

TRANSCRIPT

The Editing Podcast, Season 1, Episode 7 Style sheets for writing and editing

Denise Cowle: Hello and welcome to episode 7. This week we have a really great tool for you, especially if you're new to writing and self-publishing.

Louise Harnby: And we promise you, this is going to save you a major headache, whether you're working through the initial writing and later redrafting stages of your book, or you're running a business and producing lots of content for your customers or clients. So what's this tool? It's a style sheet – one you're going to create yourself. Honestly, you won't regret it. Building a style sheet is like holding hands ... but with yourself.

DC: That's an interesting concept! I have to say I've never actually thought of it like that! But I agree, a style sheet is such a useful tool. For those of you who are wondering what on earth we're talking about, a style sheet is a reference document you create to help you apply consistency to your writing.

Whether you're a publishing house, a business, a blogger or an indie author, you can benefit from creating your own style sheet.

A style sheet is tailored to your own preferences or the conventions of the sector you work in. You make a decision on the points that are open to variation or debate and record them so that, from then on, you treat them exactly the same way each time you use them.

LH: Exactly – it's so helpful! It can also help you keep track of what's going on in your novel – who's who, what's where, and when X, Y and Z happens. At the same time, you'll be able to record your preferences for the micro elements of your book ... things like spelling, punctuation, the rules about the way your fictional world works, and how you treat the various elements of the text. So here I'm talking about your paragraphs and headings, how you're going to

handle narrative viewpoint for different chapters, and how you'll render speech and thoughts.

Now, you might still be wondering if you really need a style sheet. So, Denise, tell us about this from a non-fiction and business point of view because that's your wheelhouse.

DC: Well, whether you like it or not, people will judge you by the quality of your written materials. Poor spelling, bad grammar and inconsistency can be a major irritant – just look at how often mistakes get shared on social media, for example.

This is a distraction for your readers, pulling them away from your message for a moment, and the last thing you want is for your potential customers or clients to be distracted. That moment can be enough for them to decide to look elsewhere – people have short attention spans!

Bear in mind that everything about how you present your business is part of your brand, including consistency in your copy. You can have a fabulous logo and professional images across all your materials and social platforms, but this will be undermined by inconsistencies in how you present written information. So why risk it? A style sheet is absolutely invaluable when you're producing written content for your business – everything from emails and blog posts to websites and brochures.

And there are specific advantages to using a style sheet if you're writing fiction, aren't there, Louise?

LH: Too right! So the same's going on with stories. Distracted readers who've been tripped up by inconsistencies are more likely to put their grumpy hats on when they're leaving reviews on Amazon. And just like you were saying, Denise, about branding, there's no point in creating a beautiful interior and a fabulous book cover if there are stylistic niggles.

The other thing I want to mention is that some writers like to have everything in one place – I do whether I'm writing or editing; but others prefer to have several documents, each of which records different types of decisions, and then toggle from one to another. And

that's fine. It's your choice – whatever helps you work most productively.

DC: So how does that work for you, then?

LH: One style sheet might include the main character names and features, and the organizational, family or time-frame groupings they belong to. Another could record key events in the timeline ... that's particularly useful if your novel covers multiple discrete time frames. Another might cover geography: so here I'm thinking about environments and buildings (especially important measurements like as distances, heights, number of storeys because if they're inconsistent it can make a real mess for a reader whose really got their eye on the ball). And you might have another for spelling and formatting preferences.

DC: Gosh, there's just so much to think about with fiction that I don't have to deal with in non-fiction, like world-building and timelines and family trees! So I'd imagine a style sheet must really come into its own if you're writing a series.

LH: So so useful for series. I cannot emphasise this enough actually. So, the thing is, not only will you have a reminder of the places, people and events in the previous books; you'll also be able to prevent accidental inconsistency or repetition. I've proofread series for both indie writers and mainstream publishers where the authors hadn't kept a written record of what had gone before, and different copyeditors had been used for each book.

DC: Really? So what happened?

LH: In one case, this led to a character's surname changing slightly (but noticeably) in Book 2. In another, the author had used the same surname for two separate key characters in different books in the series. And bearing in mind how much people like to binge read, it's important to get this stuff right.

DC: Oh my God, I can see how copyeditors and proofreaders can spot these problems when they occur within a single book, but if they weren't hired for the previous novels, they'll be ignorant of

inconsistency or repetition *across* the series. So your style sheet will enable them to flag up potential errors.

LH: Yep, so what I'm saying is, a style sheet won't just help the writer; it helps those who assist the writer, too. And the more *those* people know about what the writer wants, the better the service they can provide. And that keeps everyone happy!

DC: Right, let's get to the nitty-gritty. What's included in a style sheet? Well, you can pretty much include anything you want, but a solid, usable style sheet that'll really help you keep an eye on what's going on will include at least:

- spelling preferences
- punctuation style
- handling numbers, dates and times
- abbreviations
- capitalisation and hyphenation
- preferred words, and words to avoid.

LH: And for fiction, you'll want to consider all of that, plus:

- how you're going to handle point of view
- key geographical locations
- building names and layouts
- language choice
- tense choice
- timeline information
- treatment of dialogue and thoughts
- world-building rules
- character names, histories and traits

And I'll throw in a little example here. One thing I often notice in indie author fiction is that writers get fixated on particular names. So I just finished working with a lovely author who had five characters called either Robert, Rob or Bob in his book, and two Johns, and three Andrews. And the thing is, this happens in real life all the time but it can be confusing in a book, which harks back to your earlier point, Denise, about not dragging the reader away from where the focus

should be – on the text. So that’s where style sheets really come into their own in terms of helping writers keep track of who’s who.

DC: One thing we want you to bear in mind is that there isn’t always a right or wrong way to do something. Although there are hard and fast rules about some things, such as spelling, even then there can be variations, and at the end of the day it’s your book and your decision.

And while we editors can give you advice based on industry-recognized style manuals such as *The Chicago Manual of Style* or Oxford’s *New Hart’s Rules*, those resources are not the law – although they are excellent!

LH: That is such a good point – those style guides are reference points that help writers and editors bring clarity, consistency and readability to text; they’re usually based on preference and convention, *not* rules, despite that *New Hart’s Rules* is called *New Hart’s Rules!*

And if you’re not sure which particular element of style will suit your book best, talk to an editor.

- Developmental editors will be able to advise you on what works well in terms of big-picture decisions.
- Copyeditors and proofreaders will be able to guide you on the micro elements of style.

DC: Great advice. I think the thing to keep in mind is this: inconsistent styling will distract the reader and move them away from what they should be engaged with – your story.

And now it’s time for Editing Bites! So these are handy resources that we both love, and every week we’re going to offer you one each. What have you got for us this week, Louise?

LH: So my Editing Bite for this week is a free style-sheet template to help you get going. It’s in Word so you can add, or delete or tweak to your heart’s content. Think of it as ready-to-go downloadable handholding! And I want to give another shout-out for the *Chicago Manual of Style* – it’s one of my go-to resources for guidance on stylistic consistency.

DC: And mine is a free guide to creating your own style sheet, with suggestions and recommendations on the basics to include, to get you off to a flying start. And we've talked about *New Hart's Rules* before, but it's a great reference guide if you need a reminder on all things style-related.

That's all for this week. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe via your podcatcher.

DC: And don't forget to share, share, share! Tell your writer friends, your editor friends, your business friends ... basically anyone who writes!

LH: Yes, we'd love to hear from you – so, do you have any questions about style guides? Are you struggling to decide what to put in or leave out? Perhaps you work in an organisation that would benefit from a style guide, but you know you'll struggle to convince them of its value.

DC: You can get in touch with us via The Editing Podcast Facebook page. If you ask us, we will answer. That's a promise!

LH: And don't forget – all the links we've mentioned are in the show notes. Thanks for listening.