



# E 303: TECHNICAL WRITING

School of Literature and Languages

Louisiana Tech University



## Lecture 3 Memo

**To:** Mr. Merchant's English 303 students  
**From:** Mr. David M. Merchant, English Instructor  
**Subject:** Lecture 3: Style Guides Discussion  
**Date:** March 18, 2020

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The purpose of this memo is to give an overview of the purpose of style guides in technical writing.

### Style Guides: Who Cares? Who Needs Them?

Most large organizations have style guides, even if just small ones. Some organizations have large style guides. The Government Printing Office, for example, has a 460-page style guide. NASA's is 53 pages long, while the National Summit on Medical Abbreviations put out a one-page official "do not use" list (more on the latter in a moment).

But why have a corporate style guide? First, to protect the brand. You will notice that the first section in the *Merchant's Style Guide* is all about protecting the brand. In this class, I have a letterhead already created for you in Word and placed on Moodle as well as a properly created logo for you to use for your final report cover sheet, but I wanted you to become familiar with the idea that corporations and other organizations are extremely protective of their brands. They have to be. If they are casual or lazy about protecting their brand, their brand could be considered to be abandoned and used by another organization. Also, organizations like consistency. It helps with brand recognition if there is consistency in how the brand is displayed and used.

Second, think of document design as creating a user interface for the document. Organizations need consistency in that design. It helps make documents more efficient and helps readers (remember: Audience, Purpose, and Context, with Reader as the first item). Having a consistent user interface helps regular readers become efficient readers.

But what about standard style guides, like the APA, Chicago, and MLA? While many organizations will use a standard style guide for formatting references, those style guides do not go far enough. They also tend to give advice such as "A or B are both correct; which one you choose is up to you." Large organizations hate such advice. They want consistency, and so their style guides and/or writing handbooks make a choice. See page 1 in the *Merchant's Style Guide* for more information/discussion on this.

Also, different organizations have contexts that require exceptions or overriding decisions made by standard style guides. IBM, for example, has around 18 pages of words and phrases to not use in IBM documents! Why? I will give you one important example. The word billion and trillion mean different numbers in different countries, depending upon whether they use the long scale or

short scale system for naming large numbers. In short scale, 1 billion =  $10^9$  and 1 trillion =  $10^{12}$ , while in long scale 1 billion =  $10^{12}$  and 1 trillion =  $10^{18}$  (with milliard =  $10^9$ ). In both scales 1 million =  $10^6$ . Silly (may even say stupid), I know, but that is the reality. Some countries have both—French-speaking Canadian provinces and English-speaking provinces have different definitions for billion and trillion. This is critical for a company like IBM which works with bits and bytes in the billions and trillions. Technical writing has to be accurate. A number off by three decimal places, depending upon which definition is used, is greatly inaccurate which can cause problems, some critical or fatal. And since technical document readers are skimmers, or are busy or stressed when reading, even if you give them your definition, they can still slip into the definition they grew up with.

Remember the National Summit on Medical Abbreviations official "do not use" list mentioned above? This short style sheet (Table 1) lists standard abbreviations deemed perfectly acceptable in other contexts but are not acceptable in the context of a medical document as they can be misread which could cause the death of a patient.

**Table 1. Official 'Do Not Use' List of Abbreviations from the Joint Commission 4**

<b>Do not use*</b>	<b>Potential problems</b>	<b>Use instead</b>
U (unit)	Mistaken for '0' (zero), the number '4' (four) or 'cc'	Write 'unit'
IU (international unit)	Mistaken for IV (intravenous) or the number 10 (ten)	Write 'International Unit'
Q.D, QD, q.d, qd (daily)	Mistaken for each other	Write 'daily'
Q.O.D., QOD, q.o.d., qod (every other day)	Period after the Q mistaken for 'I' and the 'O' mistaken for 'I'	Write 'every other day'
Trailing zero (X.0 mg)	Decimal point is missed	Write X mg
Lack of leading zero (.X mg)		Write 0.X mg
MS	Can mean morphine sulfate	Write 'morphine sulfate'
MSO4 and MgSO4	or magnesium sulfate; confused for one another	Write 'magnesium sulfate'

\*Applies to all orders and all medication-related documentation that is handwritten (including free-text computer entry) or on preprinted forms.

**Source:** Myers, Jennifer & Gojraty, Sattar & Yang, Wei & Linsky, Amy & Airan-Javia, Subha & Polomano, Rosemary. "A randomized-controlled trial of computerized alerts to reduce unapproved medication abbreviation use." *Journal of the American Medical Informatics Association: JAMIA*, vol. 18. 2011, pp. 17-23.

## Style Guides, Writing Handbooks, and Identity Standards

Some style guides combine style decisions with a writing handbook. Purists say style guides should not contain a writing handbook, but most style guides have both (I have researched over almost four dozen academic, corporate, and governmental style guides). In addition, some organizations have separate identity standards sheets or guides.

Identity standards are style guides that focus on establishing an organization's visual identity. They usually contain guidelines for the proper use of the organization's logo and other symbols as well as acceptable color use and sometimes approved typefaces. An organization needs to protect its brand, its identity, which requires strict, consistent adherence to the standards. Such consistent adherence not only protects the organization's brand but helps enhance recognition of the brand.

### Guides and Handbooks for This Class

I have separated my style guide and handbook because the combined document was difficult for some students to use on their tablets or phones. You will need to look at both: *Merchant's Style Guide* has mostly document design choices, while the *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers* has mostly grammar, punctuation, spelling, and word usage choices (including using the Oxford, or serial, comma. You **must** use the serial comma in this class). Both are located at [davidmmerchant.com/](http://davidmmerchant.com/).

The *Identity Standards Manual* (located at [davidmmerchant.com/style-guide/](http://davidmmerchant.com/style-guide/)) is there to give you an idea of how protective companies can be about their corporate brand. It is based on the research I have done. Some organizations have small identity standards manuals or sheets, while others go in greater detail. The one I want you to look over shows an organization that goes into great detail.

For this class, you have a template for your memos provided to you so you do not have to worry about creating a letterhead and having the correct proportions and alignments in the letterhead. For some reason, many students ignore using the template, but by doing so they lose points from getting the formatting of the logo and the heading segment wrong.

Read the *Style Guide* closely and thoroughly, as you need to use the information in it for all your writing assignments in this class. Likewise, read the *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers* closely and thoroughly, as you also need to use the information in it for all your writing assignments in this class.

### Closing

If you have questions, please contact me via email or the course Moodle page (forum or messaging service). Do not forget to do your assigned readings. Again, *Merchant's Style Guide* and *Merchant's English Usage Guide for Technical Writers* are located at [davidmmerchant.com/](http://davidmmerchant.com/).