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UXPin

The Critical Components of Web UI Style Guides

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Index

1. A Practical Overview of Style Guides 6

What They Are and Why They Matter 7

4 Types of Visual Style Guides 10

Takeaway 23

2. Core Components of Style Guides 24

Overview/Mission Statement 25

Layout (or Grid) 27

Typography 29

Colors 31

Media Treatment 32

Branding 34

Navigation 36

Iconography 38

Naming Conventions & File Directories 39

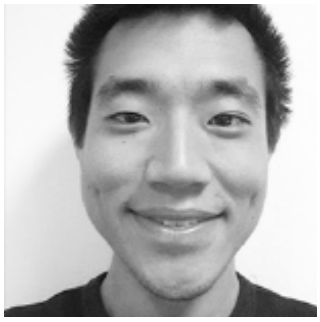
UI Patterns 40

UX Documents 42

Writing Guidelines 44

Code Snippets 46

Takeaway 48



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A Practical Overview of Style Guides

What They Are, How They Help, and What Types They Come In

How big do we make our headers? What hue of blue is our logo? Where's the reusable code base for new pages?

Source: "Switch." VFS Digital Design. Creative Commons.

Website and app building is full of minutiae that even Rainman couldn't keep track of, and for designers it gives new meaning to the phrase "the devil is in the details." Style guides help maintain consistency throughout brands and all their digital and offline entities.

Because they are living documents, they provide enough structure without strangling creativity.

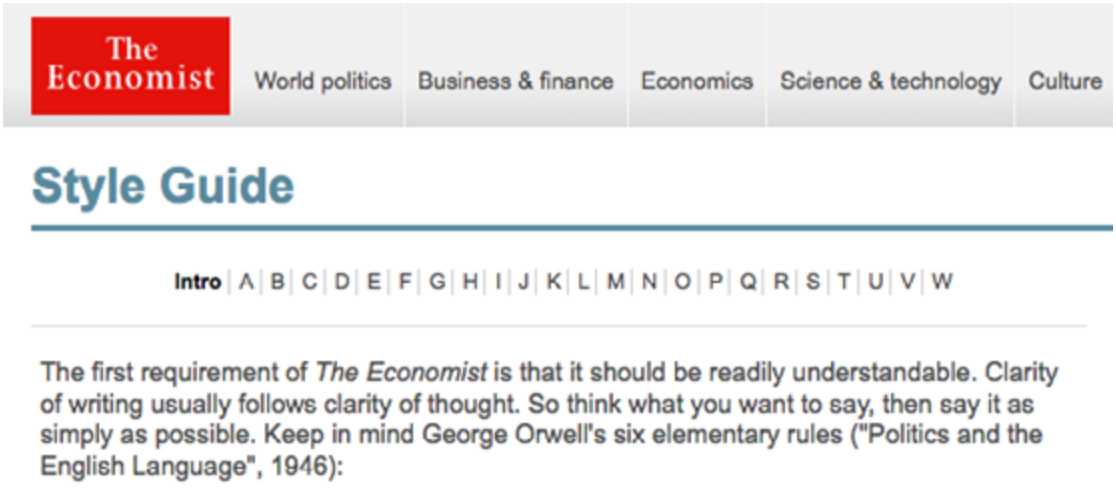
Let's take a look at why style guides are important, then dissect four effective types of visual style guides for the design process.

What They Are and Why They Matter

Let's start with the basics.

A style guide is a comprehensive document that keeps track of all the repeating elements for a project, ranging from branding rules down to the amount of beveling for call-to-action buttons.

Style guides also often reference rules and suggested practices, including *do*s and *don't*s. On a more holistic level, they're also a great place to state motives and missions statements for a company.



Source: The Economist

Yes, style guides require extra work to create, especially at the beginning, when you're busiest trying to flesh out the design itself. But in the long run, that extra work goes a long way. Because the power of a style guide comes from the sharing of knowledge, even small companies with just a few designers and developers can use style guides.

Think of style guides not as an academic PDF only for onboarding new hires, but as a collaborative tool that evolves as you improve your design and development processes.

As we mentioned in the free e-book *Consistency in UI Design*, style guides are recommended for the following reasons:

1. **Visual consistency** – At the most basic level, style guides help you create a cohesive design that reflects a common visual language. Visual and interaction design elements like color palettes, typographies, animations, and load times all contribute towards a unified user experience.

2. **Context** – Great style guides won't just provide a visual overview of a tab-based page and scroll-based page, but explain why the designer may want to switch between the two. For example, Jawbone uses a scroll-based page for storytelling, and a tab-based page for product customization.

3. **Collaboration** – Having a set reference manual for each member of the team will ensure that everyone's on the same page. Collaboration is easier, with less repeated questions and back-and-forth

emailing. Style guides also streamline communication through creating a singular vocabulary (i.e., defining what a “widget” or a “module” might be).

4. **Code standardization** – Front-end style guides help standardize the (X)HTML, CSS, or Javascript, so designers and developers can see if a new design deviates from established standards, quickly discovering if something already written can be easily expanded.

5. **Consolidation** – Designers only need to look one place to reference all components, as opposed to losing time sifting through different notes and questioning which documents say what.

6. **New employee orientation** – Rather than repeatedly teaching new hires the standards, you can send/give them a style guide for reference as they ramp up. With the style guide as an anchoring document, follow-up conversations will be more meaningful.

These, of course, are simply the broad advantages to style guides. By specializing the type of style guide you use, you’ll further improve your workflow and creativity. In fact, just the process of creating a style guide may stimulate new ideas for improving existing UI patterns.

To see a design process that uses mood boards, style tiles, and style guides, check out this thorough piece from designer Steven Bradley.

4 Types of Visual Style Guides

In reality, you can create a style guide in whatever way best fits your company, product, team size, and design process.

That said, there are several common types of style guides, though we won't discourage customization, being creative, and mixing-and-matching elements. The four mainly used types, however, are mood boards, style tiles, brand style guides, and front-end style guides.

We'll mention here an important distinction between the four. The first two, mood boards and style tiles, are far more simplistic, while the latter two, brand and front-end style guides, are closer to thorough lists and manuals (and likely what you think of when you think of style guides). That doesn't mean that pages and pages of detail are better or worse – each type of style guide has its own advantages and recommended uses.

Most of this ebook will discuss front-end style guides, but the others are still worth discussing since they're all a part of the design process. It's important to note that mood boards and style tiles can feed into a front-end style guide, almost as a seed that later grows into a tree.

1. **Mood Boards**

   Mood boards are the most artistic, but likewise the most abstract, of the types of style guides. They specialize in setting an project's

atmosphere and artistic style – its mood – but little else aside from that. What they lack in technical details, they make up for in concept exploration.

Popularized by industries such as fashion and interior design, these stylistic collages have been proven effective across many visual industries, including web UI design.

Source: "Discussing the mood boards", foam. Creative Commons.

As an example, let's take a look at this mood board made by UX agency ClearLeft.

Their mood board is more than just a Pinterest-style collage – it's a canvas that shows (rather than tells) the typography, colors, and overall feel for the site. Web Designer Depot explains that mood boards show clearly the aesthetic feel of a site, and act as a quick reference guide for the design's visual elements. You can think of mood boards as a succinct and abridged style guide, in poster form for easy reference.

Mood boards work best at the beginning of the design process because they aid in inspiration and exploring ideas when there's nothing else to go on. An eye-pleasing mood board will keep the entire team moving in the same direction before more substantial style decisions come into fruition. However, as more consistent frameworks develop throughout the design process, the mood board will lose effectiveness.

In addition to helping you think about consistency early in design, mood boards are also great for design collaboration. Since clients and stakeholders may have difficulty articulating the details of their ideas, mood boards provide a clear visual direction for productive feedback.

To learn more about mood boards, check out this list of 24 pro tips. When you're ready to start, here's a list of helpful tools.

2. **Style Tiles**

Style tiles are a transitional style guide more specific than mood boards, but lacking the intricacy of brand or front-end guides.

The inventor of style tiles, designer Samantha Warren, describes their use as a way to "...establish a direct connection with actual interface elements without defining layout," and that they, "work well for clients who have established brands and need them to translate smoothly to the web."

As you can see in this example, style tiles maintain the same collage

look and feel of a mood board, but with more concrete information. Notice how the style tile provides details like typeface, font treatment, and examples for texts and icons. The style tile itself is designed with the same style and color scheme as the intended site, and you could even add some adjectives to describe the emotional spectrum.

While style tiles cannot take the place of more thorough style guides, their simplicity and ease have their advantages. Because they're quick to make, style tiles are recommended for first determining a site or app's visual style, or when considering a redesign. When done right, style guides can even replace mockups as a visual representation of the site or app's theme.

This style tile example for the Tuts+ redesign has all the basic requirements, and more. Not only does it list their predetermined standards for various elements, it shows them as vivid samples: buttons, colors, textures, and typography standards for headings, links, titles, and text. You can also see the thematic keywords generated in the second step, and presented in the site's style.

Even if you need something meatier, this Compass extension can help you turn style tiles into a more complete style guide. Installation instructions are on the site.

3. Brand Style Guides

The first of the manual-type style guides, the brand style guide lists out all the rules and standards for a company's brand. Extending far beyond simply the logo, it will affect the entire brand identity on websites/apps, advertising, business cards, public forums – anywhere, really.

Brand style guides will include design details such as fonts, colors, sizes, iconography, and logo placement. Aside from consistency, their overarching purpose is defining the personality of the brand – whether the tone is smart or sassy, or whether the first impression should be rugged or refined.

The brand style guide is like a Magna Carta that protects your identity, preventing less familiar employees from diluting your impact through poorly executed visuals. They cover any usage specifications concerning the brand, including:

- **Logo Usage** – Logos may lose their effects at certain sizes, or sometimes require a certain amount of empty space surrounding them for maximum impact. Sometimes logos use different colors depending on the background, or have different variations depending on context (i.e., website vs. app). If you don't know these details, you risk stepping on the company's toes.

- **Color** – Companies are strongly identified by their colors – can you imagine a blue Coke can? Not only should you outline the brand's preferred color scheme, but also the values of the spe-

cific hues. Include both HEX codes for web use, and CMYK (or Pantone) for print.

- **Typography** – Aside from typeface, you'll also want to specify weights and treatments, and any specific styles should be avoided. Brands may sometimes create highly customized typefaces (ever notice that the Ls in Kellogg's are different sizes?).

- **Iconography/Imagery** – If the brand has its own specialized set of icons or images, include them (or a link) here. Chances are they'll have multiple variations, each with their own individual rules for usage.

These are the essential fields that almost all brand guides cover. To go the extra mile, though, you can also include sections on:

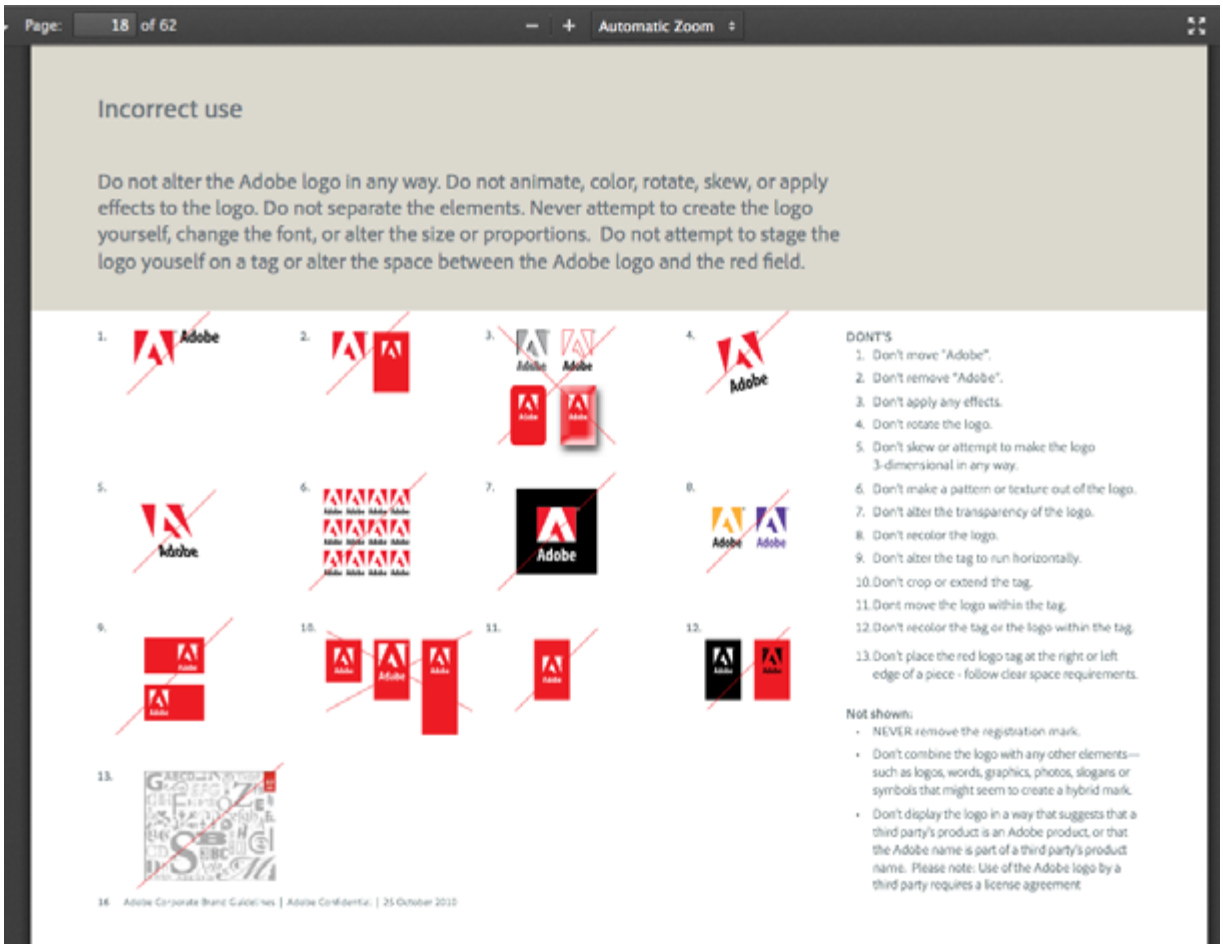
- **Copywriting** – The tone and language style any writing associated with the brand should have. This can include specific phrases to include, appropriate slang, or any words that are off-limits.

- **Medium-specific Instructions** – While these are typically covered in the front-end style guide, it may be worth mentioning any rules that apply only to web, mobile devices, various types of ads, brochures, etc.

- **Brand Background** – To paint a fuller picture of the brand, include its history, mission statement/vision, and personality. For example, you might say that "Distillr is human. We are

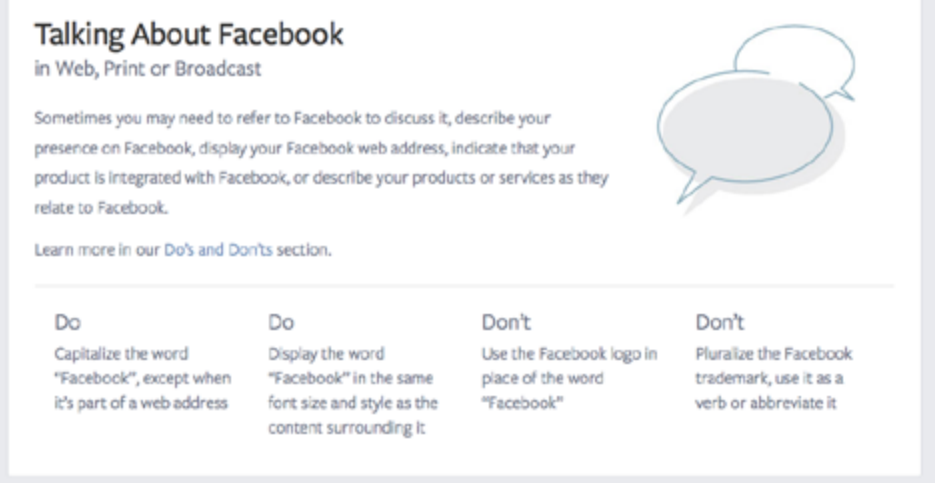
familiar, friendly, and intelligent. All of our assets are lean, stripped down, with not one element extra."

Feel free to customize your brand style guide to include anything relevant to you, and ignore the sections that are not. Now, let's take a look at a few examples.



Source: Adobe

The brand style guide for **Adobe** features 62 pages of instructions on the proper usage of its brand identity. Covering everything from visuals, typography, and usage across different mediums, this brand guide is proof that you can't be too meticulous about brand identity.



Source: Facebook

Facebook takes a different approach.

The have a boiled-down version of their brand guidelines on a public webpage, with the option to download a more comprehensive manual on how to properly use their brand. This webpage is designed for quick reference, featuring digestible sections for downloading and using their different icons and screenshots, the general *do*s and *don't*s, and download links to PDFs with more specific rules on using their brand in various scenarios.

For further information on brand guides, read designer Cameron Chapman's post for Web Designer Depot that describes the basic elements of every brand style guide.

4. Front-end Style Guide

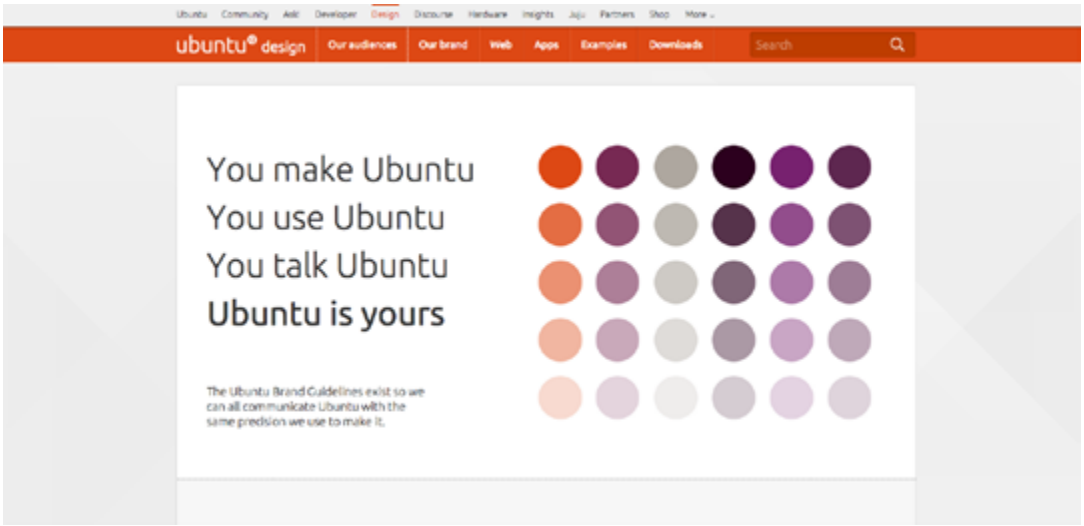
Most relevant to web and mobile UI designers, the front-end style guide is what most people think of when they hear the term "style guide." The rest of this ebook will cover how to create the best

front-end style guide for you; here we'll just give an overview to explain how they stack up against the previously mentioned types.

These are the largest and most detailed of the guides, covering all the ground of the previous guides combined, and then some. These robust manuals usually live as a section on a company's internal or public website, including snippets of code alongside more common guidelines about typography and branding, etc.

Front-end style guides are useful because they help connect design with development.

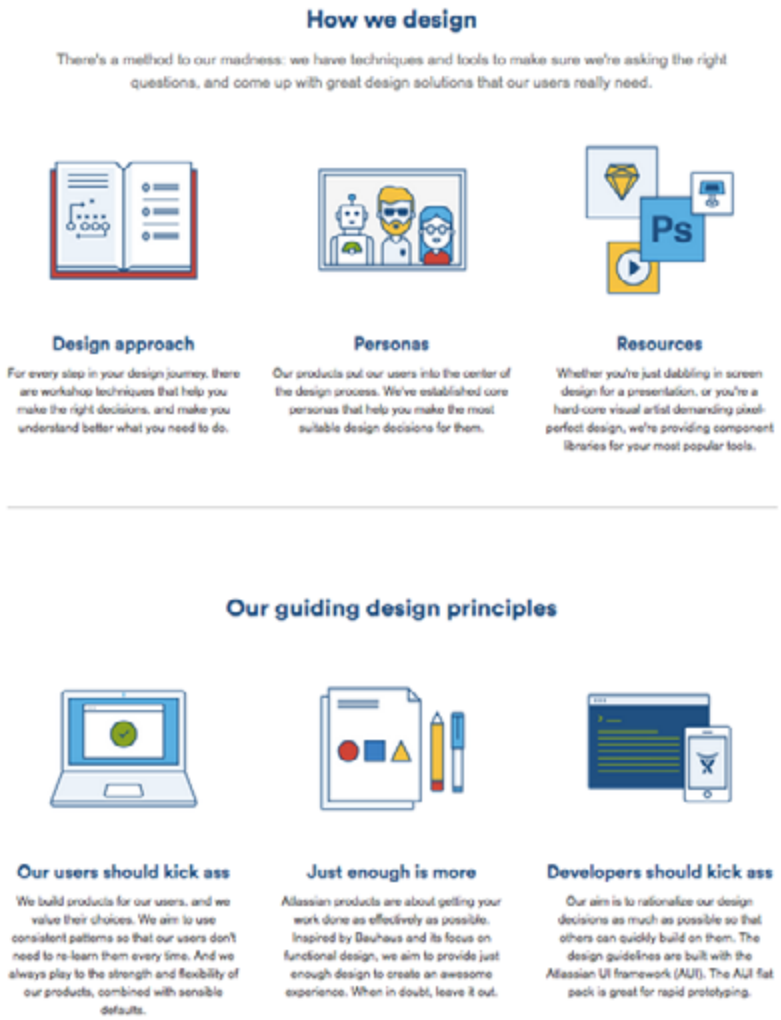
For example, if you've already created a style tile and a brand style guide, you already have the design foundation for a front-end style guide. Just iterate and include any reusable code and UI patterns.



Source: Ubuntu

The front-end style guide for Ubuntu, for example, divides itself into several smaller guides for the brand, web contexts, and mo-

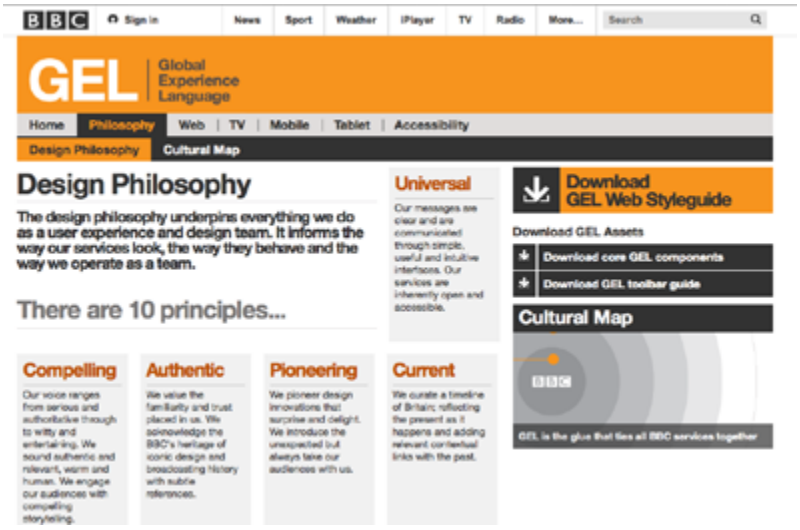
bile contexts. In doing so, it's able to cover everything in highly structured detail. The style guide includes everything from a slider that determines tone based on audience, to reusable sections of Javascript code.



Source: Atlassian Design

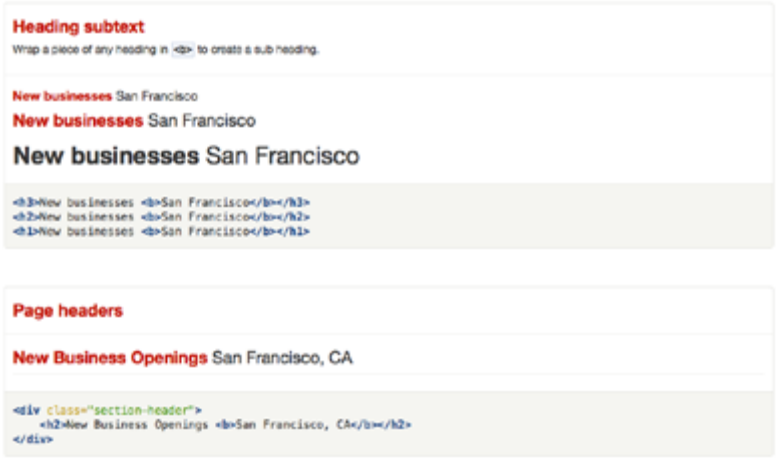
The Atlassian Design style guide, too, is beautifully organized while still functional. In addition to technical details for product design, user interface, and branding, they provide extra information such as their step-by-step approach to design, core personas, and additional resources for visual design. As if that weren't enough, they

also include basic descriptions of their design principles to give their style guide a philosophical edge.



Source: BBC GEL

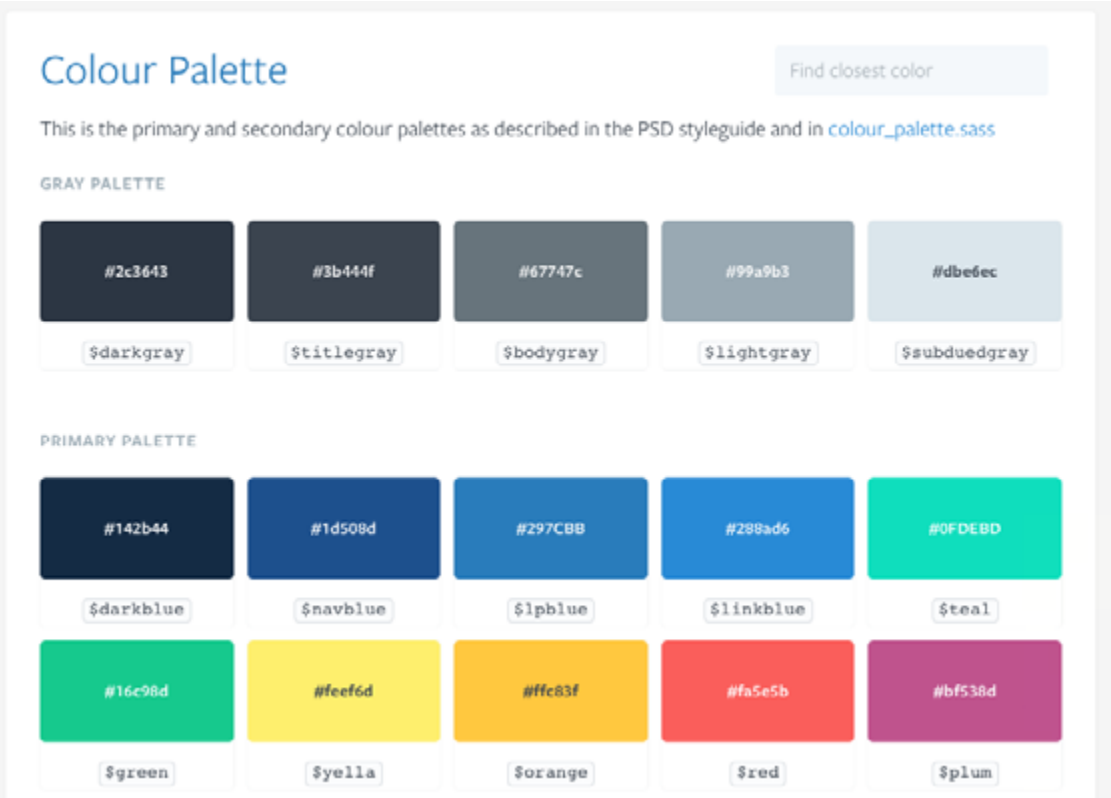
Even **BBC** features a hybrid style guide, listing their design philosophies first and foremost before the technical details for use on web, TV, mobile, and tablet devices. It should also be noted that the platform sections each contain subsections for discussing the detailed philosophy for that medium, the technical details, and downloadable assets.



Source: Yelp

Of course, style guides can also be purely technical reference guides.

In their style guide, **Yelp**, for example, lists out their HTML coding alongside other purely black-and-white details. Their style guide is a good example to follow – they outline all the relevant information they need, whether typographical to stylistic, and accompany each with the proper coding.



Source: Lonely Planet

Lonely Planet, too, sticks just to the facts. As you can see by the above example, their section on color leaves no room for error, with coding-specific hues. Each page of their elaborate style guide is equally detailed, including several pages listing out all of their icons.

It's always nice to be as thorough as possible, but that depends on your company size and availability of resources. Like we first recommended in the e-book *Web UI Best Practices*, front-end style guides should contain enough detail for developers and designers to build functioning sites from the design principles, technical guidance, and code base.

Takeaway

At heart, style guides are design and development aids meant to make the lives of you and your team easier. With that in mind, don't do more work than necessary. Browsing through example style guides, it's normal to feel overwhelmed by the wealth of detail some companies include. Remember, though, that you only need to include what's useful to you.

Simple style guides like mood boards and style tiles are great because they're easy to make, but fall short if you need something more meticulous like a front-end style guide. On the bright side, creating a mood board or style tile at the start of a project will help you answer some (but not all) of the fundamental questions, and can be a good first step towards creating a fuller style guide later – so they're rarely a waste of time. If all you need is a simple and atmospheric reminder of only the basic details, build a few style tiles and keep to that.

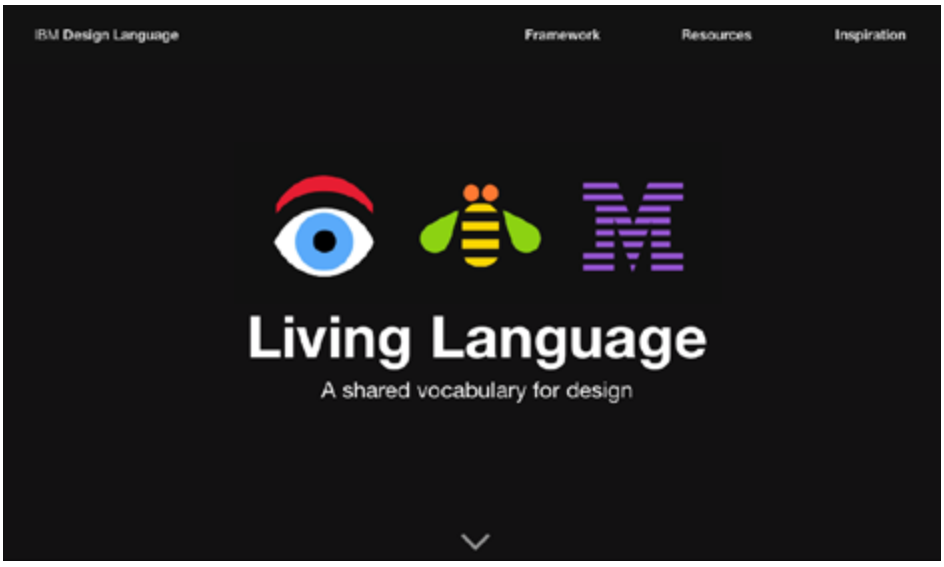
Depending on how strong your brand identity is, you may or may not need a separate branding style guide – sometimes a minimal section within a greater front-end style guide is enough. The front-end style guide is recommended for every major project or substantial company, but how in-depth you make it depends solely on your individual needs.

Core Components of Style Guides

Some Suggestions on What Ground to Cover in Your Style Guide

At the end of the day, your style guide should only include what will help you most.

Just as you choose the *type* of style guide that will benefit you most, likewise you choose only the sections that will benefit you. That said, there are some common areas that most companies, brands, and projects will need to address, and so in this piece we'll list some recommendations for sections, and how to best use them for your designs.



Source: IBM

These are the sections that we here at UXPin have used in our own style guide. It is by no means a checklist of all the necessary components, nor is it a complete list of every available option. These are just some suggestions, based on our research, other companies, and what has helped us personally.

To see which companies use which sections, check out this comprehensive style guide spreadsheet.

Overview/Mission Statement

Every important work needs an introduction.

Before diving into the facts and figures, the first section(s) are a great place to present an overview of your goals or the product/brand's mission statement. Remember that one of the purposes behind style guides is to unify the team, so presenting your mission or philosophy right from the onset will send everyone off in the right direction.

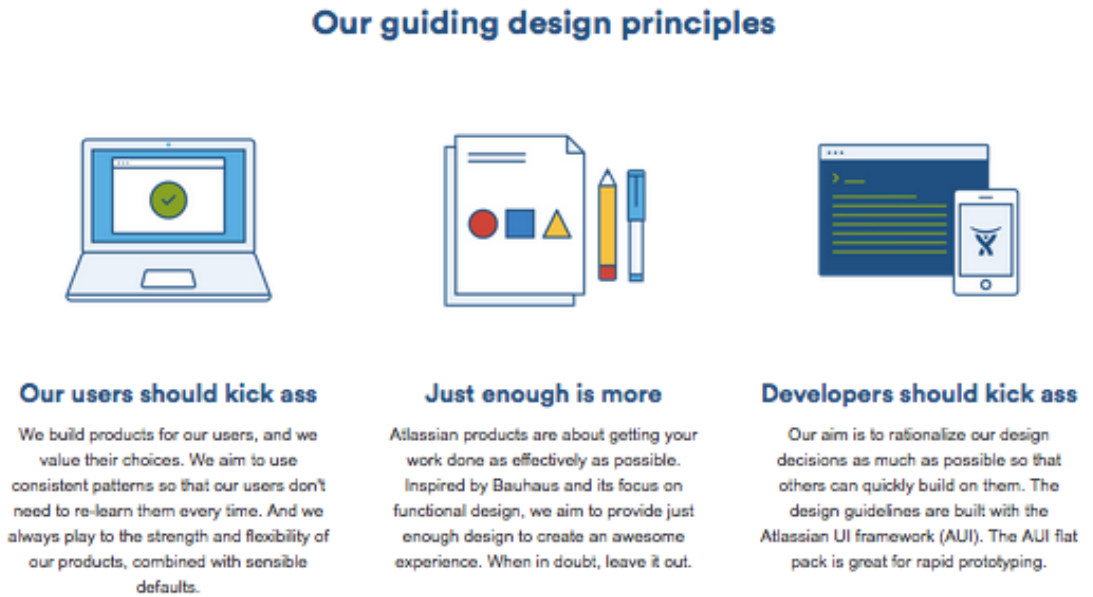
Some topics to discuss here might include the site/app/company's:

- overarching mission
- personality
- content strategy
- philosophy or motto

Furthermore, if you choose to bypass the later branding section, this would be a good place to at least mention your target audience, the style of the design, or the tone of the copy.

Source: Buffer

The style guide for Buffer introduces and explains the thinking behind the style guide itself. They describe their style guide through the lens of an atomic analogy – the organism is made up of tinier atoms.



Source: Atlassian Design

Atlassian Design goes deeper into their philosophy and personalities at the start of their style guide. The three "guiding design principles" at the bottom infuse the style guide with the brand's own personality, setting it apart from other companies, and even potentially inspiring some of its workers.

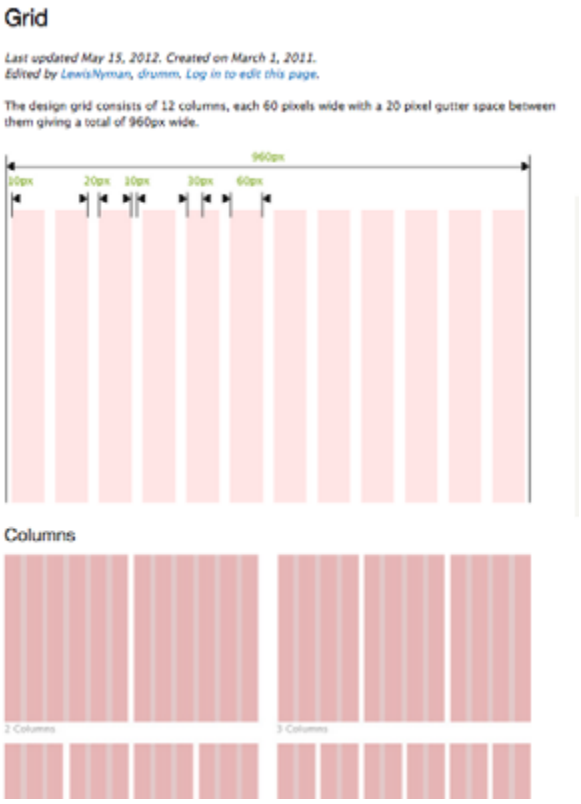
Layout (or Grid)

Now we get into the nitty-gritty, the details that warrant thorough documentation.

Your screen layout should be meticulous, and moreover these elements should remain consistent on each page. The layout and grid section should point out:

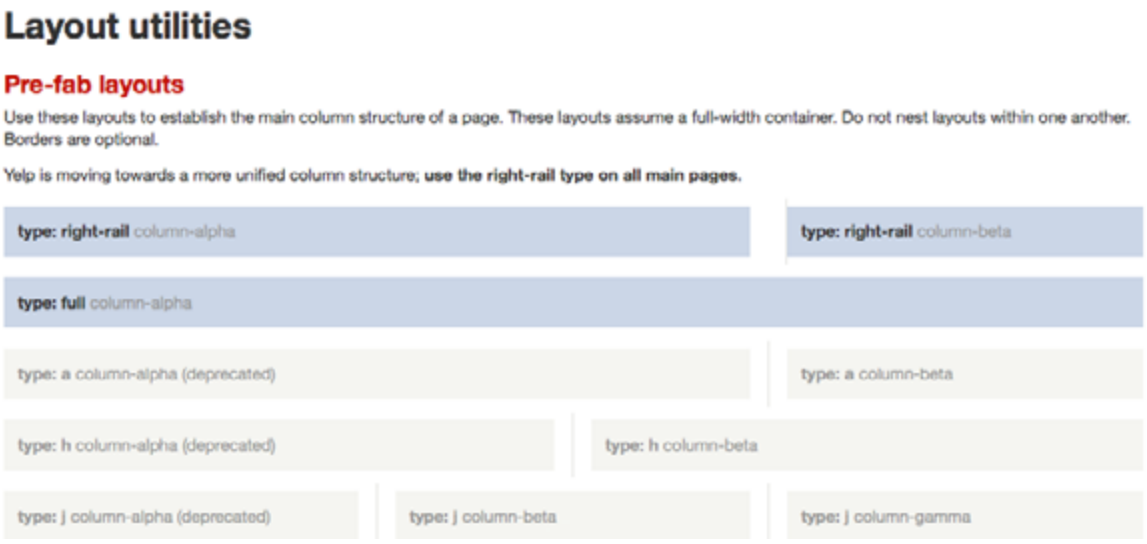
- the exact values for all border margins
- the exact values for spacing between different elements (i.e., between text and images, between the header and the top navigation bar, etc.)
- positioning of global elements (logo, copyright information, etc.)
- procedures for columns, if applicable (how many, their width, the spacing between them, etc.)

Due to the visual nature of these elements, it's best to include any existing wireframes or mockups for this section.



Source: Drupal

The style guide for Drupal outlines very clearly the pixel width between columns for their grid section. The complete page is divided into 12 equal columns, with instructions on how to customize their use in accordance to their guidelines for gutter spacing.



Source: Yelp

The Yelp style guide presents the types of layout all together, and outlines some ground rules right at the top. This simple and basic style for the style guide presents the information up front without fluff – there's a lot of information to go over in style guides, so in many ways brevity and clarity trump more stylistic and entertaining additions.

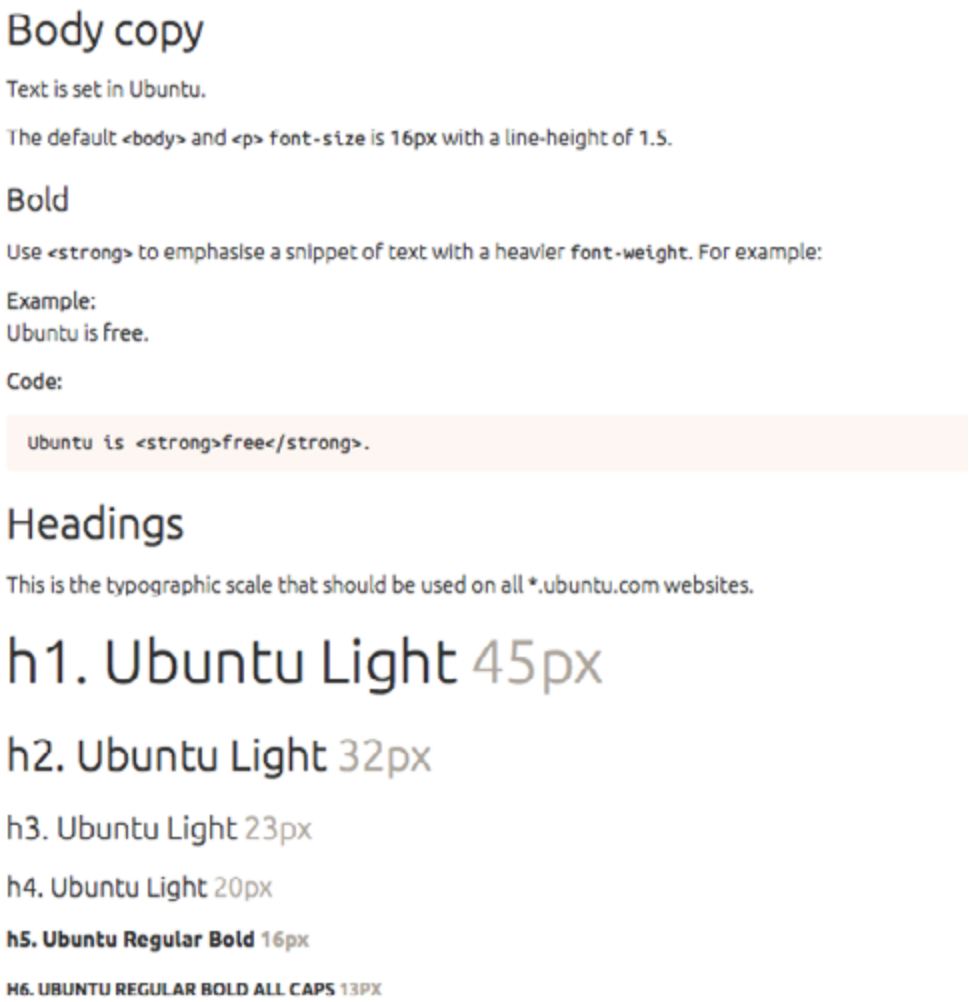
Typography

Typography is one of the main areas where everything must be outlined in black-and-white. Many non-digital mediums contain extensive typography style guides, which are equally important for text-heavy sites or apps.

The two basic elements of the typography section are **size** and **font**. The complexity, however, stems from each type text needing its own values for size and font. This means that your heading has one size and font, your subtitles others, your body text others, and any other types (image captions, copyright information, menu text, hover text… the list goes on and on).

While general best practices advise simplicity in typography for the sake of legibility and readability, it's quite common to see multiple typefaces and styles combined tastefully. As we described in *Web UI Design for the Human Eye*, many sites may use a decorative font for large headers and a tasteful sans-serif font for sub-headers and body copy.

Further complicating the typography section, you'll also need to document different guidelines for how to deal with elements like links (internal and external links may even have different protocols) or bylines. You should also mention when to italicize, underline, or use specific colors for certain words or subjects.



Source: Ubuntu

Almost every style guide will display their typographic information using the style its describing, as with the Ubuntu style guide above. The information for the H1 heading is 45 px, the line for H2 is 32 px, etc. This kills two birds with one stone, providing the information and the visual example.

Colors

This is another subject matter in which companies can get nit-picky, and for good reasons. It's not enough to simply list the names of the company's favorite colors.

Color schemes must be precise, with certain colors used only for certain objects (i.e., call-to-action buttons should be green, backgrounds should be cream), and restrictions about which colors can be used next to each other.

However, the most important field in this section is in specifying the exact hues of the colors used. You'll want to include the numeric values for each hue's CMYK, Pantone, RGB, and HEX. Remember, it's not one or the other – try to include all of these color codes if you can, in case problems arise. For that matter, it's also important to cite the primary choice, and any backups.

Source: Mozilla

The style guide for Mozilla Sandstone displays the specifics behind their color regulations without overloading the reader with infor-

mation. They include a small description to the side, with visual samples and all the relevant color data, plus a link to the suggested gradient tool.

Source: Lonely Planet

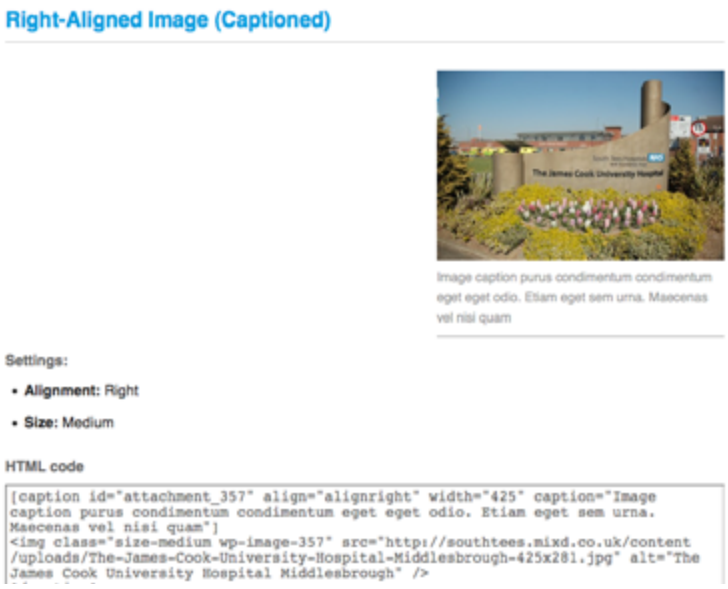
The style guide for Lonely Planet gives more options, but stays specific about the hues. Their color scheme is categorized by hierarchy, and those familiar with the site will know how to apply them (or they can check the separate PSD style guide, which is linked in the description). Notice the search box at the top, allowing the reader to search by color to find the proper hue in accordance to the company's preferences.

Media Treatment

Each company and site will want to deal with their images and videos a certain way. The most common topic in this section is the proportions and ratios for your media, divided based on type (such as graphics within banners compared to those within content).

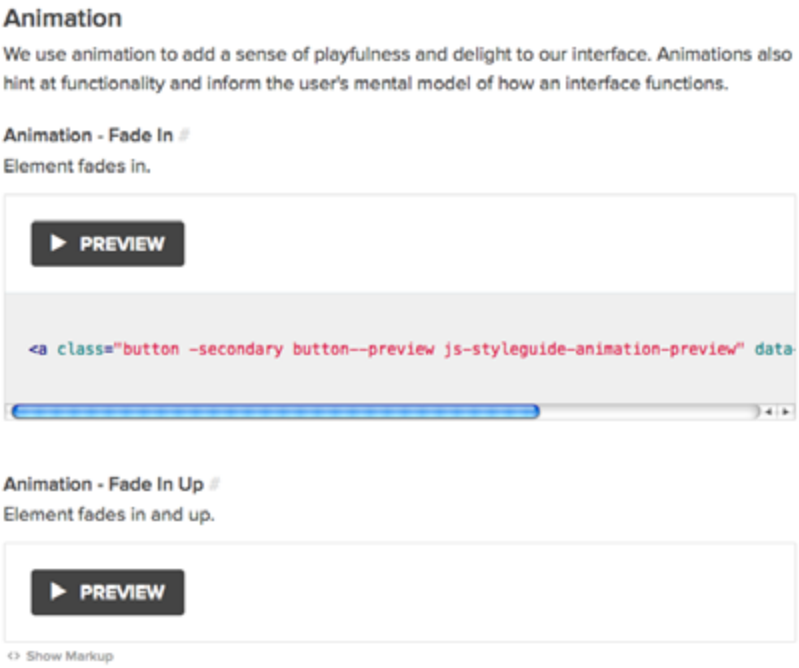
You could get further detailed and include specific practices, such as alignment, the surrounding spacing (if not discussed in the layout section), notes on captions, and the use of icons if necessary (such as a play button for video or an enlarge button for images). If your concerns are more technical, you could even outline the specific cache settings, in case your CMS might make this confusing.

Sometimes it might be necessary to discuss the kind of content used in media. Is it important that all your content is children-friendly? *How* children-friendly? This could be a good place to solidify any rules or guidelines about what your company is comfortable with publishing.



Source: South Tees Hospital

The online style guide for the South Tees Hospital NHS Foundation Trust gives an item-by-item list of how they handle each element, including images. In the above screenshot, you can see an example, including the proper procedure for captions, plus basic information, ending with the HTML code for direct implementation.



Source: Neue

The style guide for Neue explains the logic behind their animations, and lists examples. For something like animation that can't be captured in a document, they include playable previews. (Moreover, notice how the code appears as a collapsible, clickable option – this retains the quick-reference benefit to developers, while saving space and making the document more comprehensive to workers who don't need the coding.)

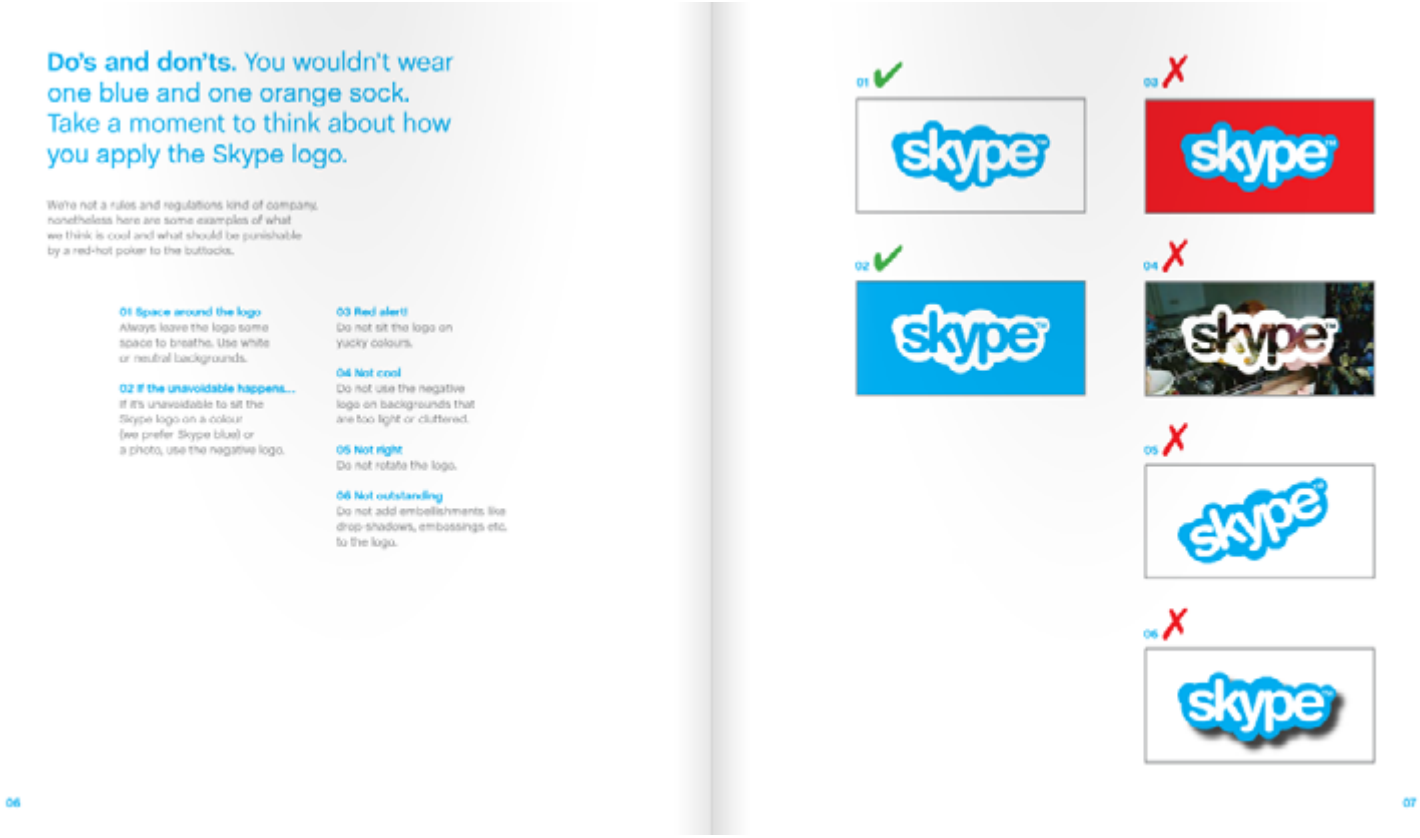
Branding

In the last chapter, we discussed branding style guides – entire manuals around the usage rules for brands. Instead of creating an entire book on this topic alone, many companies opt instead to create a smaller branding section in a front-end style guide.

Most of the other brand-heavy topics will be handled in other areas of the style guide (like color scheme or typography). In that case, here would be the chance to handle everything yet unmentioned – namely the use of the logo. Include a section showing both the proper use of the logo, and common mistakes to avoid (with examples).

Source: New School

It's not uncommon for companies to separate all brand-related instructions in a separate manual. The New School Identity Guidelines, which is another name for a branding manual, features page after page of rules concerning how their name is presented visually. In the sample above, they are very direct about the proper sizes and styles of the logo. The following pages outline rules regarding the logo's color, placement, and how it's to be handled across various mediums.



Source: Skype, via Issuu

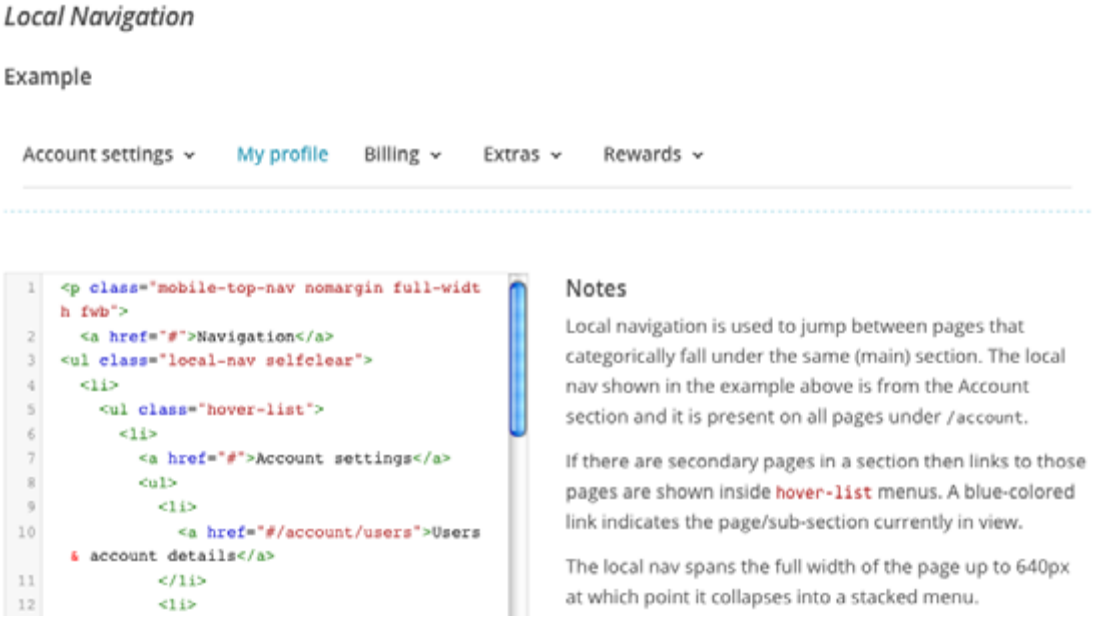
Similarly, Skype's brand guidelines include the rules over the proper use of their logo, with a *dos* and *don'ts* page, a popular inclusion when discussing branding. The *don'ts* section lists the common errors with logo usage, proactively helping employees to avoid improper brand treatments.

Navigation

These sections covers all rules related to navigation, such as the use of search boxes, sidebars, links (if not covered in the typography section), and menus and drop-downs (i.e., what is the appropriate range of items to include).

Source: Homify Living

The Homify Living Style Guide keeps their style guide succinct, and geared specifically towards code (see the section on coding at the end of this chapter). Rather than wasting time describing their practices with words, they simply have a visual example and the corresponding code. Developers need look no further when building their navigation guidelines.



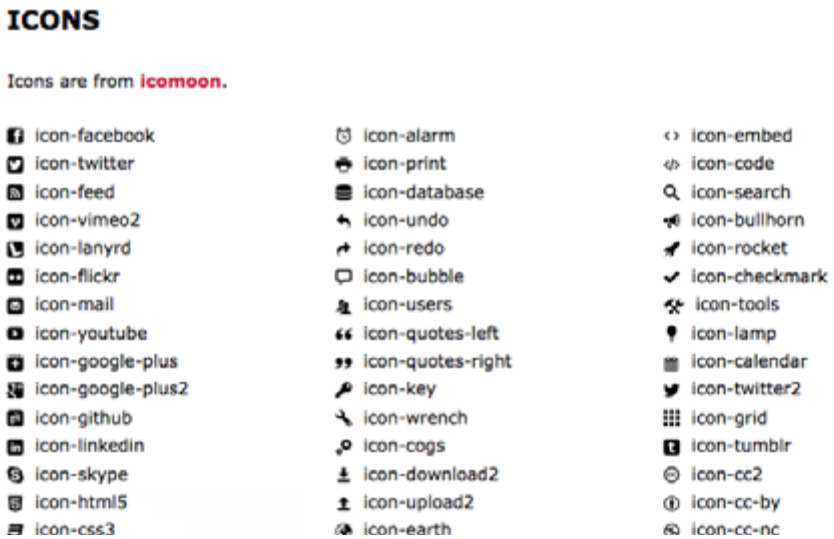
Source: MailChimp

On the other hand, the style guide for MailChimp goes into a little more detail. In addition to the visual example and coding, they give a few notes on how the navigation system operates, and opts to clarify some key points, such as the procedure for linking to secondary pages.

Iconography

Even if you don't feature a wide variety of icons, you still want to clearly define them since they are one of the most commonly recurring design elements.

After all, it only takes a few clicks on incorrectly designed icons before the whole experience feels inconsistent. In this case, the iconography section can show all available icons in one place for easy selection, the rules governing them (i.e., size, placement, etc.), and even include the coding for quick reference.



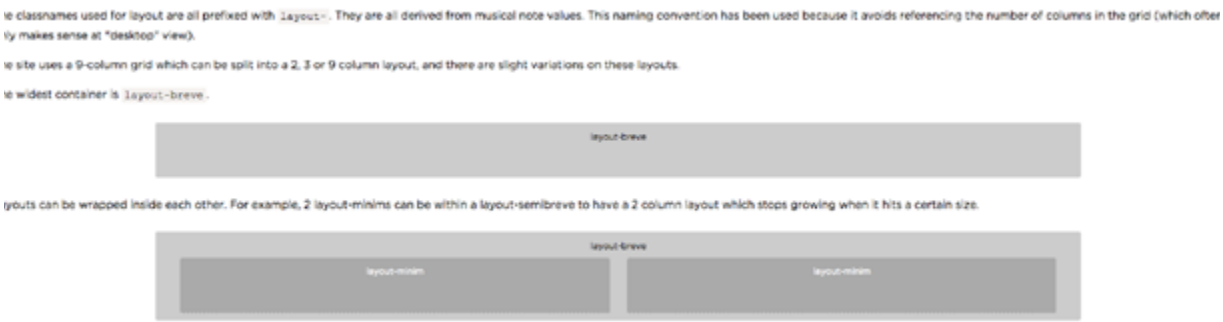
Source: Code for America

The Code for America style guide, while limited with its information, makes a point to display all the icons they use in an alphabetized list. Visual examples are included next to each coded name. In a separate section, they also define the dimensions for the six common sizes of each icon.

Naming Conventions & File Directories

Your file directories can become a mess if everyone organizes them according to their own sensibilities. Outline the proper directory structure for your files and folders, as well as a standardized naming convention (especially for versioning).

On a related note, make sure you also use consistent terminology in your style guide. For example, don't call a "sidebar" a "widget" in a separate section.

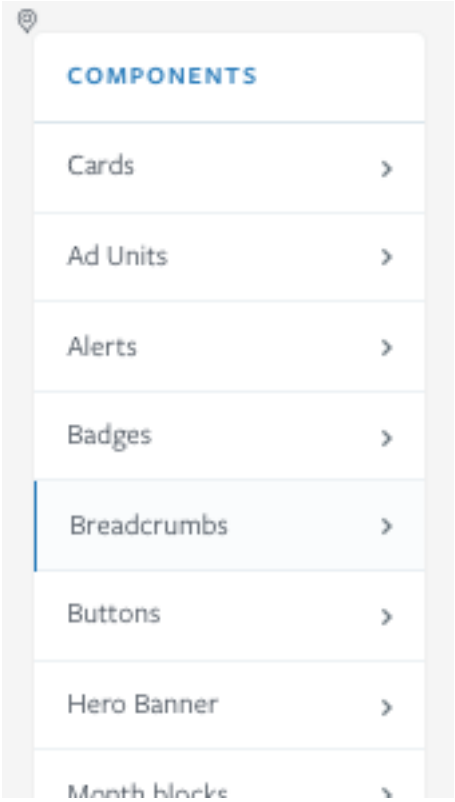


The Code for America style guide even explains the reasoning behind how they name their layout class names. Their naming convention is derived from musical notes because it helps avoid listing out the number of columns in a grid.

UI Patterns

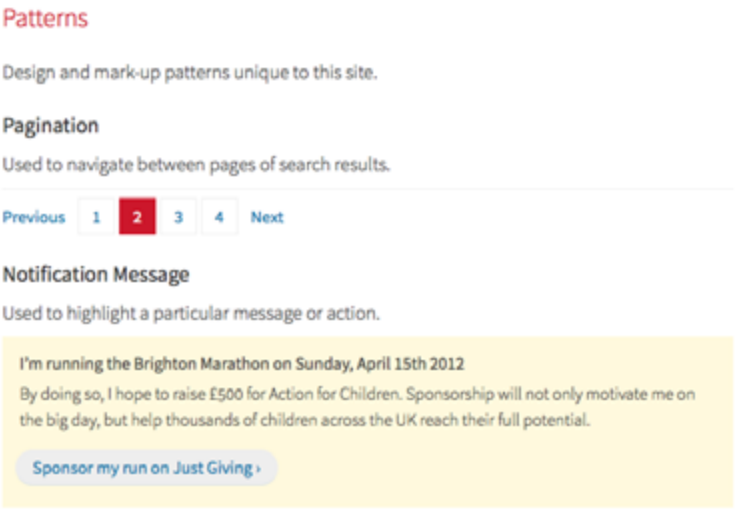
The more familiar with UI patterns a designer is, the better equipped they are to use them.

Show your UI patterns and mention any special modification or variations for each. This is also a recommended habit in order to determine if any patterns overlap or contradict.



Source: Lonely Planet

In many ways, style guides themselves are lists of the patterns the company uses. You can tell by the above navigation menu for the Lonely Planet style guide: each entry is an existing UI pattern, where the style guide acts as a manual for defining how each one is modified specifically for the site.



Source: Paul Robert Lloyd

Sometimes there's more to mention other than common design patterns. Paul Robert Lloyd concludes the style guide for his website with a small section describing the patterns he created for his site. This is a great way to set the standard: since these patterns are original to him, there would be no where else to look except this site.

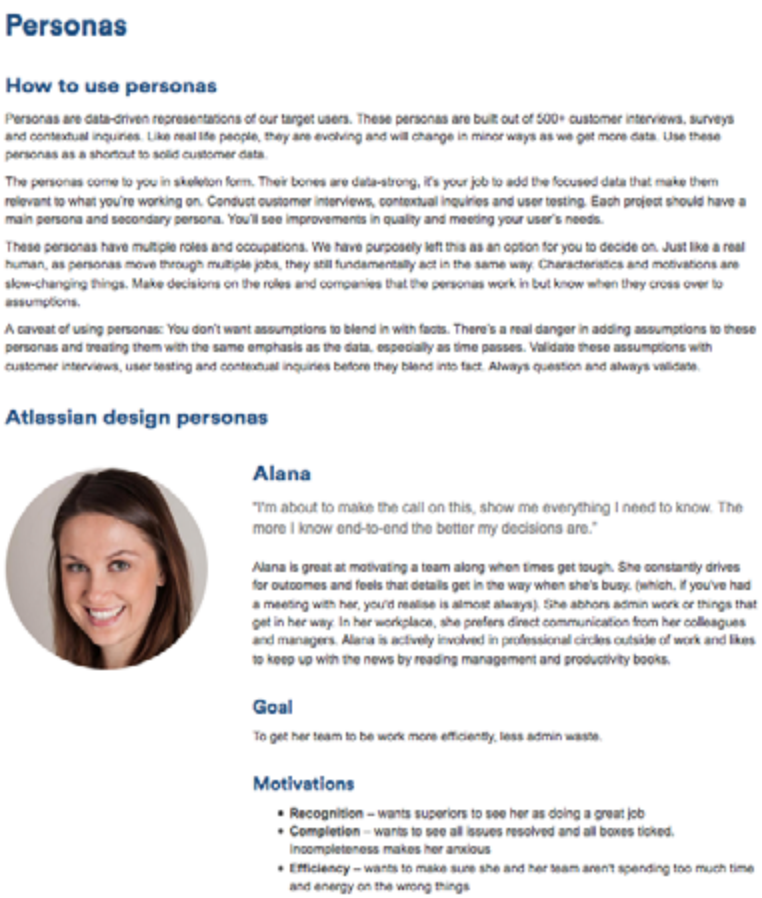
This level of specificity again emphasizes how you should not assume your reader has any existing knowledge. You might know that certain patterns are unique to the design, but a new designer (or a non-designer) probably wouldn't.

To learn more about how to create pattern libraries for your style guide, check out this practical piece by designer Paul Boag. In fact, if you include enough detail in your pattern library, it will usually suffice as a standalone lightweight style guide. The pattern library for DoSomething.Org is a great example – it provides the design reasoning, implementation notes, and markup code for UI patterns.

UX Documents

Style guides are also an ideal place to consolidate all UX documents created by the team.

The most relevant design documents are the user personas, which should be created and implemented right from the start. Other secondary documents include any source material, analytics reports, news articles, statistics reports – any documents relevant to the project or company. As the project progresses, this section can also house wireframes, mockups, and/or prototypes – even mood boards and style tiles, if you went that route.



Personas

How to use personas

Personas are data-driven representations of our target users. These personas are built out of 500+ customer interviews, surveys and contextual inquiries. Like real life people, they are evolving and will change in minor ways as we get more data. Use these personas as a shortcut to solid customer data.

The personas come to you in skeleton form. Their bones are data-strong, it's your job to add the focused data that make them relevant to what you're working on. Conduct customer interviews, contextual inquiries and user testing. Each project should have a main persona and secondary persona. You'll see improvements in quality and meeting your user's needs.

These personas have multiple roles and occupations. We have purposely left this as an option for you to decide on. Just like a real human, as personas move through multiple jobs, they still fundamentally act in the same way. Characteristics and motivations are slow-changing things. Make decisions on the roles and companies that the personas work in but know when they cross over to assumptions.

A caveat of using personas: You don't want assumptions to blend in with facts. There's a real danger in adding assumptions to these personas and treating them with the same emphasis as the data, especially as time passes. Validate these assumptions with customer interviews, user testing and contextual inquiries before they blend into fact. Always question and always validate.

Atlassian design personas

Alana

"I'm about to make the call on this, show me everything I need to know. The more I know end-to-end the better my decisions are."

Alana is great at motivating a team along when times get tough. She constantly drives for outcomes and feels that details get in the way when she's busy. (which, if you've had a meeting with her, you'd realise is almost always). She abhors admin work or things that get in her way. In her workplace, she prefers direct communication from her colleagues and managers. Alana is actively involved in professional circles outside of work and likes to keep up with the news by reading management and productivity books.

Goal

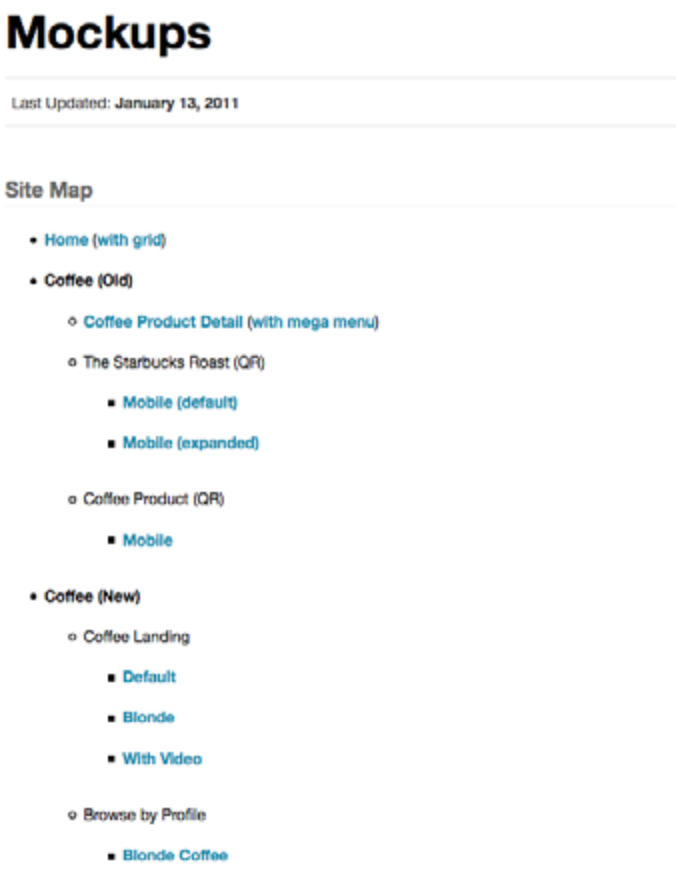
To get her team to be work more efficiently, less admin waste.

Motivations

- **Recognition** – wants superiors to see her as doing a great job
- **Completion** – wants to see all issues resolved and all boxes ticked. Incompleteness makes her anxious
- **Efficiency** – wants to make sure she and her team aren't spending too much time and energy on the wrong things

Source: Atlassian Design

Referring once again to the style guide for Atlassian Design, we see an entirely specialized section for their design personas, including a guide on how to use them, and a summary for each. Any member of the team has only to click the link and scroll down to see a succinct list of the company's UX personas.



Source: Starbucks

In a simplistic style lacking decorative flourish, Starbucks includes a page with clickable links to its past mockups. These mockups contain helpful design information, including grids and sample visual elements – a visual style guide in their own right. This is a great example of the advice we included in The Guide to Mockups, which says that you can chop up your mockups and insert them into style guides for quick reference.

Writing Guidelines

This section deals with the content of the writing, not the typography. In essence, there are a few fields to this section, though you could choose any or all, depending on your needs:

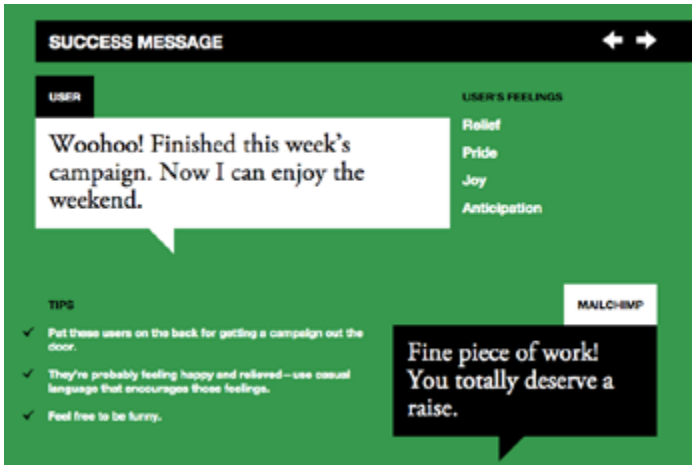
- **Subjective Guidelines** – These cover the type of content and the manner it's dealt with. This section could outline the tone and voice, including the target audience it aims to speak to (if not already covered in the branding section).
- **Objective Guidelines** – These cover specific language and grammar choices (such as the inclusion of the oxford comma, or customized spellings of words), when to write out numbers, or the preferred system for writing dates. While this is an essential section to most journalistic outlets, it could still be useful for any text-based site.
- **Suggested/Prohibited Language** – Some brands choose to either identify themselves with or avoid particular words or phrases. If you'd like to make a note to include certain "buzz" words, or perhaps avoid language that might remind the reader of something unflattering, mention it here.
- **Appropriate Language** – This section could solidify what is and is not appropriate language, including age levels and even profanity.

In an ideal world only the writers would have to deal with these guidelines. But there are circumstances in which copy must be added

or revised in a pinch, so it's helpful to have handy some formalized guidelines. Besides, as Basecamp suggests, good copywriting is good design.

Source: Mapbox

The Mapbox style guide says all it needs to say about its copywriting in this quick blurb. While neglecting subjective regulations like tone and voice, it makes definitive points about questionable grammar usage – dashes and commas – and textual branding. Note the external links for further clarification.



Source: MailChimp

Both beautiful and practical, MailChimp's editorial style guide is the best example we've found of the perfect editorial guidelines. Separated from the main style guide as its own microsite, the highly interactive guide feels immersive and fluid – a far cry from some of the dry "style manual" sections we've seen before. Most importantly, the guide forces writers to think about the user experience, outlining the emotions users feel upon encountering each design pattern.

Code Snippets

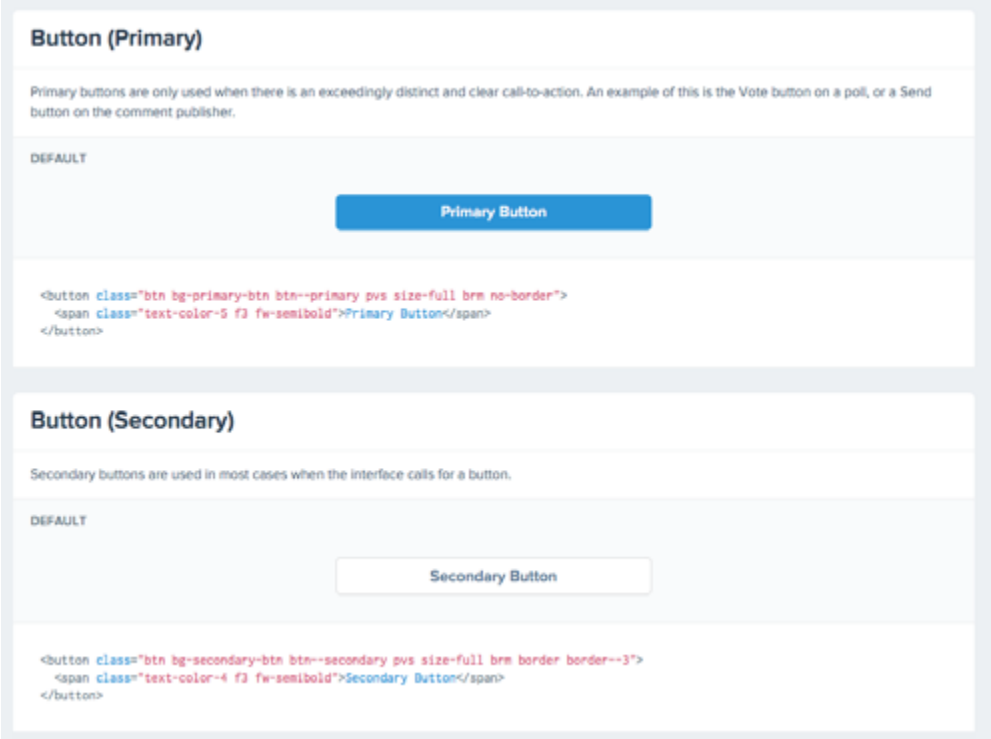
Last, we have one of the most important style guide elements, the reusable snippets of code. As far as style guides acting as a quick reference guide, remembering figures like fonts and sizes is a breeze compared to the toil of rewriting the same fragments of code.

Coding doesn't have to be an individual section. It can be sprinkled throughout the style guide accompanying the relevant elements. Use whichever method would be most helpful to your developers.

Style guides should include both CSS classes and IDs in the snippet samples. Ideally the developers should be able to copy and paste what they need.

Source: Oli.jp

In addition to including code bits throughout, the Oli.jp style guide also has a separate code section, where they explain some of the finer points to coding rather than simply showing the markup text.



Source: Salesforce

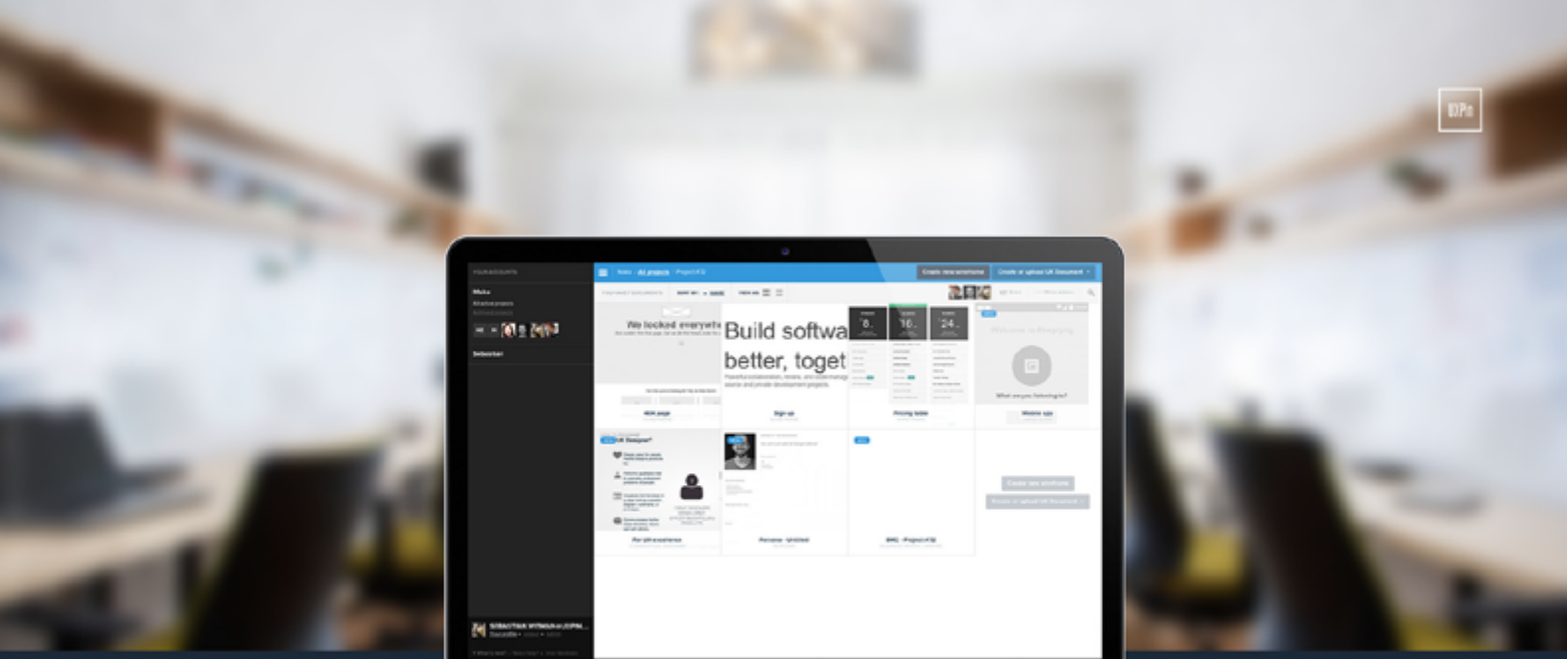
Alternatively, the Salesforce style guide lacks an individual code section, but instead presents the sample code next to each relevant entry. Whether or not to include a separate coding section or implement code throughout depends on your needs, but both will save the developers time when implementing the design.

Takeaway

As we mentioned from the start, feel free to mix-and-match these sections depending on your needs. These are only our recommendations based on what's helpful to most companies, but not all. Similarly, feel free to modify each section to your own needs. Some topics could make equal claims to more than one section (should proper link format be discussed in typography or navigation, should logo colors be outlined in branding or colors).

It's important to communicate with your team so that the style guide is built to help them find this information quickly. Getting lost when looking through your style guide and wasting time looking up items defeats the whole purpose – that's what you're hoping to avoid by creating a style guide in the first place.

Start wireframing and prototyping in UXPin (free trial)



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