

## Style Is Strategy: How Editorial Standards Send Your Message

*Adapted from the presentation, Not Just for Geeks: The Grammar Queen Discusses the Strategic Value of Editorial Style—and Answers Your Usage Questions in Plain English, at the August 2004 meeting of the American Society of Business Publication Editors, San Francisco chapter.*

If your organization were a person, who would it be? If your publications were that person's voice, how would they sound? Do they sound that way (polished up for a job interview, of course)?

Your editorial voice can have nearly as strong an effect as the information itself on how readers perceive your organization—on how they judge your credibility, point of view, understanding of their interests, and compatibility with their personal sensibilities. In short, it affects all the reasons they would read your publication and buy from or support your organization, not a competing one.

Your editorial style—the words you capitalize, how you choose to spell words with more than one acceptable spelling, the level of formality in your language, and so on—is part of your editorial voice. Yes, the effect of style is subtle. Readers are not necessarily leaning back in their pneumatic chairs, stroking their chins and thinking, “Hmmm . . . this magazine sure uses a lot of contractions” or “Ooooh, I hate that trendy business of turning two words into one.” Only a usage geek like the Grammar Queen would do that. Nonetheless, those choices can make quite an impact.

Editorial style is akin to color: people respond to it, but usually on a subconscious level. The problem is that people understand this about color—much discussion, even argument, no doubt went into choosing the color of your logo—but they often choose editorial standards based purely on personal preference, habit, or whim.

### Wired vs. The New York Times

To see what a difference style can make, compare the *New York Times* business section with Wired News. They cover some of the same technology stories, but you wouldn't confuse the two. Both organizations take editorial style very seriously.

The *Times* knows that its use of courtesy titles—Mr. and Ms. and the like—is old-fashioned and its writing style is dry. The editors believe those choices tell readers that the paper is an august purveyor of objective news and that in an environment of multiplying, often questionable news sources, it hasn't compromised on its commitment to journalistic values (however tarnished those values may be).

Wired News, on the other hand, speaks in the voice of a young upstart. Wired magazine and its Web news offshoot in the early years were gung-ho for lowercasing everything, pushing words together, and using techie slang. The idea was to present the publications as the tribune of the hip “digerati”—a word they actually used without irony. They've backed off that a bit as they, and the Internet, have reached a wider audience, but they've maintained their edgier-than-average tone as well as an exceptional sensitivity to style questions. When Wired News's copy chief decided to put the hyphen back in e-mail in 2000, he wrote a three-page essay about it. And the site got a slew of letters in response to that essay. People do have feelings about a publication's editorial choices.

More recently, Wired News decided to start lowercasing Internet, on the theory that it's just another medium for delivering and receiving information, like radio and television, so capitalizing it seems like a feeble attempt to make it sound more important than other media, in the way marketers like to inflate their “solutions” by capitalizing them. One can argue with the logic in this case, but it illustrates the fact that seemingly minor details like capitalization can carry powerful messages.

That's why, if you haven't reviewed your editorial style in a while or have never given it strategic consideration, it's time look it over in light of your audience and how you want to be perceived. As you review your style (and general writing standards), ask these five questions:

## 1. Is this the language my readers speak?

You should write a bit more formally than people speak, but it's a mistake to communicate in language that's dramatically different—in an off-putting way—from what your readers use with their peers.

We have a client who told us not to use any fancy literary words because his readers wouldn't understand them. That seemed a tad condescending at first, but our client is an engineer and the readers are mostly engineers, so we have to believe he knows what he's talking about. Our policy is, when our client doesn't understand a word, we change it. Your readers might use a lot of jargon, and while jargon generally deadens writing, you may want to use a bit of it with a narrow audience that will understand it—just a word here and there will tell them you are part of their world.

## 2. What personality does the writing convey?

If you asked your readers to describe your publication as a person, how would you want them to see it? As an authority figure—extremely well informed, disinclined to follow fads, credible? If so, don't use a lot of slang and be careful about usages that may not be widely accepted. As a friend? If so, you should be a bit more colloquial, write in the second person when it's appropriate, and give your writers some leeway to have personality. Or is your publication a trendsetter? You can get away with more lingo—not just from the field you're writing about, but from the broader culture. And make sure you're up on current usage.

## 3. How does this square with current usage?

Speaking of contemporary usage, no matter what your publication's personality, you should review your style guide against contemporary usage manuals, a current dictionary, and similar publications to see how it stacks up. This is true even if you're aiming for a conservative tone—there's traditional, and there's archaic. You don't want to seem like you've been publishing in a cave for the past 20 years. Conversely, you don't want to change more quickly than your readers.

## 4. How consistently do we follow these rules?

If you're not following your style guide consistently, either the guide is no longer relevant to your publication or you need to exercise some editorial control. Make sure everyone knows that a consistent style is important.

## 5. Are there questions that aren't covered in the guide?

In addition to underscoring your position with readers, your style guide should make your work more efficient. If you're always discussing whether to capitalize this or that, your style guide needs an update.

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