

# The style guide imperative for branding

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**Date :** July 2, 2016



## How and Why We Built a Company Style Guide

Inconsistency stinks.

With writing, it's the one thing that's not debatable. Especially when you're writing on behalf of an organization.

Because here's the secret: companies can't write (can't read, vote, or fall in love either). People write. When you get an email from Apple telling you about the new iPhones, a person wrote it. Billboards, Twitter ads, cease and desist notices. All people writers.

But, being people, we're a pretty difficult and stubborn animal. We're individuals. We like doing things our own way. It's what makes us frustrating, but also pretty great.

[Bonus: See our "words to avoid" list from our style guide here.](#)

So, if a bunch of us are all writing for the same company, what happens? We all write different ways. Individuality thrives, consistency suffers.

It makes a company look scattered, flighty, and unprofessional. That's why we decided it was time to build a company style guide.

## What is a style guide anyway

A style guide is a set of guidelines and instructions for writing for a certain organization or purpose. They typically cover nitty-gritty grammar and punctuations questions as well as big picture issues like voice and tone.

There are some great general purpose style guides, like "The Elements of Style," that cover writing for a variety of purposes.

Then there are industry-specific style guides. These outline writing for a particular industry, but are often adopted for uses outside that industry. "The Associated Press Stylebook," for

example, is the standard style guide used by most American journalists.

Then there are institutional-specific guidebooks. The New York Times has their own style guide that deviates in many ways from the “AP” stylebook. Ever wonder why New York Times’ stories use Ms. and Mr. instead of just the subject’s last name? It’s part of their style guide.

## Why we wanted our own style guide

It’s become pretty obvious that we need our own set of rules and principles for writing. We’ve grown to more than a dozen people. At any point any one of us could be writing a blog post, an email to a customer, or a newsletter announcing a new features.

We needed consistency. We all brought our own backgrounds and personalities to writing for the company. This was fine. For a while.

But eventually what it means is you have some people using serial commas and some not. You have people writing “6 a.m.,” “6 am,” “6 AM,” “6 in the morning” or “6 A.M.”

There’s no reason to write the time five different ways.

## A friendly little chimpanzee helps us out

Some tech companies have made their own style guides and put them online. One that we’ve always loved is **MailChimp’s**.

We’re **MailChimp** customers. We’ve used and loved their products for a long time. And we’ve always been impressed by the style and consistency of their writing — whether it’s in-app copy or **marketing** newsletters. **MailChimp** just seemed to have the right stuff.

So it’s no surprise that they have a style guide. A pretty excellent one, in fact. It’s available online, [here](#).

It’s great to see that **MailChimp** made their style guide completely public and available under a **Creative Commons** license. Which means other entities can use and adapt the guide, as long as we credit **MailChimp**. Which we we’re happy to do.

Using the **MailChimp** guide as a jumping-off point, we we’re able to source some great ideas, structure, and boilerplate language for much of our guide.

Using their guide as a template, we outlined eight sections that seemed appropriate for the first version of our guide. They were:

1. INTRO: Welcome To The StatusPage Style Guide
2. Voice, Tone, And How We Talk About Our Company
3. Writing About People

4. Grammar and Mechanics
5. Writing Email Newsletters
6. Writing for Social Media
7. Word List
8. Resources

It's worth noting that we definitely took the minimum viable product approach with this guide. It's far from any sort of final or perfect version. The best thing is doing right now, though, is giving us a place to get some of this institutional knowledge written down.

To address that, we included this language in the guide's intro:

This guide is meant to be a living document that will change and improve over time. Debates, challenges, and questions around any point in the guide are welcome and encouraged.

## Tooling

We use Quip for the bulk of our internal documentation. From support FAQs to technical documentation to offsite planning, Quip has been a great tool for us to share and collaborate internally.

So it made sense to put our style guide in there, too. Someday it could be interesting to put it on our website and make it public. And we'd love to carry on the open source spirit of **MailChimp's** guide. But for version 1.0, Quip is the easiest and most obvious. Quip also makes comments around the guide really easy.

## Closing thoughts

A style guide can be an intimidating project. It's tempting to feel like you need to create this huge, perfectly comprehensive guide on your first crack. This doesn't help when you start noticing all the huge, perfectly comprehensive guides that other companies have.

But try treating it like building a product — the first version will be simple, but get the job done. Then you have something to build off.

In the long run, you'll have better consistency around your company communication. And you'll have a great resource for the people on your team.

Because people are the ones who do the writing.

At least for now.

*This article first appeared in [blog.statuspage.io](http://blog.statuspage.io)*