



## Style Guides for Medical Writers

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Why bother using style guides? If you have ever been unsure of the correct way to cite reference material from books, electronic sources or government reports, or whether to use periods in abbreviations, or when to use a generic drug name instead of a proprietary name, a style guide can provide the answer. Do you really know what an acronym is? See what leading style guides say in the following sections.

Writers and editors use style guides to help achieve consistency and clarity in written documents. Many large organizations have created their own style guides, which may be intended for strictly internal use or may be published for general use. Most of us do not have internal workplace style guides, and rely instead on publicly available sources. Information about the key style guides available in North America is provided in this article.

### ***The Chicago Manual of Style***

*The essential guide for writers, editors, and publishers*

This venerable style guide was first published in 1906. It grew from an earlier list of typographic fundamentals that was prepared by a University of Chicago Press proofreader. This guide is intended primarily for writers and editors of scholarly books and journals, and defines the University of Chicago Press house style. Not specifically geared for medical or scientific writing, it does not address many specialized areas of interest to the medical writer, but as a result can and does devote more space to detailed style issues. It includes information on manuscript preparation & editing, the publication process, grammar & usage, punctuation, terminology, compound words and hyphenation, expression of numbers (e.g., physical quantities, percentages, dates) typography for mathematical expressions, documentation of sources, and many other topics. What does Chicago say about acronyms? "...the word acronym refers only to terms based on the initial letters of their various elements and read as single words (NATO, AIDS). Initialism refers to terms read as a series of letters (BBC, ATM)".<sup>1</sup>

The current (15<sup>th</sup>) edition, which exceeds 900 pages, was published in 2003 and thus will not need to be replaced anytime soon. As a bonus, frequently asked

questions may be searched by topic on the Chicago Manual of Style Web site: [www.chicagomanualofstyle.org](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org).

### **AMA Manual of Style**

*A guide for authors and editors*

In the 1960s the manual was established to set out written rules covering the AMA's preferred style for manuscripts published in *JAMA* and the *AMA Archives* journals. Other journals also may stipulate the use of AMA style for manuscripts. The 9<sup>th</sup> edition, published in 1998, contains over >600 pages. It includes instructions for preparation of articles for publication including ethical and legal considerations. Its section on Style includes the headings Grammar, Punctuation, Plurals, Capitalization, Correct and Preferred Usage, Non-English Words and Phrases, and Accent Marks. The manual also covers the structure of tables and figures, the main types of literature citations, the use of abbreviations, lists of abbreviations for units of measure, journal titles, academic degrees, technical terms, nomenclature used in medical specialties and for drugs, isotopes, microorganisms, etc., conventional to SI conversions, statistical symbols, abbreviations, and terminology.

The AMA guide quotes the Random House dictionary's definition of acronym: "a word formed from the initial letters or groups of letters of words in a set phrase or series of words (eg. ELISA for enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay). Acronyms are pronounced as words." It further explains that an initialism is formed from the initial letters of a group of words and pronounced as a separate word (eg NATO for North Atlantic Treaty Organization) or a set of initials representing a name, organization, or the like, with each letter pronounced separately (eg, DHHS for Department of Health and Human Services).<sup>2</sup>

Publication of the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the AMA Manual of Style is planned for early 2007. It contains expanded sections on ethics, authorship and conflict of interest. Among other changes will be a requirement for lowercase letters rather than numbers in table footnotes.

### **Scientific Style and Format**

*The CBE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*

The Council of Biology Editors was formed in 1957 in the US by the National Science Foundation and the American Institute of Biological Sciences. The first manual, published in 1960, covered only the life sciences. The 6<sup>th</sup> edition (1994) was expanded to include other scientific disciplines, and in 2000 the name Council of Science Editors was adopted. The Council's mission is to promote excellence in the communication of scientific information. The 7<sup>th</sup> edition of

Scientific Style and Format is in press and is expected to be available in late spring 2006.

The 6<sup>th</sup> edition, at over 800 pages, covers general style conventions and special scientific style conventions, publication-related issues such as journal style and format, citations and references, and the publication process. There are chapters covering terminology and notation in, among others, astronomy, analytical methods, chemical kinetics, drugs and pharmacokinetics, and micro-organisms. There also is extensive information on manuscript preparation and publication. The new edition will include new and revised material on ethics in scientific communication.

About acronyms, the current CBE edition (6<sup>th</sup>) says this: “Abbreviations consisting of the initial letters of 2 or more words, occasionally with 1 or more internal letters, can be called acronyms if they serve as pronounceable words.”<sup>3</sup>

## Summary

Was anyone surprised by the way all 3 style manuals defined acronyms? Many people confuse acronyms and initialisms. Along with many other things this may have become an “LC” (lost cause, a term favoured by Edie Schwager, the author of *Medical English Usage and Abusage* below). Nevertheless, until authoritative style guides change rules, we encourage sticking to correct usage.

Many resources are available to help writers avoid errors in their written communications. Whether preparing a manuscript for publication or writing any of the formal documents associated with clinical research, efforts to achieve clarity and consistency always are worthwhile.

### Other worthwhile resources:

Schwager, Edith. *Medical English Usage and Abusage*, Phoenix, AZ: The Oryx Press; 1991. (Paperback, 216 pages, ISBN 0-89774-590-6)

Strunk W and White EB. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. Longman; 1999. (Paperback, ISBN 0-205-30902-X)

other Strunk & White titles found on Amazon.com: *The Elements of Style Illustrated* (2005) and *The Elements of Style: A Style Guide for Writers* (2005)

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<sup>1</sup> University of Chicago Press. *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 15<sup>th</sup> ed., Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> American Medical Association. *American Medical Association Manual of Style*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed., Chicago, IL: Williams & Wilkins; 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Council of Biology Editors *Scientific Style and Format*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., Cambridge, UK: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge; 1994.