

## If time is money, where does that leave style?

*AGPS Style Manual editor Lindsay Mackerras raised many questions affecting style and usage at our October meeting, including the collision of traditional style with the one that's evolving for use on the Net.*

It's good to be here at last, and I'd particularly like to thank Peter Frankis for stepping in for me at such extremely short notice at your July meeting. The information which resulted from that meeting is going to be extremely useful when we start putting together the sixth edition of the *Style Manual*.

Now for tonight's topic, 'Thoughts on the role and meaning of style'. I've always liked what Eric Partridge has to say about style in his book *Usage and Abusage*: 'In writing, hence in style, the primary consideration is comprehensibility, therefore clarity. One's first duty is to make oneself understood.' For me, style is synonymous with consistency. Style is the cumulative effect of choices about words, their forms, and their arrangement in sentences.

We as editors work with style at the word and sentence level to increase the effectiveness of the document as a whole. By an effective document, I mean one that can be understood. Readers are distracted from meaning by an inconsistent style, which is why every good editor will aim for reader comprehension above all else, even if it means bending the odd grammatical rule occasionally. By correcting spelling and grammatical errors, checking facts, clarifying ambiguity and introducing a consistent style, the editor clears away all distraction and

enables the reader to concentrate on what the author is trying to say.

The second edition of the *Macquarie Dictionary* gives 22 definitions for the word *style*, the first of which is 'a particular kind, thought, or type, as with reference to form, appearance or char-

acter'. I think it's interesting to reflect that if we take on-line communication as being the particular kind, sort or type, then surely it is the very lack of consistency in form, appearance and character that distinguishes this medium. As David

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Next meeting: Tuesday 4 November 1997

### ***Forensic linguistics***

**Dr John Gibbons**

**Senior Lecturer in Linguistics at the University of Sydney**

John Gibbons studies, teaches and researches applied linguistics. His research interests are related to language and the law and to bilingualism in its many forms. These interests include the complications caused by mis-communication in the process of police interrogation of suspects with limited knowledge of English. He will be speaking to us about 'Complexity in police language: sources, problems, solutions'.

6.30 pm for 7 pm in the Rooftop Function Centre, 4th floor, Australian Museum (enter from William Street). Drinks and light refreshments provided. Please **RSVP by Friday 31 October** to (02) 9552 0039 (voicemail). Members \$10; non-members and those who don't RSVP, \$12.

**Coming meetings:**

2 December: A Spanish Fiesta at Casa Asturiana (see enclosed flyer)

3 February: Annual General Meeting

## Style

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Crystal writes in the *Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*:

The electronic age has changed our lives as communicating human beings. New methods of sending and receiving information enable us to communicate with a bank or supermarket, interrogate a library catalogue or our encyclopedia database, or select from a series of menus, as in television data displays, or teletext. In each case we have to learn new conventions of communication, new techniques of accessing or asking, new techniques of reading and assimilating. Interacting with a computer is, at present, not the same as interacting with a human being.

A little further on he writes:

Because time is of the essence, errors in typing may not be corrected. The sender usually ignores letter case, putting everything into either upper or lower case. Depending on the system used, the computer may print out everything in upper case anyway. When mixed case programs are available, they are often used inconsistently, because of the extra effort involved. Participants also tend not to use time-wasting formulae such as greetings and farewells, and messages are characterised by space-saving conventions such as ellipses and abbreviation.

Styles are emerging for the electronic medium, but it seems to me that it is an editorial style which increasingly will be dictated by technological and design considerations, and of course by time itself. Take for example the so-called rules that are cropping up for the Internet. Netiquette for e-mail messages

advocates short paragraphs, short sentences, lines under 75 characters, and e-mails under 25 lines. Smilies, asterisks, typed-out vocalisations, and lots of white space are recommended.

When writing for the Internet, we're told that the best practice is minimal use of text and punctuation, balanced with graphics and spaces to enable ease of reading. We're told, too, that documents to be read on-line must be concise, and structured for fast scanning. On-line writing is characterised by minimal punctuation, reduction of the use of prepositions and conjunctions, use of dot points, use of design elements.

The goal in writing for the Web is to provide the user with the information in the shortest possible time. Text must be kept simple and concise. Short and single-idea sentences are preferred and qualifiers should be avoided. Of course, on-line style is still in its infancy, and will evolve further as generations with no memory of life before the electronic publishing age come to maturity.

Meanwhile, those of us who have the misfortune to be born in a more leisurely age learn to straddle two such apparently opposing styles, one for electronic publishing and another for the traditional paper publications. I can't believe that such situations could work, or endure. As never before, speed governs everything we do today and, if for no other reason, there will not be time to contemplate and practise the vagaries of one style over another.

The Commonwealth Government is concerned at the lack of consistent style

and standards in Commonwealth electronically published documents. The first edition of the *Style Manual* was a direct result of a 1964 report by the Joint Select Committee on Parliamentary and Government Publications, which found widely different standards in the quality of government publications.

In August the report, *Management of Government Information as a National Strategic Resource*, produced by the Office of Government Information and Technology (OGIT) was released, and it recommended that a whole-of-government approach to managing information should be initiated to ensure a high degree of common look and feel for Commonwealth electronic publishing.

## An electronic style manual

The Australian Government Publishing Service, despite the recent ministerial reshuffle is, as far as I know, still responsible for the on-going development and maintenance of standards and guidelines for government information. And because these specifically relate to editorial style, production, distribution, pricing, and access to parliamentary and government information, they have been extended to include the production of a companion document to the *Style Manual* covering standards for electronic publishing.

An editorial committee has been formed and we hope to have an initial draft of the document available on the Internet for public comment by the end of this month. At this stage we see the document as being divided into eight parts:

- Introduction
- Commonwealth Government Information Management
- The Electronic Publishing Process
- Electronic Publishing via Physical Digital Media
- Electronic Publishing via the Internet
- Style and Standards
- Writing and Editing for the Electronic Medium
- Appendices.

Because it's unlikely that all the proposed sections will be completed at the end of October, we plan to place each section on the Net as it is finalised, so it will be a growing, living document for people to comment on.

### Society of Editors (NSW) Inc.

#### Membership

Membership of the Society of Editors (NSW) Inc. is open to anyone working as an editor in the print media, and anyone who supports the society's aims.

Membership runs for a calendar year. 1997 fees are \$45 for new members (\$25 if joining after 30 June) and \$40 for renewals.

For a membership application form, phone (02) 9552 0039, or write to PO Box 254, Broadway NSW 2007.

#### Blue Pencil

The society's newsletter, *Blue Pencil*, is mailed to members monthly, except for January. We welcome your comments and contributions. Please mail them to Merry Pearson at 55 Collins St., North Narrabeen, NSW 2101, or fax or e-mail them to her as per the committee list on the back page.

Deadline for the December issue is Monday 10 November.

I've had something to do with preparing the section on writing and editing, and in the light of what I've said earlier I don't think you'll be surprised to learn that it is by far the shortest of all the sections. After all, there's not a lot you can say about on-line editing when it's a case of minimal punctuation; semicolons are a no-no, so there's no point in discussing their use (but can someone tell me why I can't use a semicolon?) Similarly, we avoid prepositions and conjunctions, but use lots of dot points, and make use of design elements. So that just about says it all! I'd always understood that punctuation was used for clarification and to make the author's meaning as clear as possible, but I now have a strong impression that it might actually impede readability. This doesn't auger well for editors who spend quite a lot of their time agonising over punctuation. After all, if there's so little call for editorial style as we know it, is there going to be much call for editors at all in the future?

## DTP a harbinger of doom

I think, though, that desktop publishing was the harbinger of doom for the editorial profession. Certainly editors have always been undervalued and among the first to be declared surplus in any inter-departmental or commercial restructure. Surely everyone wants their communiqué to be understood. None of you needs to be told that the role of the editor has changed dramatically over the past few years, and that it will continue to change with further developments in electronic publishing technology.

It's already fairly unusual for an author to supply material in hard copy format, and even more unusual for a publisher to accept it. Advances in technology present ever-increasing opportunities for authors to produce their text electronically, and the role of keying in the text is being increasingly assumed by the author. In other words, book production is edging closer and closer to book writing, so authors have the means of being their own copy editors, and thus the guardians of style, to an extent that has never before been possible. Copy editing is now very often a freelance activity, and editors no longer necessarily follow a particular style or convention.

Of course, this presents its problems. At present, there is no national accreditation scheme in Australia for editors,

and so there's really nothing to prevent people with the ability to read and write from calling themselves editors. This is a worry to the Canberra Society of Editors, as I'm sure it is to you all. Our president, Peter Judge, had brief discussions earlier this year with the executive officer of the Culture Research Education Training Enterprise Australia, otherwise known as CREATE. CREATE has not been concerned with competencies in the field of editing and publishing so far, but does intend to become so. In fact, it's likely that CREATE will be setting work performance standards for editors sometime next year.

The Canberra Society believes that as long as there is no national voice for editors there is no real professional platform for Australian editors, and that the seven separate state societies should be thinking of a structure that will enable federal consultation, preferably in time for delegated representatives to speak to bodies like CREATE in an organised way. The issue of competencies is bound up with criteria for professional membership of our societies, and with issues of training, professional qualifications and eventual registration schemes, all of which require discussion at national level if they're to gain real acceptance and significance.

At our AGM almost a fortnight ago, the Canberra Society floated the idea of hosting a Web site, available for national use, on which all the Australian editors' societies could put their newsletters, discussion groups, freelance registers and so on. The site might offer a chance to achieve genuine discussion on national issues and might be a small start on developing a national position, on the issues which affect the editing profession and which demand a single voice.

## So who needs an editor?

But I've digressed. Reflecting on matters of style has inevitably led me to a discussion of editing. And I think it would be fair to say that the major impact of desktop publishing has been to liberate the author from the editor. Good editing, being invisible, has always been hard to justify. I recall an article by well-known author Marion Hallagan in the *Canberra Times* a year or so ago, entitled 'The Role and Art of Reviewing under the Author's Microscope'. While her article was obviously concerned with

book reviews, I felt it also began to explain the instinctive resistance to editorial input that is experienced by most writers, along with their conviction that editing is the part of the publishing process most easily dispensed with. Marion's article began:

I wonder just what proportion of the population intends to write a book one day. People I meet at parties, in shops, on aeroplanes, the cleaning woman—she's made a start—are all going to write a book on that magical 'one day'. And yet they don't consider composing an opera, or a rock song, or painting a picture except perhaps in the context of 'my two year old could do a better job than that'. Once, this assumption that all you needed to write a book was time used to irritate me. Then I realised it was because people feel that language belongs to them, in a way that painting, or music doesn't. There you need special skills and training, whereas language is ours by birthright. But of course we have developed tremendous skills, and by rigorous training on the part of dedicated teachers, usually parents, over a period of years starting at birth. And when you think of it, even the most inarticulate of us has done a marvellous language learning job. So since we're all experts, we all believe we have a special relationship with the word.

Now Marion makes an interesting point in those opening paragraphs, that is, that we all consider language is ours by birthright. And there is an assumption that because we can communicate through speech, we can communicate through the written word automatically and equally as well. Okay, so we can all write. So who needs an editor?

In her book *Copy Prep*, author Jilly Baker begins the chapter on copy editing with an account of a dinner party at which she was attacked by a dogmatic scientist—fortunately not literally. When the scientist discovered she was an editor, apparently he spent most of the evening arguing that she, and her job, was superfluous, and that copy editing was a waste of time and an insult to authors. See what I mean? I wonder where that leaves the *Style Manual*? Not necessarily the AGPS *Style Manual*, but any style manual? I'd like to think that they'll always be needed. Particularly if there are going to be so few editors around in the future.

I don't know exactly how many copies of the AGPS *Style Manual* have been sold over the years, but I do know that over 45,000 copies were sold of the

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## Style

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fourth edition, which was published in 1988. Initially 15,000 paperback copies and 1500 hard cover copies of the fifth edition were printed in 1994, and a further 10,000 paperback copies were reprinted in March 1995. The paperback edition retails at \$24.95 and the case-bound edition at \$39.95. We hope to see the sixth edition early in 1999, in time for the Sydney Olympics.

Although the AGPS *Style Manual* is the house style guide for the Commonwealth Government, a look at the publications produced by the government show great diversification of style. Getting government departments to buy the *Style Manual* is one thing, but getting Commonwealth employees to use it is quite another.

I'm inclined to think that on the whole most people find the information contained in the *Style Manual* fairly inaccessible and difficult to find. Another complaint is that it's not prescriptive enough. Users tell me they don't want to be confronted with choices; they just want to be told what to do. Which takes us back to one of the points I made earlier, that speed is the key to style, or the lack of it. This is why we started producing *StyleWise*. It's an attempt to get points of style across in a simpler and faster way to people with no basic publishing experience. We also have plans for an electronic version of *StyleWise* that will deal with electronic publishing issues, and which we're tentatively referring to at the moment as *StyleEyes*.

For the same reason, early in 1998, we will be publishing a *Little Book of*

*Style*. Shirley Purchase, who will be well known to you through her *Australian Writers and Editor's Guide* and more recently *The Australian Writer's Dictionary*, is compiling it for us, and she'll have the draft completed by the end of this month. Basically, it will be an abridged version of the *Style Manual*, alphabetically arranged and very prescriptive. I aim to get one on every Commonwealth public servant's desk. I dream that every Commonwealth public servant will consult it daily. Then perhaps we might see an end to this sort of thing; it's a quote from a government document: 'The provisions of Sections 43 and 48 shall, with such modifications as are necessary extend and apply to and in relation to this division and without affecting the generality of the foregoing, in particular with the modification that a) a reference to eggs or egg products, or to eggs and egg products, shall be construed as a reference to citrus fruit.'

Thank you. Now, are there any questions?

**Question: How would the *Little Book of Style* address that?**

I don't know! It's beyond me. I suppose you'd look under *E* for *eggs*, or *C* for *citrus fruit*.

**Question: What is the Web site address for the draft of the style guide for electronic publishing?**

It will be on the AGPS home page at <http://www.agps.gov.au/whatsnew/epub.htm>. We've also published recently the *Electronic Standards Bulletin*. Anyone can receive future issues of that by sending a request to AGPS at GPO Box 84, Canberra ACT 2601.

**Question: You said that the next edition of the *Style Manual* would be published in 1999 or so. Can you outline the main differences between that and the current issue?**

I'm serious about being in time for the Olympic Games, mainly because I would like to see us include a chapter on sports. I think it would be useful to have documented somewhere—and not only for the Olympic Games—how to abbreviate names of countries, how to record track and field events, and that sort of information. The Institute of Sport in Canberra is very keen to produce that section for us. The other thing of course is electronic publishing. Just off the top of my head, they would be the two major differences,

but it's hard to say. These are committee decisions. I wouldn't have to authority to say, 'I don't like the way we spell *program* with a single *m*; I'd like to spell it *mme*, so I'll change that'. We'll have several sub-committees also to try and get as broad a representation as possible.

**Question: I thought the sixth edition was well under way.**

No, it's not well under way, and that's why we'd be looking at 1999 as the earliest possible time. We've been waiting on the news of our restructure and whether we were even to remain and what our purpose and role is to be. I may go back tomorrow and find that they don't think they need a *Style Manual* anymore.

**Comment: Well they may not need any of the other AGPS publications, but they will need a style manual.**

**Comment: We need it, but whether the government perceives that the government needs it is another matter. It has grown into a document that is hugely useful beyond its original purpose. If the government no longer felt it had a role in it, a publisher would snap it up.**

It will obviously be taken up by someone else.

**Question: I'm interested in your thoughts on that tension between prescription and description, and how you see it affecting the development of the *Style Guide*. Something like Pam Peters' (*Cambridge Australian English Style Guide*) can much more easily be rooted in the descriptive approach than yours, which was originally designed to tell people what to do—to be a standard reference for Commonwealth Government publishing. But it has obviously evolved beyond the government standards-keeping role and I'm wondering whether as a result you're feeling a pull to be more descriptive in the next edition.**

I raised this at Style Council last year. Pam Peters invited me to speak about the *Style Manual* there, and I invited comments and got some very useful feedback. Several people said we weren't prescriptive enough, that people like to be told what to do. One of the suggestions was that, where there are

### New members

A warm welcome to all those who joined the society from 11 September to 19 October:

Mary Halbmeyer  
Robyn Swanson  
Mary McMahon  
Carolyne Bruyn  
Kathryn Skelsey  
Silvana Giles

options in the *Style Manual*, we include a statement about the preferred Commonwealth style.

**Comment: I can't speak for the other states, but I work in the NSW Government, and the Commonwealth *Style Manual* has become the Government style manual in NSW.**

**Question: Are you putting *StyleWise* on the Net?**

We are putting bits of it on the Net on our home page, but you won't get the demonstrations of stock and ink in each issue.

**Question: You've talked about design and the use of white space which really is a kind of punctuation. And you talked before the meeting about your department losing its design staff. I wonder if there's any way of capturing some of that knowledge before it goes the way of punctuation.**

That's a good point. We are bringing out a design manual, put together by David Whitbread, next year. He would certainly be covering those topics because people aren't going to have access to a design studio. The four remaining designers finish up tomorrow; we used to have 23. And we haven't had an editorial unit for over a year. So there is a need.

**Comment: Especially in the Internet area.**

That's right. David will be covering those issues, and there also will be a design component in our electronic publishing standards document.

**Comment: It's no use picking up your printed document and plonking it on the Net because no one will read more than just half a screen. If there's more text than half a screen they're going to print it out. What's the point of printing out a document that's already in print?**

**Question: I've got a particular style question about citing electronic publications.**

We had an article in *StyleWise* about citing on the Internet, and we will be re-printing it.

**Question: Who is on the committee that decides what the *Style Manual* contains?**

All being well, there'd be two people

from AGPS on the committee; one would be me, and the other my supervisor, Dr Ann Villiers. She is currently in charge of what we call Government Information Services, and that includes standards and style, AGPS Press, promotions, marketing, legislation.

As for the other people, I can tell you who I'm hoping will be on it. I'm hoping Pam Peters will be on it, and that we'd have a representative from the English Department at ADFA [the Australian Defence Force Academy]. We'd have the chairperson of the Joint Committee of Publications, currently Senator Sandy McDonald, who would probably chair that committee because it's a protocol issue. We'd have the parliamentary librarian and the chief parliamentary reporter. We'd also have David Whitbread, who was an AGPS designer for many years and was studio manager, but is now head of the School of Design at the Canberra University.

I think that's all, from memory. But I also want to form some smaller sub-committees that will be more representative of actual users. They would perhaps undertake to look after certain aspects and then report to the main committee.

**Question: Have you got an audience in mind for *The Little Book of Design*? One of the things we basically agreed on in the design group at the July meeting was that there seem to be two distinct audiences: one that is designers who need to know what we're talking about and another that needs to know, as editors, how to talk to designers so they get what we're saying.**

I would see it for anyone involved with publishing in some form or another, whether they're an editor, designer or even in production.

**Question: With most of the universities and many companies and state governments adopting the AGPS *Style Manual* as their own style manual, wouldn't it make sense to change the name to the *Australian Style Manual*?**

Well, it probably will. All the production areas of AGPS have been sold, the old factory, design, editorial, all those areas. And they also sold the acronym AGPS and our logo (but not the name 'Australian Government Publishing Service').

**Question: Who bought it?**

A consortium of Canberra printers who call themselves Canprint.

**Question: And they're going to publish under the AGPS name?**

Yes, under the AGPS logo and acronym, but they won't be able to write the 'Australian Government Publishing Service'. On the latest *StyleWise*, for instance we have 'Australian Government Publishing Service' in full, and where we used to have the logo we now have the coat of arms. We can't use the logo because that's been sold.

**Question: So AGPS doesn't stand for anything now?**

No. Isn't it ridiculous? I think the name will obviously change. One name I've heard bandied about is 'AusInfo', which I cannot stand.

### ***Good company, good food, good deeds***

The annual general meeting will be held on Tuesday 3 February, so it's time to start thinking about whether you'd like to be among those elected to the new committee.

As you've probably heard before, the work can be fun, plus it's a good way to meet people and to keep up with what's going on in the publishing industry. And it doesn't look bad on the CV either.

Currently, the committee meets once a month, on the Monday evening after the general society meeting, at the Graphic Arts Club near Central Station. This is where we held our Christmas party last year and where most committee members linger for a feast when the business is finished. The club still serves that fantastic Chinese food.

Give a committee member a call to see what's involved. Contact details are on page 6.

## **1997 COMMITTEE**

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# NOTICEBOARD

## **Membership renewal time**

It's that time again. When 1997 expires, so does your society membership. Please use the renewal form enclosed with this issue.

## **Register update**

If you're listed in the society's *1997 Register of Editorial Services*, you should find enclosed a form to update your listing for the 1998 edition. For those who aren't currently listed, there's a form for new listings. The *Register* is an excellent way to make your availability and the services you provide known to those who need them.

## **Style Council Sydney 97: Language and the media**

Style Council 97 will be held at the State Library of New South Wales, Macquarie Street, Friday evening through Sunday, 21-23 November 1997. It will be preceded by a *Macquarie Dictionary* Third Edition Seminar on Friday afternoon, also at the State Library.

Style Council papers and discussions will include Language of Broadcasting, Language of Advertising, Language of the Internet, Newspaper Language, and Language Media of Law.

The registration fees are: Style Council—\$220 before 31 October, \$275 after that date; Dictionary Seminar—\$25. For further details telephone Maureen Leslie on (02) 9850 9800.

## **The Australian Editor**

Didn't Paul Bennett do a splendid job with the inaugural issue of *The Australian Editor*? Comments I heard at the October meeting were all very positive. It's a shame that his new job precludes his staying on as editor.

Meanwhile, Susan Keogh of the Society of Editors (Victoria) tells me that they've received some applications and anticipate more before applications close the first week in November. I have a copy of the position description in case any of you decide to give it a last-minute go.

The Victorian society has funding for one more issue, after which, if we want this publication to continue it's basically up to us. The Victorian society's preference is for the state societies to include a subscription to the quarterly journal as part of state society membership. And since 900 to 1000 subscribers at about \$30 each is required to keep the journal going in its present format and since that's about how many of us are members of the state societies, that is probably the only way it could work. This would mean an increase in our (NSW) society dues and it's important for you all to have a say in this. We have asked that some sort of feedback form be included in the next issue of the magazine, but if you've got views you'd like to share in the meantime, please let us (committee members) know.

But even if all the societies included the journal as one of their membership benefits, that alone would not sustain it. It requires our support and input. Letters to the editor, articles or suggested article topics, advertising sales or leads (preferably solids ones with contact information), even photos (we need one for the next cover) or other graphics. As your state representative, I am happy to talk with you about any or all of these.

*Merry Pearson*