

RESOURCES

CSE's Style Manual Continues to Please, with Room for Improvement *by Geoff Hart*

Scientific Style and Format: *The CSE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers* (*CSE*), from the Council of Science Editors, is to science writing what the *Chicago Manual of Style* (*CMS*) is to the humanities. It's an attempt at the impossible: to answer every question that might arise when editing a manuscript and to impose a logical and defensible style that communicates clearly.

Why *impossible*? Because, for example, it's not possible to include unabridged subject-specific dictionaries and usage guides for every writing genre covered by a style guide. *CMS* covers the key points surprisingly well, which is why it's in its 16th edition and more popular than ever. But *CMS* does not provide science-specific advice, and that's where *CSE* shines. Although neither guide covers everything, both are indispensable additions to the library of editors who work in the relevant genres.

In reviewing the **previous edition** of *CSE*, I noted the book's several virtues:

- ▶ Reasonably comprehensive coverage
- ▶ Extensive reference lists both for each chapter and for the book as a whole that provide information that couldn't be shoehorned into the book
- ▶ Explanations and justifications for many of its recommendations

I like this philosophy. If you understand why a rule exists, it's easier to apply the rule.

The new edition of *CSE* (8th) also does a good job of covering the basics, for both guidelines that apply to all scientific disciplines (chapters 4 to 14) and the issues that arise in specific disciplines (chapters 15 to 26). Things you'll find here that you won't find elsewhere include discussions of numbers that go beyond whether to use numerals or words, of equations and statistics, and of the idiosyncrasies of papers in scientific journals. If you have a good science background

(which most of this book's audience will have), *CSE* provides a great overview of how the world of scientific style fits together and covers a great many of the details.

The new edition mostly represents an update of the previous edition, but there are reasons to buy the new. Notable changes include the recommendation to use numbered literature citations to avoid interrupting the flow of the text with lists of author names and years and improved coverage of citing online media (e.g., blogs).

Speaking of online information, *CSE* now has an online edition, which represents the single biggest change since the previous edition. **CSE Online** adopts the same structure as, and includes links to, *CMS Online*. This is hardly surprising, as the University of Chicago Press publishes both books. **CMS Online** (\$35 per year, multi-user discounts available) offers a Q&A section, a user forum, tools such as a guide to preparing manuscripts in Word, the ability to add notes and to bookmark features, and the ability to create a personalized style guide, plus a quick guide to citations. And—*joy of joys!*—a hyperlinked index. *CSE Online* is more expensive (\$50 per year, multiuser discounts available) but looks equally promising. There's a **free trial** if you want to explore.

A quibble: *CSE Online* doesn't feel well integrated with its printed equivalent. As I've noted **on my blog**, printed books can serve to ground the overall body of information but should be supplemented by web technologies that can accomplish things you can't achieve in print (e.g., updated lists of clickable links to reference sites, animations, podcasts). *CSE Online* seems to repeat more than enhance the printed information.

CSE provides about 150 pages of style advice, but not as comprehensively as *CMS*. It compensates by addressing scientific style issues that *CMS* omits, such as extensive discussions of issues that arise in genetics and geology. Problems with *CSE* include an index that remains wholly inadequate,

particularly at less than half the length of the previous edition's inadequate index. A comprehensive table of contents for each chapter doesn't solve the problem; that's not how readers search for information in long books. *CSE Online's* search tool doesn't solve the problem; if you don't know the terms the authors used to describe a concept, you won't find it by searching. Also, key disciplines such as ecology and plant biology lack their own chapters.

A problem with focus remains from the previous edition: although it's laudable to strive for an overall guide, some chapters seem better left to *CMS* and other guides that could function as companion manuals. For example, there's little use for chapters on punctuation (chapter 5), spelling and word formation (chapter 6), grammar (chapter 7), and capitalization (chapter 9). Providing 102 pages of advice on references and literature citations (chapter 29) seems questionable given the way science journals almost maliciously create unique variations on what should be a simple theme: to help authors cite references and to help readers find them.

A curious continuing omission is the lack of instruction on onscreen editing, which is increasingly important during peer review; the bibliography doesn't even mention relevant resources. All we get are three inadequate pages on editing PDFs to correct proofs. On the plus side, I found the book's typography more readable than the previous edition's, though still smaller than I prefer.

Bottom line: *CSE* remains the best resource for issues related to scientific editing, and the move online makes it even more valuable. Buy it if you don't have it, and consider an upgrade if you have an earlier edition.

Geoff Hart has been editing journal manuscripts for more than 25 years and remembers when CSE was less than half its current length. Visit him online at www.geoff-hart.com. ■