



Preparing a house-style guide

TN156 Training Notes series: Communication

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An editor's house-style guide (HSG) is a written agreement or set of rules for how to write text in a document or on a website when there are various possible options. It determines a standard way of writing for a church or mission agency when different people may be providing material.

To give an example, do you write 'house style' as two words, 'housestyle' as one word, or do you hyphenate the two words, so 'house-style'? Again do you want to 'harmonise' or 'harmonize' the written output from your church? It looks untidy to write that you are 'finalising' a decision about 'harmonizing' your writing. It is not that one is right and the other wrong but that you have one agreed way of spelling such words.

But a house-style may cover much more than possible spellings. It may include punctuation, such as whether you write 'e.g.' or 'eg' or 'eg.'. Or how you capitalise /capitalize particular titles. So should this be titled, 'Preparing A House-Style Guide', 'Preparing a House-style Guide' or as I have in fact capitalised it (according to my own house-style!)?

There again the HSG may cover your church or mission agency's use of fonts, logos (or should it be logo's?), bullets, and so on. Do you write 'Rev', 'Revd' or 'The Revd'. How do you shorten books of the Bible: '1 Chron', '1Chr', or what?

The whole point is to offer a common style that is used for all types of printed output and to ensure two different styles do not muddle up in the same document. It encourages neatness and professionalism in written materials from the one church or society.

What these notes now show is how to provide a possible editorial house-style guide, at least in outline, for a church. You do not need to agree with each choice that has been made so by all means come up with different solutions. But this will at least show the kind of issues you might like to take into account.

1 Spelling and punctuation

- 1.1 If in doubt, follow the 'Concise Oxford Dictionary' (COD) for spelling.
- 1.2 End appropriate words with -ise not -ize (COD allows either).
- 1.3 Use *programme* for normal use, *program* for computer software.
- 1.4 Use a colon to introduce a list and commas to separate items including before the use of etc. so *The train stopped at every main station: Crewe, Stafford, Rugby, etc.*
- 1.5 Take care to use apostrophes correctly. So *Our food bank has its own room but it's not big enough.* Again: *Our Ministers' office is closed as both of them are away but our Youth Minister's office is still open.*
- 1.6 Use *Jesus' disciples* rather than *Jesus's*.

2 Hyphens

- 2.1 Use a hyphen when a noun is being treated like an adjective so *daughter-church*.
- 2.2 Also for a prefix, so *non-believer*, or to avoid a misleading spelling as in *co-ordinator*, *re-advertise*, though *reconsider* and many others do not need this.
- 2.3 When two or three words are strung together such as *an 18-year-old* or *two-thirds*.
- 2.4 To form a compound adjective, so *a part-time member of staff*.
- 2.5 But *no one* should never be hyphenated. And we choose not to hyphenate *line manage* (two words) and *checklist*, *homepage* and *email* (one word). *e-learning* is hyphenated.

3 Abbreviations and references

- 3.1 Do not shorten *road* or *street*. For counties use standard abbreviations so *Herts*, *Wilts*, etc. For books of the Bible use standard abbreviations (*show examples*).
- 3.2 Only shorten days and months in lists when brevity is at a premium.
- 3.3 Do not use full stops for abbreviated names, so *USPG*, *CPAS*, *C of E*. If using an acronym ensure the full title is used first, as with *HSG* on page 1.
- 3.4 Use one full stop at the end of abbreviated initials to avoid confusion so *eg.*, *etc.*, *no.* (for number).
- 3.5 But no full stop for abbreviations of single words, so *Revd*, *Mrs*, *5Op*, *St* (for saint).
- 3.6 When citing a web address use the format *https://www.address*.

4 Quotations

- 4.1 Always use double inverted commas for speech or quoting text. *The manual states, "Avoid direct sunlight".*
- 4.2 If italics is not possible use single inverted commas for book or other titles, foreign phrases, or for emphasis. *They had an 'en suite' bathroom. TN156 is called 'Preparing a house-style guide'.*
- 4.3 Common usage is to put a comma inside the double inverted commas at the end of speech. So *"I love Manchester," said Sally.* But see 4.1 above for the full stop.

5 Book titles and church names

- 5.1 Book titles within prose should go in italics or single inverted commas.
- 5.2 Capitalise the first word but not the others. So *Pilgrim's progress*. But *Concise Oxford dictionary* is confusing so capitalise all three words here.
- 5.3 Church names should be capitalised to follow general use so *Christ Church, Main Road Baptist Church*.
- 5.4 Official names of groups are capitalised (see section 6 below). *Our Parents and Toddlers Group met today*. *Other churches have toddler groups too*.

6 Capitalisation of official groups

- 6.1 Capitalise specific titles for office holders but not when the word is used in general. But it is not easy to separate these out so it is sometimes better to capitalise general usage. In general, go with what makes sense. So *Miles is the Pastor of Christ Church*. *He was one of several pastors at the meeting*. But *Miles is the Minister of Christ Church*. *He was one of several Ministers at the meeting*. This is because Minister has other uses and lower case 'm' might be confusing.
- 6.2 Capitalise *Board* in the same way since the word has meanings other than the governance group for an organisation. *Trustees* is often capitalised to make it clear this is a formal group. But we acknowledge that this is not completely tidy.
- 6.3 Capitalise *Church Administrator* for a member of staff with that title, but use lower case for *administrators* in general. Similarly for *Church Secretary*, *Treasurer*, etc.
- 6.4 Committee names follow the same principles. So *Parochial Church Council* is always capitalised but we might talk about *church councils* in general.
- 6.5 Similarly *We had our Church Meeting* for a Baptist Church where this is a formal title, but *We had a church meeting* for an Anglican Church where this is a descriptive not an official title.

7 Specific capitalisations

- 7.1 There is often confusion on the use of divine pronouns but they should not be capitalised in line with most Bible versions. *Jesus came with his disciples*.
- 7.2 Church is capitalised for specifically named churches, so *Gasworks Lane Church*, also for the worldwide body, so *The global Church is growing*, but not for general use, so *churches in this country are growing*.
- 7.3 The same principle applies to gospel. *St Mark's Gospel*. *He preached the gospel*.
- 7.4 And to the names of services. *There was Holy Communion after the Wedding Service*. *Most weddings do not have this*. But note that to avoid confusion, you need to avoid communion with a small c for *Communion services* in general!
- 7.5 *Bible* is capitalised, *biblical* is not.
- 7.6 Seasons of the year are not capitalised unless the word *spring* may cause confusion. So, *he came in winter and left in Spring*, although it may be better to capitalise *Winter* too in this example.

8 Numerals, dates and references

- 8.1 For numbers up to ten, use the words. Above ten use numerals. *Kate had seven sessions but Ray had 15.* But use discretion if starting a sentence with a number over ten.
- 8.2 However always use numerals for page numbers, dates, addresses, or lists. Never use a mixture of forms of words and dashes so *This runs from 10 to 12 November,* not *from 10 - 12.*
- 8.3 Dates are normally written *23rd September,* though in a list or table they may be shown as *September 23.* But never use *September 23rd* or *23.09.24.*
- 8.4 Telephone numbers should be in the format *01234 567890* (do not omit the code) or *07777 888888* if not designed for international use.
- 8.5 Bible references use colons, semi-colons and commas as *Genesis 3:1-5, 7-16; 4:1-3.*

9 Lists

- 9.1 Use numbers where order is important. Also for reference use as in this guide. Otherwise use bullets.
- 9.2 For lists of sentences close each with a full stop and start the next one with a capital.
- 9.3 For lists of points in phrases, close each with a semi-colon and start the next one with lower case.
- 9.4 But for lists of single words or very short phrases, close each with no punctuation.

10 Writing to those outside the Church

- 10.1 When the readership will be of people who are not used to church language, such as in our leaflet drops, avoid all terms that will only be understood by Christians. Be very careful with words such as the titles of our services, terms such as *elder* or *disciple*, and anything that might be too theological such as *salvation*.
- 10.2 Keep in mind people who find reading difficult, and so use simple terms and straightforward sentences.
- 10.3 Write in very short paragraphs: two or three sentences each maximum.
- 10.4 Break up a longer piece with sub-heads, quotations in boxes, photographs.
- 10.5 The use of clip-art is now seen to be dated. Use copyright-free websites (such as 'Unsplash') to find appropriate photographs. But take care with stock photographs so people realise they are not our church.

Notes

- 1 The above is designed to apply to a general setting such as a church or mission agency. Specialist users will need additional sections. For example, academic settings will require detailed notes on setting out references to other works for the writing of essays.

- 2 A house-style guide will often have additional sections on the use of the logo, strap line, specific fonts, colour and design. A house-style guide that is designed to define a brand will major on these.
- 3 There may also be guidance on how to set out formal letters so that correspondence leaving the church or organisation is consistent, although this is not so necessary for most of us in today's digital age.
- 4 There may be in addition rules for the use of email and social media. Much will depend on the level of formality felt to be appropriate.
- 5 Anglican Churches may include sections on the correct way to address different members of the clergy such as bishops and archdeacons. See 'Crockford's Clerical Directory' for advice but err on the side of informality these days. Also churches may need to include advice on whether to use Rev or Revd or The Revd. In addition it is never correct to say *The Revd took the service* or *Revd Jones was born in Wales* – use *The Vicar* (or whoever) in the first example and *Mr* in the second.
- 6 Your guide may include details for writing with dyslexic people in mind. Use 12 point fonts and bold rather than italic headings, among other things.
- 7 A standard text book on many points applied to specific examples is Sir Ernest Gowers' 'Complete plain words'.
- 8 Your church may have specific examples where there is known to be confusion and these might form an additional section. For example, many people muddle up *lay* and *lie*. It is wrong to say *He was laying on his bed* unless he was a hen! Similarly many people muddle *less* (when you cannot count) and *fewer* (when you can). So *he had less money with fewer coins*.
- 9 For an interesting point on apostrophes read the final footnote in Training Notes TN70 on this website, *Do's and don'ts for a new leader*.
- 10 This sample guide has been kept simple. Institutional guides run to many pages with long lists of examples but that will not be necessary for most churches.

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN156. See also Articles A2, *Watch your image!*, and A21, *The use of print in outreach*, plus Training Notes TN63, *How not to write a newsletter*.

John's resources are marked for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN156 under Communication with a link to Administration.

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