Universal Style

by Patrick Scalisi

WRITING A STORY WITH A LOT OF WORLD BUILDING? A CUSTOMIZED COMPENDIUM CAN HELP YOU KEEP TRACK OF YOUR CREATION.

IN HIS FOREWORD to *Stephen King's The Dark Tower: A Concordance* – which serves as a kind of encyclopedia of the epic seven-book series – King explains how the world he had built for his massive western-fantasy series became harder and harder to organize with each passing volume. As he began work on the fifth book, *Wolves of the Calla*, he had a realization: "I needed some sort of exhaustive written summary of *everything* that had gone before, a *Dark Tower Concordance* that would be easy to search when I needed to find a reference in a hurry."

Chances are good that most of us won't be able to hire a professional research assistant like King did when he was writing his saga of Roland

Deschain. However, writers of science fiction and fantasy can certainly use King as an example (in more ways than one) by creating their own stylebooks – their own concordances – when crafting stories, especially ones that take place in invented, alternate or future worlds.

STYLEBOOKS have been part of the written word since the end of the 19th century. The first edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* was informally put together when the press opened in 1891, expanding from a sheet to a pamphlet to a book by 1906. About 50 years later, the Associated Press published its own formal stylebook, and *The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law* has been a touchstone for journalists since 1953.

In addition, many corporations large and small have company-specific stylebooks in their communications or public relations departments. I've worked on in-house stylebooks and know that they contain all of the jargon and usage rules specific to the company's voice and mission. These are some sample entries from the LEGO Group's "Fair Play" guide:

> ALWAYS use a noun after the trademark, e.g. LEGO toys, LEGO values.
>
> NEVER add a possessive "s," plural "s" or hyphen, e.g., LEGO's design, more LEGOs to play with, LEGO-bricks.

Such rules govern how the LEGO Group's intellectual property should be handled by writers, both within and outside the company.

Finally, many TV shows maintain "bibles" that serve as reference documents for the series' characters, settings and other elements. Consider the series bible for the rebooted *Battlestar Galactica*. The document, which you can read online, was written by producer and screenwriter Ronald D. Moore and includes characters' biographies, descriptions of vessels and even an explanation for how ships travel faster than light.

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About 18 months ago, I began work on what I hope will be my next novel. It's a sci-fi space opera that takes place in a vast universe populated by many different sentient species, including the human race. As I began writing, I kept having to refer back to previous pages: What was the name of that planet again? What did I call the space-age material in chapter three?

At first, I kept a simple list of planets with brief descriptions, adding to the tally whenever I needed to create a new locale. Soon, though, that list became too sparse, and I needed more of a reference material for the world I was creating.

Enter my own version of the *Encyclopedia Galactica*. Like the encyclopedia in Isaac Asimov's Foundation series or the reference tome mentioned in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, my *Encyclopedia Galactica* contains all the knowledge I need for the universe I've created. With listings of places, materials, fictional technology and alien customs, this document helps me easily recall how to spell dynoplas ("a special kind of plastic used for a variety of building purposes that is stronger than most metals") or the name of a pharmaceutical and biotech company on a planet called Nyoploris ("AugmentCon – short for Augmentation Holdings Consolidated").

I'm certainly not alone in this approach, as I learned when I spoke to author Jessica McHugh, whose early work includes an epic fantasy trilogy called *The Tales of Dominhydor*.

"Because I had created a brand-new world, religion and even language for my epic fantasy series, having a guide was essential for keeping track of locations and character lineage," says McHugh, who has published 17 books to date. "Plus, I needed the dictionary I'd written to name pretty much anything in the world. I went as far as to build a guide for the botany in Dominhydor, and though I wasn't sure I'd ever need it, I also wrote my own sort of Dominhydorian bible."

McHugh went on to explain that she was inspired greatly by *The Silmarillion* – the "stylebook" that J.R.R. Tolkien created to set the mythological foundation for Middle-Earth in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

"It really helped me stay organized when it came to writing epic fantasy," McHugh says of her own stylebook, "especially since those novels were the first I ever wrote."

SAY YOU'RE WRITING your own piece of speculative fiction. Chances are good that a stylebook can aid the process, especially if you find yourself inventing a lot of words or doing a significant amount of world building. Starting a stylebook from the beginning can also hasten your overall writing process, particularly if you're planning a trilogy or series. Finding yourself without a guide to the world you've created will only increase your workload down the line because you'll have to look back and find a particular passage every time you describe the same character.

This is the situation that *New York Times* best-selling fantasy author Terry Brooks found himself in after writing 13 books in his Shannara series. In the foreword to *The World of Shannara*, Brooks explains, "I thought (rather selfishly) that if all those things were

contained in one volume, I wouldn't have to go back and reread all the books every time I set out to write a new one. Maybe I wouldn't have to spend so much time trying to find where it was that I wrote that description of Garet Jax or Eldwist or the Mwellrets. What color where Brin Ohmsford's eyes anyway?"

It's easy to start and maintain a stylebook, and you can make the document as sparse or as detailed as you like. At the very least, I recommend starting a simple alphabetical list (people, places, things) with definitions. You can add to the list as your writing progresses. If you want to get more in depth, you can set up your stylebook like a dictionary, providing syllable breaks, usage suggestions and pronunciation guides. Or you can write detailed histories of each entry in your stylebook to provide the background for your own mind that may not necessarily make it into your book.

Author Max Booth III took a particularly novel approach to creating a stylebook when he was writing his latest book, *The Mind is a Razorblade*: He used a giant dry-erase board.

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"I used a huge, school-size whiteboard to map out each scene," says Booth. "This worked especially well for a scene toward the end that takes place in a cabin. The scene is mostly one long shoot-out, so before writing it, I first mapped out the floor plan of the cabin. It really helped picture the action scenes and naturally progress the characters from room to room."

In our conversation, Booth recommended that writers not limit themselves to creating on pen and paper or on their computer's word processor.

"Don't be afraid to get creative," Booth emphasizes. "I prefer to use a giant whiteboard. However, I've also used blocks and LEGO bricks to figure out building structures. As a writer, you must do what it takes to create worlds. If the world is not real to you, then it will not be real to the reader."

Both Booth and McHugh agree that their books are more cohesive for having used a stylebook or stylebook techniques to map out characters, settings and the "rules" for the worlds they had created.

"Using a guide in my early days of writing showed me just how much work goes into creating a world and its inhabitants," says McHugh. "A world can be built from large blocks – trees and sky – but what about the composition of those blocks, the history of those trees, what lies beyond the sky? In creating a guidebook, you create shades of world-building details that you might never use on the surface, but they're still there, quietly solidifying the reality of your fiction. It's the difference between using run-of-the-mill green paint and using varying shades of blue and yellow to create a hue that's uniquely yours. In my experience, that's the kind of world that absorbs readers."

Whatever your approach to creating a stylebook, I can guarantee that your world building will be stronger for it. And who knows? Maybe when your series is a runaway success, you'll have enough material to publish a companion book or concordance of your own someday. W

Patrick Scalisi is a journalist, magazine editor and author of *The Horse Thieves and Other Tales of the New West.*

Stupendous

Stylebooks

Many authors with ongoing book series have published or collaborated on stylebooks to go along with their novels. Want more ideas of what goes into a stylebook or how one is set up? Check out these great examples.

Stephen King's The Dark Tower: The Complete Concordance, Revised and Updated
by Robin Furth

The World of Shannara (Revised Ed.)
by Terry Brooks and Teresa Patterson

The World of Robert Jordan's The Wheel of Time
by Robert Jordan and Teresa Patterson

The Vampire Companion: The Official Guide to Anne Rice's The Vampire Chronicles
by Anne Rice and Katherine Ramsland

The Dune Encyclopedia
by Frank Herbert and Willis E. McNelly