

**WELCOME TO:**

**HOW TO LEARN  
A STYLE GUIDE IN  
10 DAYS**





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# DAY 1: LEARN YOUR WAY AROUND

## What dictionary does your style guide use?

- Familiarize yourself with its:
  - Website, if it has one (allows for faster searching)
  - Pronunciation guide
  - Designations for words that are archaic, obsolete, vulgar, obscene, nonstandard, jargon, or dialect

## Read the style guide's table of contents and other front matter.

- Find your style guide's order of operations—which reference works you should consult in what order.

## Try to find a digitally searchable version.

**Did you know?** The *AP Stylebook* has a definite opinion on *ax*, which it spells without an *e*. It may also interest you to know that AP says *bra* is “acceptable in all references to brassiere.” (Thanks to Ashley Bischoff for suggesting this.)

# DAY 2: HOW DO YOU SPELL THAT?

## Four categories of words you should look up:

- Technology words, e.g., *internet*, *web*, *smartphone*, *byte* and *bit*, and *friend* and *like* as verbs
- Foreign words, e.g., *façade*, *mélange*, *résumé*, *schadenfreude*, *encyclopædia*, *achæology*, *blonde*, *brunette*, *Al-Qaeda*, and *Koran*
- Food words, e.g., *Boston cream pie*, *Bordeaux*, and *Arborio rice*, but *riesling*, *romaine lettuce*, and *serrano pepper* (per *AP Style*)
- English words from outside the U.S. You will have to know:
  - Does the word need to be defined?
  - Does the word have another meaning in U.S. English?
  - Is it offensive in the country that uses it?
  - When is it OK to change the spelling to match American usage?

**Also look for entries on prefixes, suffixes, and doubled letters.**

**Did you know?** Your style guide likely has an opinion on: *advisor/ adviser*; *drive-through/drive-thru*; *bus/buses* or *busses*; *doughnut/ donut*; *catalogue/catalog*; and *dialogue/dialog*.

# DAY 3: BASIC USAGE ISSUES

## Contractions

### Restrictive and nonrestrictive clauses

### Changing-usage questions:

- *Data* and *media*—can they be singular?
- *Contact* and *impact* as verbs
- *Whom*

### Rules we can't shake:

- *Hopefully*
- Split infinitives
- *Over* and *more than*
- *Because* and *since*
- *Last* vs. *past* (week, month, year, etc.)
- Starting sentences with conjunctions

## Maintaining small distinctions:

- *Like* and *such as*
- *Compose* and *comprise*
- *A while* and *awhile*
- *Compare* and *contrast*
- *Accused* and *alleged*
- *Wracked with pain* or *racked with pain*
- *Toward* and *towards*; ditto *forward*, *afterward*, *backward*, and so on
- *Farther* and *further*
- *That/which* and *who*
- *gantlet/gauntlet*
- *Suffer/sustain injuries or damages*
- *Of*—as in *all of* or *off of*
- *On*—as in *on Sunday* or *on May 1*

# DAY 3: BASIC USAGE ISSUES

## Inclusive language:

- Gendered language
- Gendered job descriptions
- Sexual orientation
- Religious descriptions
- Ethnicity and race
- Cross-dressing and transgendered people
- Illnesses
- Disability labels

**Did you know?** Most style guides have an entry on jargon, including when it's acceptable to use.

# DAY 4: PUNCTUATION

**Ellipsis**

**Em dash**

**En dash**

**Semicolon**

**Quotation marks**

**Parentheses and  
square brackets:**

- Their role in quotations
- Does other punctuation go inside or outside them?

**Comma**

**Colon:**

- Followed by a capital letter?
- When can it start a list?

**Hyphen:**

- Compound nouns and compound modifiers
- Prefixes that take a hyphen

**Apostrophes:**

- Joint possessives
- Set expressions
- Single letters and initialisms
- *Do's and don'ts*

**Slashes**

**Ampersand**

**Did you know?** The *AP Stylebook* lists its rules for all creative works under “Composition Titles.”

# DAY 5: PROPER NOUNS

## Plurals of proper nouns

### Locations:

- Directions and regions
- Street names
- Countries

### Titles of creative works

### People's names:

- Stage and pen names
- Names of sources and authors

### Abbreviations:

- When do acronyms lose their caps?
- Abbreviations for months, days of the week, and state names

## Company names

### Brand names:

- Generic terms for brand items
- Can they be verbed?

### Trademarks

### Seasons

### Weather

### Government institutions

### Military branches and titles

### Academic degrees

### Names of boats

**Did you know?** There are multiple rules for referring to god, heaven, hell, the bible, and gospel.



# DAY 6: FORMATTING & GRAPHICS

**Headlines, subheads, and section heads**

**Indentation**

**Margins**

**Bold, italics, and underline**

**Punctuation marks adjacent to formatted text**

**Curly/smart quotes**

**Block and run-in quotations**

**URLs and hyperlinks**

**Figures and tables:**

- Numbers and titles
- Credits and disclaimers

**Keys:**

- When does a map or graph require a key?
- How should that be formatted and where should it appear?

**How big can figures, tables, and images be relative to text?**

**Did you know?** The *Chicago Manual of Style* has an entry on when it's OK to deviate from the original quotation.

# DAY 7: NUMBERS

## **Numerals vs. writing out:**

- Very big and very small numbers

## **Roman numerals**

## **Dates and times:**

- *BC* and *AD*, *a.m.* and *p.m.*

## **Percents:**

- Reminder: A percent is a fraction of something, and percentage points are what you get when you subtract one percentage from another.

## **Dimensions**

## **Fractions**

## **Units of measurement**

**Did you know?** The *Chicago Manual of Style* provides a chart on dealing with potentially ambiguous mathematical symbols.

# DAY 8: READ & UNDERLINE

**Find some text that is already in the style guide you're learning, preferably the actual publication you hope to work for.**

- Find text that covers a variety of topics or the niche you hope to be working in, depending on the job you'll be doing.

**Read 25 pages and highlight anything that you don't completely understand the logic behind.**

**Pay special attention to formatting and the types of terms you might have to look up in the dictionary, as discussed in Day 2.**

**Make note of any publication-specific trends you notice: a lot of hyphens, frequent section breaks, em dashes instead of semicolons, etc.**

**Create a list of everything you've highlighted and triage it:**

- Category 1: Anything you haven't looked up before at all or have barely glanced over.
- Category 2: Entries you've looked at before but are still having trouble with.
- Category 3: Anything you feel you have a good grasp on but need to work on remembering a few of the finer points. Spend very little time on these.

# DAY 8: READ & UNDERLINE

**Start marking the entries you use most often:**

- Sticky flags on pages
- Useful sections highlighted

**Handwrite a list of the titles and page numbers of entries you use most often.**

- This is a memory aid, and when you're done you'll have a personalized cheat sheet.

**Pick five entries you just cannot seem to make stick in your brain and handwrite a condensed version of their advice.**

**Did you know?** Formatting has its own special set of proofreading marks, which are listed in the *Chicago Manual of Style* and available from other sources online.

# DAY 9: PRACTICE

**Find any text that's not in the style you're trying to learn.**

- Blog posts work for almost anything, since they rarely follow any style, but if you're learning *Chicago* you could use the newspaper, if you're learning the American Medical Association guide you can use an academic paper, etc.

**Edit about 10 pages to conform to the style you're learning.**

- Ignore other copy editing issues, such as awkward phrasing or informal language.

**Get creative to give your brain a workout:**

- Treat a link as a citation of another work.
- Format block quotes as they would appear in print.
- Turn a “read more” link into a section header.
- Turn a lengthy aside into a footnote.

**Take special note of anything you're trying to look up but not finding clear answers for.**

- If there's a pattern in these questions, you could be missing something.

# DAY 9: PRACTICE

If you're working in *Chicago* or other book styles, don't forget to create a style sheet for the text.

What did you look up most often?

- Is it already on your handwritten list?

**Did you know?** If you're wondering how to cite blog posts or quote authors who write under internet usernames, you're more likely to find answers in a frequently updated online Ask the Editor feature for the style guide than in the print version.

# DAY 10: HAVE A DRINK

learn all the things?



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# DAY 10: HAVE A DRINK

**Pour yourself a cup of tea or a cold beer, turn on the TV, and flip through the style guide during commercials.**

**Read entries that catch your eye:**

- You may find something vital in a strange place, or you may find something funny.
- You should feel confident that you now know a lot about the most important entries, and notice that the unfamiliar ones are mostly for rare circumstances.

**Did you know?** Most style guides discuss legal issues related to their type of publication. The *AP Stylebook* has a section called “Briefing on Media Law,” and *Chicago* has an entry called “Rights and Permissions,” to name two. These most likely won’t be on any editing test but will take you less than an hour to read and could save your company a costly lawsuit.



# RESOURCES

*12 Common Mistakes of AP Style*: Blog post at [www.inkhouse.net](http://www.inkhouse.net)

*AP doesn't impose style; house style reflects readers*:

Blog post at <http://markallenediting.com>

AP vs. Chicago: [www.apvschicago.com](http://www.apvschicago.com)

Chicago-Style Citation Quick Guide: [www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools\\_citationguide.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html)

Subversive Copy Editor: [www.subversivecopyeditor.com](http://www.subversivecopyeditor.com)

Online Style Books: [www.onlinestylebooks.com](http://www.onlinestylebooks.com)

*\*AMA Manual of Style* website: [www.amamanualofstyle.com](http://www.amamanualofstyle.com)

*\*A Primer on Medical Editing*: [www.reportingonhealth.org](http://www.reportingonhealth.org)

*\*How to Find Medical Editing Freelance Work*: <http://editor-mom.blogspot.com>

*\*Suggested by medical editor Katharine O'Moore-Klopf, ELS, creator and curator of the Copyeditors' Knowledge Base, at [www.kokedit.com/ckb.php](http://www.kokedit.com/ckb.php)*

Learning a New Style: [www.copyediting.com](http://www.copyediting.com)

Copyediting.com's Ask An Editor series: [www.copyediting.com/category/free-tag-topics/interview](http://www.copyediting.com/category/free-tag-topics/interview)

# SPECIAL THANKS

I polled editors I know on Twitter and elsewhere to find out what strange things they know about their style guides or what they wish someone had told them when they first started learning. I got some excellent responses that enriched this presentation, so I want to specially thank:

- Brittany Buczynski, Assistant Editor, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
- Judy Weightman, freelance editor and writer
- Karen Yin, who runs [AP vs. Chicago](#)
- Author M.L. Hart
- Dana Laverty, writer and editor
- Kyle Brown, associate editor at GIE Media, Inc.
- Ashley Bischoff, who has noted some of AP's more amusing entries
- Copy editor Jaclyn Liechti

# GET IN TOUCH

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