SAMPLE PERSONAL STYLE SHEET FOR WRITERS

Use this style sheet as a baseline to build your own style sheet to your personal writing, formatting, and grammar styles. Your style sheet should contain word usage and punctuation rules that you may forget or apply inconsistently, as well as unique terms and custom usage of words and styles that you use within your fiction.

General Tips

1. Main reference materials: *The Chicago Manual of Style*, Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* (unabridged-Web).
2. Run spell and grammar checks in Microsoft Word.
3. Run third-party grammar program (e.g., ProWritingAid).

Formatting

1. Chapter headings should be *Heading 1* style.
2. Body text should be *Normal* style.
3. Section breaks are three asterisks *** with one line before and after.

Word Usage Rules and Tips

1. Use dialogue tags to show who's speaking and changes in emotion. When in doubt, *said* is the best tag. Avoid impossible tags. E.g., *"Never," he hissed*.
2. Make sure antecedents are clear (e.g., *he, she, it*). Avoid using the word *it* when possible.
3. Use the correct word. E.g., *okay, not OK; its vs. it's, lay vs. lie*.
4. Use *who* for humans and named animals, such as pets. Use *that* for inanimate objects and unnamed animals.
5. Do not put direct thoughts in italics. E.g., *Jasmine will get her comeuppance, he thought.*
6. Use the possessive *s* in all names except names ending in a "z" or "z" sound. E.g., *Marcus's dog, Topaz' cat.*
7. Replace clichés in narrative with fresh descriptors.
8. Avoid roaming body parts. E.g., *Her eyes flew to the man as he entered the room.*
9. Avoid purple prose. Cut flowery language, overdrawn descriptions, and overly dramatic dialogue.
10. Resist the Urge to Explain (RUE). Trust the reader's intelligence.
11. Replace or cut garbage words. E.g., *really, very, so, that, just, good, well, quite*.
12. Replace filter words (i.e., telling words) with better descriptors. E.g., *looked, heard, felt, thought, noticed, watched, knew*.
13. Replace adverbs (think *-ly*) with stronger verbs when possible. E.g., *loudly, nearly, there, near, once, soon.* Tip: Adverbs are descriptors that tell how, how often, when, and where.
14. Replace adjectives with stronger nouns.
15. Cut overused words. E.g., *that, s/he, just, like, and, but, as, then.*
16. Avoid generic descriptions. E.g., *the man.*
17. Choose interesting linking verbs when possible to replace *is, was, were, of the, to be.*
18. Minimize similes.
19. Avoid obscure words that require readers to leave the story and consult a dictionary.
20. Keep a list of unique terms (or unique usage of words) used. E.g., *planetside, dromadier, Playa, Playans.*

The Tidy Guide to Self-Editing Your Novel by Rachel Aukes

Punctuation

Periods

1. Use only single spaces after periods. *Tip: Search and replace all double spaces in manuscript with single spaces.*

Quotations

1. Avoid using single quotes (' ') outside quotation marks. In North America, they should never be outside quotations (" ").
2. Minimize the use of quotation marks or italics for emphasis or to show sarcasm.

Ellipses

1. Use a space before and after three points (…), E.g., *She didn't seem so bad … for a citizen.*
2. Search and replace three periods with the ellipsis symbol.
3. Note: If not using Word's ellipsis symbol, put a space between each dot.

Comma

1. Use the serial comma (aka Oxford or Harvard comma), i.e., put commas between the last two items in a list. E.g., *He bought milk, eggs, and bread.*
2. No comma is needed to separate short independent clauses. E.g., *She had him cornered and he knew it.*
3. No comma is needed after a conjunction when it begins a sentence. E.g., *And she ran.*
4. Use a comma before a proper name, nickname, or title in dialogue. E.g., *"I don't care, pal."*

Hyphens

1. In general, don't hyphenate compound nouns. E.g., *She leaned against the armrest.*
2. In general, hyphenate compound adjectives. E.g., *Critch swallowed the up-front costs.*
3. When in doubt, refer to a dictionary.

Em Dash and En Dash

1. An em dash is an interruption in a sentence. Don't use a space before or after. E.g., *"What brings you here—wait, let me guess—the cash."*
2. If an em dash interrupts a statement, exclude the punctuation mark. *E.g., What the—*
3. Use an en dash in place of *to* between two open compounds. E.g., *1931–1935, pages 1–5.*

Capitalization

1. Capitalize family terms only when used as a name. E.g., *Mom refused to listen. My mom hugged me.*
2. Capitalize formal titles. E.g., *President Jones remained at the White House. The Queen of England smiled. Yes, Captain.* Don't capitalize general titles. E.g., *The president and the queen laughed. The captain took control.*
3. Capitalize the first letter after a colon only if the clause is a full sentence. E.g., *I told you before: You must do exactly as I say. This is what I want: a monkey in a barrel.*
4. Capitalize nicknames when they take the place of names. E.g., *Jan and Spike headed out.*
5. Don't capitalize terms of endearment or respect. E.g., *honey, babe, sir, ma'am.*
6. Use all CAPS only when shouting or showing a sign written in that style. E.g., *He read the sign. GO AWAY.*

Numbers

1. Spell out numbers one through ninety-nine. Hyphenate mixed numbers. E.g*., ten, thirty-four.*
2. Spell out whole numbers over one hundred. E.g., *He fired a thousand rounds and still faced overwhelming odds.*
3. Use numerals for mixed numbers over one hundred. E.g., *She could count 356 reasons why she should turn around and leave.*
4. Spell out numbers that begin a sentence. E.g., *Two hundred and two days later, she returned home.*
5. Percentages (%) are spelled out. E.g., *Sam was ninety-nine percent sure Dave cheated him.*
6. Use numerals for years. E.g., *1921.*
7. Use Roman numerals for wars, monarchs, and popes. *E.g., World War III, King William II.*

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