're a medical school or school of computer science, you should list difficult or new words and their spellings. It could even take the form of a glossary. On the other hand, you might prefer to list references where writers can find the information rather than creating a lengthy volume of your own.

In addition, if you use a specific format for detailing information, you should explain it and provide examples. For instance, if you bullet details rather than putting them in paragraph form, show writers how you like to see it. If you use a certain format to cite references or a specific regimen for footnoting, provide samples. You might want all charts to follow a certain format – show your writers. If you want writers to highlight material a certain way, cite examples. If there is something you definitely don't want to see, spell it out.

Finally, the style sheet is also a good place to set the tone and vision of your publication or website. If you like a special tone or point of view, explain it clearly so writers can emulate it.

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How do you make your style sheet available?

The best – the only sure way – to make sure writers are aware of your guidelines is to give all writers a copy. Most editors provide a hard copy for each person, but you could also provide them on a diskette or CD. You could also post guidelines on the Internet. Make sure you also get a copy to designers and developers, who deal with text and, thus, need to know the guidelines.

Of course, this short article doesn't cover every instance. Suffice it to say, the more direction you provide your writers, the better your content will be for you. It may take a while to set up, but your investment in time will pay off later when your content comes in according to spec and, thus, needs less adjustment.

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Alan Eggleston, a Web writer, editor, and site strategist, has specialized in Internet communications since 1995. He has helped launch and maintain dozens of websites for businesses, universities, and organizations.

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