

Experiences Developing and Using a Writing Style Guide in a Statistical Agency

Colleen Blessing (U.S. Energy Information Administration, United States)

The U.S. Energy Information Administration (EIA) published its first official Writing Style Guide in 2012. This paper discusses how the Style Guide was introduced and distributed to staff, how it was received and used, successes and challenges of the guidance, and how feedback from staff was incorporated into the next edition just published in April 2015. (I will include a link to the 2015 Writing Style Guide here—it's not ready yet.)

First—the 2009 Writing Style Guide

EIA writes everything from one-page stories to 150-page reports. And, like most statistical agencies, we write for an audience that spans students and teachers, businesses, government agencies at all levels, financial markets, and the general public. We have content for readers from the man on the street to high-level policy makers and technical analysts.

We firmly believe that unclear communication or inconsistencies in style cause readers to question the accuracy of our data: If there are mistakes in our writing, readers might assume there are also mistakes in our numbers. Without an official style guide, EIA hadn't communicated preferences for writing rules and styles, which increased the likelihood of mistakes and inconsistencies in EIA's products.

EIA created the first edition of our writing style guide in 2009, before the creation of the Office of Communications in 2010. This was EIA's first step toward more consistent, understandable, and professional writing. We held training classes for staff and distributed paper copies. Interest in the training was higher than we had expected, although some people weren't entirely sure about what a writing style guide would contain (and, no, it didn't cover graphing guidelines). This first guide was available online. (See the [paper](#) I presented to this group on the 2009 Writing Style Guide at the 2010 UNECE meeting in Paris.)

No special effort went into the design or the formatting the 2009 guide. At least now authors had some guidance about styles and rules. The organization also didn't have a formal agency point of contact to answer questions or to help with editing. But writing rules and styles continued to vary and were interpreted differently in different parts of the organization. Content wasn't being reviewed by an established editing team, so it was difficult to correct or enforce writing styles.

Next—the 2012 Writing Style Guide

EIA published our second *Writing Style Guide* in November 2012. The Style Guide covered popular topics such as capitalization, punctuation, word usage, tone, writing about numbers—topics most relevant to EIA writing. The Style Guide included words to use and words to avoid, lists of units and words to capitalize, and a special chapter on writing about numbers. Grammar rules were also included. In total, the guide provided 110 pages of information for writers to consult and incorporate into their work.

The guide was widely and continually distributed in a number of ways: at training classes, to managers at their request, to individuals who asked for a copy, and to new employees as they joined EIA. As the agency's senior editor I always had copies of the Style Guide out and available in my office for staff to get for themselves or others. Distribution of the Style Guide and education about the Style Guide is an ongoing process.

We conducted six sessions of a short (90 minute), small (25 people) training class called Introduction to EIA's Writing Style Guide. The introduction covering specific sections and important rules in the Style Guide. We also discussed why having a consistent style is important to the agency. Participation in the classes was open to everyone in EIA from junior employees to senior managers. We wanted everyone who was interested to attend, and for everyone at every level in the agency to hear the same information. Attendance was at maximum capacity—the classes were very popular.

So, how did staff receive this guidance and how has it worked so far? At first, some authors were skeptical. But most were happy to finally have a resource to refer to and to have a point of contact to consult with questions. Most people seemed to want to know how to “do it right” and what the agency expected as far as writing voice and style. It's also good for new employees who need to know about our writing policies. Once authors learned and understood the styles and then saw more professional documents when the rules and styles were used, we steadily got buy-in for using the rules in the Style Guide.

Then—the never-ending stream of questions

After the Style Guide was published, I got questions almost every day about items that were covered in the Style Guide and about issues or topics that were not covered at all. Questions came to me via emails, telephone calls, hallway encounters, and during meetings and office doorway conversations. I kept a record of the hundreds of questions and suggestions. Common questions included uncertainty about punctuation, hyphenation, capitalization, and phrasing for clarity. Once the stream of questions began, it never ended! I think that's a good outcome. I always encourage staff to ask questions—it's a sure way to develop content for the next edition of the Style Guide and to understand what authors still aren't sure about.

I also edit most of the content published by EIA. Authors range in writing ability and technical knowledge. I see the continued mistakes authors make and the confusion they exhibit every day as I edit agency writing. I gathered lots of new topics and additional information to add to the 2015 edition of the Style Guide just published in April by seeing repeated mistakes.

Many questions asked by staff were already answered in the Guide, so I could just review the rule or style and then point them to the relevant page. Knowing that some people couldn't find the answer easily in the Guide helped me realize it needed an index. Findability in a 110-page Guide could be a challenge. The 2015 edition has an extensive index.

Many other questions were not covered in the 2012 Guide, or were not covered as clearly as they could have been, or maybe the sections needed more examples. A couple of new writing issues also became more important since 2012, so they needed to be included in the new version.

Now, the 2015 EIA Writing Style Guide—what's new?

New items in the 2015 Style Guide include:

- More examples and explanations of rules and style preferences
- A detailed index at the back of the 2015 Guide so users can more easily find what they are looking for. I made sure we had multiple entries—like *which and that* in the W section and *that and which* in the T section. I used contractors to develop the index.
- More guidance on structuring written content, putting the main points first, including background and details later, and not repeating findings in an unnecessary conclusion. In toher words, get to the point.
- Clear guidance on sourcing nonoriginal work. With so much content (words, data, images, graphics) on the Internet, it sometimes wasn't clear when authors needed to source content or why attribution/permission was important.
- More tips on proofing your own work and how to use spellcheck for more than just a spellchecker.
- An alphabetized list of examples of hyphenated and nonhyphenated words.
- Specific style changes including using % rather than the word *percent*, using b rather than bbl as the abbreviation for barrel, and using CO₂ rather than the subscripted 2 so the line spacing in html is consistent.
- A new format with Did You Know (???) and Advice/Reminders (!!!) in the margins. We also adopted a whole new look for the layout that includes wide margins for notes.

Upcoming training—EIA's comprehensive writing and editing curriculum

EIA plans to conduct a series of writing classes, in coordination with the release of the new edition of the *Writing Style Guide*. This curriculum will include classes of varying lengths (from 90 minutes to a full day) including the following topics:

- **Introduction to the new Writing Style Guide.** We will offer five sessions of a 90-minutes class, again open to anyone in the agency, management included. This class will cover what's new in the 2015 edition and include a summary of the common mistakes EIA writers are still making.
- **Policy-neutral writing.** Our agency doesn't take policy positions—we just report and write about the numbers and let others take positions and make policies, so we have to be very careful in our tone and vocabulary to appear neutral on sometimes controversial subjects.
- **Plain language writing.** President Obama signed the Plain Writing Act in 2010. It's a federal law that requires federal agencies to use plain writing and to train employees in plain writing. The law says federal agencies should write all publications, forms, and publicly distributed documents in a "clear, concise, well-organized" manner.
- **Editing and proofing your own work.** Even good writers make mistakes, which are sometimes difficult to spot if you are reading your own work.
- **Editing and proofing for managers.** This class will help managers do a better job editing, communicating their comments, and we hope in training employees to do a better editing work.
- **Hands-on and one-on-one writing training.** The scope of this training would be on an ad hoc, project- or author-specific basis.

Successes

- Our agency went from a culture of "Why do you need to review my writing?" to "Will you please review my writing?" Authors saw the value in being consistent and wanted to learn how to write right. Authors started seeing feedback from editors as a positive contribution rather than as a negative step (or worse, a roadblock) in their writing process.
- The Style Guide transitioned from being viewed by some employees as restrictive or optional to being demanded as a helpful and necessary tool for managers and writers. The Style Guide went from some people thinking it had too many rules to a place where they wanted to add rules. Many colleagues contacted me during the update to suggest (or plead) for the addition of certain material.
- Many authors now understand the difference between a rule and a style. Rules you must follow. Styles you must also follow, not because there is a right and wrong way to do things, but because the agency has decided on a style that it wants to use.
- The Style Guide is now the document of reference. Writers are happy that many of the possible issues and units and problems are clearly covered.
- Once they heard an update was underway, staff began asking for the updated version. They want to know if certain words or issues would be included. They see the 2015 edition as the new-and-improved official ruling on new styles. It's a popular document.
- Adherence to the Style Guide has been adopted by managers agency-wide as a formal element to include in the performance plans for their employees.

Continued challenges

- Not everyone gets/reads/understands/accepts the guidance in the Style Guide. Some authors are easier to train than others.

- New employees come into the organization all the time. We try to hand each one a Writing Style Guide, but it's mostly up to individual managers to reinforce the importance of following the rules and advice.
- There is some continued resistance to writing in plain language. Some authors insist that using plain language and defined terms is dumbing down their content or is not professional or technical enough to reflect our agency's expertise. It's a balancing act in this area.
- We did not use a Wiki for continual updates as I had reported we would do in my presentation to this group in 2010. I realized that constantly updating the online version would make the paper version not the document of record. I didn't want authors to be unsure about whether they were looking at the latest guidance. Constant changing the online version to include new examples and styles sounded like a good idea, but we didn't end up doing it.

Advice for other statistical agencies

- All writers need some kind of help, even if it's just a final edit to polish their work. They need to know agency policies and styles. Having a writing guide of some kind will help reduce time editing, will help content be more consistent.
- Everyone doesn't need a 125-page document. A two-page handout or a one-page tip sheet can be great. See EIA's Tip Sheet below. Start small if creating a comprehensive guide is too much work. Or, copy EIA's guide!
- Get the support of your senior management. You can't enforce rules in a vacuum.
- Communicate the writing information in creative ways:
 - Provide the document in both paper and online. The online version is easy for authors to search.
 - Write an occasional blurb on the employee intranet or in the employee newsletter about grammar or some specific agency writing style.
 - If appropriate, display the guidance in the hallways. EIA had several 5X8 foot hallway graphic displays of the Tip Sheet.
 - Print colorful versions of a one-page tip sheet (see attached) for authors to post on their bulletin boards.

Grammar rules

- * **compose** and **comprise**—the whole comprises the parts; the parts compose the whole. “Is comprised of” is incorrect
- * **more than**, not over or above
- * give it to **him and me**, not he and I—never give it to myself
- * an **em dash** (—) is the length of two hyphens. It is used to show a break in thought. Em dashes used in pairs are like parentheses
- * a person is a **who**, and a thing is a **that**
- * **i.e.** and **e.g.** must be followed by a comma. It’s better to spell out i.e. --> in other words and e.g. --> for example
- * **make bullets consistent**: start with verb, verb, verb or noun, noun, noun
- * “punctuation goes inside the **quotation marks**.”
- * use **less** for **mass** nouns (things you can’t count individually) and **fewer** for **count** nouns (things you can count)
- * use **hyphens with adjectives** and no hyphens with nouns; end use vs. end-use sector
- * use an **en dash** (–) to mean through or to; use the word *minus* in an arithmetic phrase
- * **which** or **that**: *which* has a comma before it; if you can use *that*, use *that*. These two words are not interchangeable; *which* is not a more formal word for *that*

Tips for writing

- * **copyedit your writing**—read it out loud. Use spell check. Read each word.
- * use **although**, not though or while
- * **compound words** formed with prefixes (pre, re, non, ex, anti, bi, co, mid, semi) normally are not hyphenated
- * **U.S. Energy Information Administration and EIA**; not U.S. EIA and not the EIA
- * avoid overuse of **due to**—try to use because of, as a result of, or following
- * be **policy neutral**
- * don’t begin a sentence with a **numeral** or a **year**
- * no **ampersands** in writing
- * additionally --> **also**, utilize --> **use**, in order to --> **to**, numerous --> **many**
- * spell out **acronyms** the first time used and in separate sections or chapters of a long document
- * don’t use **impact** or **incentivize** as a verb
- * use **since** with time and **because** when you want to show cause
- * **American** vs. **British** English: gray vs. grey, traveled vs. travelled, and forward vs. forwards
- * **title case** capitalization: Coal Price Data (for titles and first-level headers)
- * **sentence case**: Coal price data (for second-level headers, tables, and graph titles)

EIA style

- * **Lower 48 states**—capital L, it must include states
- * **5th**, not 5th. Ordinal numbers for position or rank. Don’t use for dates.
- * the word **data** is plural
- * use the **% sign** in all EIA writing
- * **punctuating bullets**: no ending punctuation (no commas or semicolons). Complete sentences can end with periods, but they don’t have to
- * use the **serial comma**—red, white, and blue
- * don’t capitalize **state, government, federal, nation**, and **congress** unless it’s a proper name
- * write **1990s**, not 1990’s
- * noun --> **United States**; adjective --> U.S.
- * use **b** rather than bbl for barrel
- * **website, homepage**, and **email**: one word, no hyphens, no spaces
- * don’t use **postal codes** except in addresses
- * **Washington, DC** not Washington, D.C.
- * don’t capitalize or underline for **emphasis**; use bold or italics
- * writing **time**: correct—3:00 p.m.; incorrect—3:00 pm, 3:00pm, 3:00PM, 3 pm
- * don’t hyperlink **click here** or **here**; link from the subject
- * writing **dates**: correct—January 2016; Jan 5; incorrect—Jan 2016; January, 2016; January ’16; January 5th, January of 2016; in the month of January

Updated: March 2015