

# BOOK REVIEWS

## STYLE MANUAL FOR AUTHORS, EDITORS AND PRINTERS / 5TH EDITION.

Canberra: AGPS, 1994 \$24.95

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The *Style Manual* is a must for anyone who writes, edits or publishes. It is an excellent source of useful information ranging from the intricacies of English language usage to the technicalities of book binding. Not only does it provide answers to specific queries, via the glossary or the index, but it is also important because it gives an overview of a whole communication process that more and more of us are involved in.

The *Style Manual* was first published in 1966 to set a standard for government publications. Each subsequent edition has revised and updated the previous one, and readership has extended beyond the public service to other areas also concerned with written communication. The fifth edition was published this year. Chapters have been reorganised or expanded, often to reflect changes in Australian attitudes and/or changes in technology. For instance, *The Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1992) is mentioned for the first time and is recommended for its "established Australian-English and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander language databases". Dictionaries are now generally seen as "databases" and as descriptive rather than prescriptive. Chapter 8 of the *Manual*, which was "Non-sexist language" and is now "Non-discriminatory language", has been greatly expanded. Its tone is gently didactic and its content quite persuasive. This is an ideal chapter for close reading, but try them all.

The basic layout of the *Manual* has not changed. It is set out in numbered paragraph form with examples of each point made, and it is very easy to use. Some minor proofing errors have been corrected; for example, in 6.53, in the punctuation

chapter, "has only daughter" has become "has only one daughter". Some factual errors persist; for example, the standard referred to in 10.5, 'Commas and spaces in numbers', should be AS1000 - 1974, not AS1000 - 1979. A more serious concern for users of the *Manual* is that some terms, particularly in Part One: Writing and editing, are not defined. For example, 6.72 says it is an error "to confuse a compound predicate with a compound sentence", but neither of those terms is defined there or in close-by paragraphs. Even more worrying is that no reason is given for its being "an error", and the examples do not clarify the point. Are the examples in fact correct? Could there be typographical errors in them? The bibliography at the end of the *Manual* probably contains texts that might clarify the situation, but the texts are simply arranged in alphabetical order. A bibliography at the end of each chapter would be more helpful, especially if it is not feasible to give more detailed explanations within the text. I mention this chapter of the *Manual* because it is one I use frequently, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that I was taught grammar and punctuation at school. For those without that background the relevant chapters need to be easily comprehensible or they will not be used. For those who believe that standards should be maintained in all the areas that the *Manual* covers, it is important that the information in all chapters be accessible and relevant.

To publicise the fifth edition, AGPS this year held a series of 24 weekly lunch-time lectures, under the banner "Lunching with Style: food for thought and palate", at their training centre in Canberra. After the first session on "Why a Style Manual?" a different chapter of the *Style Manual* was discussed each week. The series finished with "Future Directions" - dealing with the sixth edition.

All the sessions were well attended, with the audience showing concern for "standards" and "rules". As the AGPS editorial staff emphasised, the *Style Manual* attempts to provide guidelines but it does not claim to be definitive on every topic. It is not without flaws. Because of the time needed to prepare a new edition, some of the styles may already be outdated when they are published. In other instances, AGPS editors may be reluctant to accept "radical" changes in usage, so that the *Manual* may still lag behind community standards. It may also be impossible to set a widely acceptable standard where entrenched house-styles differ from publisher to publisher, often for no obvious reason. For example, compare the styles of legal citations in various

legal journals, law reports and the *Style Manual*. The perspectives that the *Manual* adopts will also not suit everyone. And coverage of particular topics may not be detailed enough for some readers' needs.

Nevertheless, the *Style Manual* is the most comprehensive Australian guide of its kind, and AGPS editorial staff welcome feedback about its strengths and weaknesses. If you approve of parts of the *Manual*, let AGPS know. If it mystifies instead of clarifying, then tell them that. Above all, use the fifth edition and feel free to make suggestions for its improvement.

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