A COMPARISON OF WRITERS' STYLE GUIDES

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The Associated Press Stylebook

The Microsoft Manual of Style

The MLA Handbook

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<div style="text-align:center">A Comparison of Writers' Style Guides</div>

There are hundreds of writing genres and seemingly as many corresponding

writing guides. With so much variety authors should have access to all the information

they need to create clear and engaging works. Yet amid the clutter of how-to write

guides and manuals, three works stand above the rest. They are: *The Microsoft Manual*

of Style (4th ed., 2012), *The Associated Press Stylebook 2017 and Briefing on Media Law*

(2017), and the *MLA Handbook* (8th ed., 2016). While these guides have their own

strengths and weaknesses, all three are wide enough in scope to be essential tools for

today's writers.

Regardless of genre, writers seek to communicate with an audience. To do so

they must master the most basic building blocks of effective writing. Style guides

provide useful information that help them master their chosen style and reach their

audience. The strength of *The Associated Press Stylebook 2017* (AP Stylebook) is that it

is an extensive resource for all writers, but particularly for journalists. It begins with an

alphabetical "stylebook" listing definitions, abbreviations, spelling conventions, numbers

and word usage. It is very helpful to all writers, but particularly for journalists, because it

clarifies word usage depending on the form of publication and provides helpful examples.

For example, in the entry for Roman numbers, it states:

Use Roman numerals for wars and to establish personal sequence for people and animals: *World War I*, *Native Dancer II*, *King George V*. Also, for certain legislative acts (*Title IX*). Pro Football Super Bowls Should be identified by the year, not the Roman numerals: *1969 Super Bowl*, not *Super Bowl III*. (AP Stylebook, 246).
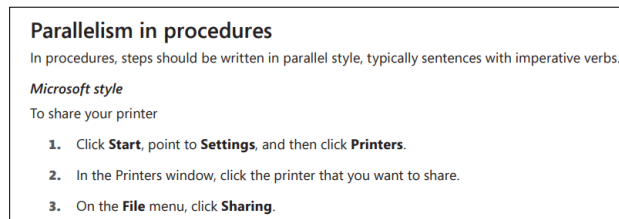
It also gets very specific on how to write certain terms where other guides are more general. It has separate sections detailing writing conventions for business, fashion, food, religion, sports, media law and social media. For example, in the sports section, it directs the reporting of sports scores, standings and standards this way:

The Dodgers defeated the Phillies 10-3 (No comma between the team and the score); in golf, *3 up*, but a *3-up lead*; *led 3-2*; a 6-1-2 *record* (six wins, one loss, two ties); *par 3*: *5 handicap*, *5-under-par 67* but *he was 5 under par* (or *5 under*, with "par" understood). In narrative, spell out nine and under except for yard lines in football and individual and team statistical performance: *the ball was on the 5-yard line*. *Seventh Hole*. (200).

This level of detail is particularly helpful for reporters and journalists writing for newspapers, magazines and other timely publications. It allows them to concisely convey the facts to their audience.

The Microsoft Manual of Style (*MMOS*) is another writers' guide that serves a niche audience. Originally intended as a reference for Microsoft writers and editors, at over 450 pages, it contains enough useful information to be useful to writers of every stripe. It is very organized and detailed, and, like the AP Stylebook, has two main sections. The first section has chapters detailing punctuation, grammar and word usage

and standards for publishing content on the internet, and terminology and norms for technical instruction. For example, in the first chapter discussing "Microsoft style", there is a lot of detail on the literary device of parallelism; that is, ensuring that the parts of a sentence are grammatically the same or similar in their construction, sound, meaning or meter. It is great advice for all writers, but particularly so for technical writers in shaping procedures, as in the below example from page 16:

Parallelism in procedures
In procedures, steps should be written in parallel style, typically sentences with imperative verbs.

Microsoft style
To share your printer

1. Click **Start**, point to **Settings**, and then click **Printers**.
2. In the Printers window, click the printer that you want to share.
3. On the **File** menu, click **Sharing**.

Another example of how the *MMOS* is useful to all writers, not simply Microsoft employees, is the section on accessible writing. It contains suggestions for "maximizing accessibility to help make documentation clearer and more useful for everyone ... " (Microsoft, 49). The second part of the *MMOS*, the usage dictionary, lists technical terms, common words and phrases, abbreviations, punctuation and more. Its purpose is to help Microsoft writers be consistent across all platforms, but it is an incredible resource for writers across all genres as well.

The third guide, the *MLA Handbook*, is an essential reference for student writers and academic researchers in the liberal arts and humanities. Like the other guide books, it lists standards for punctuation, abbreviation and numbers, but in the context for citing sources. Where the other guidebooks provide very specific guidelines related to their niche audiences, the *MLA Handbook's* strength is its flexibility. It details good documentation practices as, "a key component of academic integrity." (MLA, 6). But it also emphasizes that whatever form a citation takes, the core elements of the works-cited

must be included: author, title of the source, title of the container, other contributors, version, number, publisher, publication date and location. (MLA, 20). This format is easy to follow when citing traditional publications like a book or journal, but trickier for sources like films, twitter posts or emails.   Rather than get caught up in strict adherence to a format for citations though, the *MLA* emphasizes the goal of helping the reader understand the nature of the source material. For example, when it comes to citing film and television, which have many contributors to the final content, the *MLA* advises authors to cite the work based on, "…the contribution of a particular person – say, the performance of an actor or the ideas of the screenwriter – [to] begin the entry with his or her name, followed by a descriptive label." (MLA, 24). Very helpfully the *MLA* provides many examples to make the point easier to understand, as in this one also from page 24:

> Gellar, Sarah Michelle, performer. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Mutant Enemy, 1997-2003.

> Whedon, Joss, creator. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Mutant Enemy, 1997-2003.

These examples show how it is possible to follow a predictable format, but also provide guidance for citing sources from non-traditional outlets. The *MLA Handbook* thoroughly covers these scenarios, and more, in an organized and easy to follow format.

While these three guide books differ in their intended audiences, they have many similarities. For example, both the *AP Stylebook* and the *MLA Handbook* provide guidance to writers concerned with accuracy. In the *AP Stylebook,* the entire a-to-z stylebook section is intended as a quick reference, so writers can get the details consistently right, and readers can trust the information and its source. Indeed, The

Associated Press states, "We have gone to great lengths, overcome great obstacles – and, too often, made great sacrifices – to ensure that the news was reported quickly, accurately and honestly, in a balanced and impartial way." (AP Stylebook, 481). Likewise, the *MLA Handbook* is concerned with accuracy in attributing credit where it is due. It emphasizes that good writing includes "demonstrating the thoroughness of the writer's research, giving credit to the original sources, and ensuring that readers can find the sources consulted in order to draw their own conclusions about the writer's argument. Writers achieve the goals of documentation by providing sufficient information in a comprehensible, consistent structure." (MLA, 4). Furthermore, the *Microsoft Manual of Style* is concerned with providing technically accurate information. The first chapter lays out the Microsoft "style and voice" as per the below example from page 7:

Use words accurately and consistently.	Use words as they're defined in the dictionary or in your project style sheet. Use one term to represent one concept, and use terms consistently.
	This guideline is particularly important for technical terms, but it also applies to other words. Although the use of synonyms may be more interesting to read, users may assume that your choice of a different word indicates a subtle distinction.
	Microsoft style
	Set up operating units.
	A significant number of people access the website monthly.
	Not Microsoft style
	Setup operating units.
	A significant amount of people access the website monthly.

So, all three guides are united in their emphasis on accuracy and consistency.

Another similarity in all three guide books is the weight given to proper word usage, abbreviations, numbers and punctuation. Both the *AP Stylebook* and the *Microsoft Manual of Style* have separate chapters for punctuation while the *MLA Handbook* addresses punctuation in the context of work cited and in-text citations. Consider, for example, that each guide has a lengthy, multi-page entry on the proper use of commas. (*AP Stylebook*, 429-431; *Microsoft Manual of Style*, 190-191; *MLA Handbook*, 88-89).

Each guide also gives clear examples; the table below shows examples for the use of commas in a series of three or more elements:

AP Stylebook (429)	He would nominate Tom, Dick, Harry or Jeannette.
Microsoft Manual of Style (190)	You need a hard disk, an EGA or VGA monitor, and a mouse.
MLA Handbook (21)	Dorris, Michael, and Louise Erdrich. The Crown of Columbus. HarperCollins Publishers, 1999.

The emphasis on proper punctuation and word usage is consistent with the objective of guiding writers to convey clear, accurate meaning in their works.

A guide for contemporary writers, however, must include standards for writing on the internet. All three guides address word usage and grammar for sources obtained from the internet. The *AP Stylebook* has a lengthy section on social media guidelines, and the *MLA Handbook* gives many examples for citing sources from such varied origins as on-line comments, reviews, tweets and emails. (MLA, 29). Not surprisingly, however, the *Microsoft Manual of Style* is the strongest reference guide when it comes to contemporary writing, that is, not only for physical print, but also publishing on the internet. For example, its usage dictionary contains a great many technical and computer-related terms, e.g. G, G byte, and Gbyte (299). It also has separate chapters on content for the web and content for a world-wide audience. Furthermore, in January 2018 its entire content was revised and made available for free on-line. It is now the *Microsoft Style Guide* and may be accessed on-line at https://docs.mircrosoft.com/en-us/style-guide. While some may prefer the hard copy of the *Microsoft Manual of Style*, or the downloadable .pdf document of the *Microsoft Style Guide*, the ease and speed of on-line searches of the *Microsoft Style Guide* make it the most up to date and convenient to use.

While each of the guide books has its strengths and weaknesses, it can be hard for

a writer to determine the best reference to use. The table below is a quick-glance

comparison of some of the most pertinent features of each guide to help in that decision.

Topic	Microsoft Manual of Style	AP Style Book	MLA Handbook
Best Writing Genre	Technical Writing, On-line Content Writing	Journalism & Publishing	Academics, Literature, Humanities, Research
Length	463 pages	610 pages	146 pages
Cost	$15	$14	$10
Online	https://docs.microsoft.com/ en-us/style-guide	www.apstylebook.com	https://style.mla.org
Grammar	✔	✔	✔
Easy to Use	Very Easy	Easy	Easy
Strengths	Detailed Table of Contents

Logical Organization

Examples

Chapters on Digital Information and Social Media

Extensive Usage Dictionary

Large Index | Simple Table of Contents

Logical Organization

Examples

Detailed Guidelines for Niche Reporting

Chapters on Digital Information and Social Media

Extensive Alphabetical Stylebook

Large Index | Detailed Table of Contents

Logical Organization

Examples

Index |
Weaknesses	Overwhelming Amount of Information	Reads like a phone book. Information can be difficult to find despite the alphabetical format.	Limited to Citations
Good for Editors	✔	✔	✔
Good for Writers	✔	✔	✔

Despite the comprehensive nature of these guides, they are not always a perfect fit

for corporate publications. Even the *Microsoft Manual of Style*, which is for Microsoft

employees, acknowledges in its introduction that other reference guides may be needed.

(Microsoft, xxii). For manufacturing companies that have many processes and products, a

company style guide may be necessary. A business like Harry & David, which has many

products, a strong on-line presence and a large graphic arts department would need its own guide

for its print and online content writers to adhere to product naming and numbering standards. An

in-house guide would prevent mistakes that cause confusion for customers and affect the

company's liability. Likewise, a company with many satellite offices would achieve greater

efficiency with its own in-house guide. For example, Evergreen Helicopters (now Erickson Air

Crane) had its own Publications Standard Operating Procedure. An example of one entry is

below:

> **5.4.1 Transmittal Sheet Format:**
> Transmittal sheets may vary in form because of differences between
> manufacturers and bases of operation. Various forms of transmittal sheets may
> be used if they conform to the minimum requirements set forth in this SOP.
> Company controlled technical publications, manuals and documents must use
> Manual Revision Transmittal Sheet Form EH-145 (Annex 5). Transmittal sheets
> from manufacturers and remote bases of operation that are not on Form EH-
> 145 must include the following information:
>
> - **Title** – Transmittal Sheet
> - **Origin** – The location of the originating manufacturer, office or base.
> - **Destination** – The location of the end destination and name of the assigned
>   process owner, pilot or mechanic.
> - **Date** – The date the transmittal sheet is issued.
> - **Details of Revisions**: Must include the name of the manufacturer, title of
>   the publication being revised, model, revision number and revision date, and
>   pages being revised.
> - **Received by** – An assigned space for the responsible individual to print and
>   sign once the revisions are complete.
> - **Received Date** – An assigned space for the responsible individual to date
>   the transmittal sheet once revisions are complete.

This SOP allows the company to set standards for publications that all the satellite offices must follow.

Like the other writers' guides, it seeks to provide guidance to the company's writers and their intended,

namely employees, and to provide the style and technique for effective written communication.

Taken together all these style guides provide an overwhelming amount of information for writers,

and yet the overall purpose is quite simple. The consistent execution of word usage, grammar, punctuation

and style gives power to the written word. Referring to style guides helps writers engage efficiently and

deeply with their intended audiences. Furthermore, style guides are not static, but adapt to ever evolving

modes of publication. For writers across all spectrums, style guides such as the *Microsoft Manual of Style*,

the *AP Stylebook* and the *MLA Handbook*, and others, are key tools for effective writing.

Works Cited

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