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Removing the Stumbling Blocks to Using Styles

BY JUDY RELEFORD

Are you one of the many legal secretaries who have developed their own shortcuts for editing and formatting documents in Microsoft Word? Have you shied away from using styles?

Styles allow you to automatically format your entire document at once instead of having to do it as you go along. Although learning to use styles can seem a bit daunting at first, the benefits are worth the time and effort to implement better formatting practices.

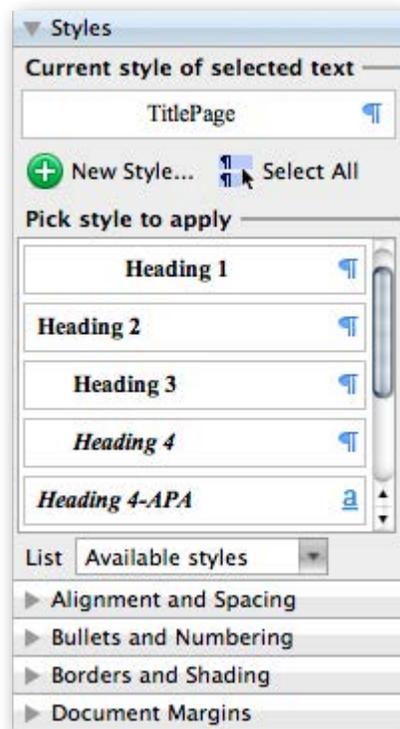
Those who have not yet mastered styles often rely on a few quick, familiar fixes to navigate edits and updates – perhaps using the “format painter” or the right-click function to apply or modify formatting. Yet these workarounds can represent traps. These tricks do not achieve the consistency using styles does. When these manually formatted documents go through multiple rounds of editing, the formatting may change or fail to update through every version.

While informal approaches may seem to work fairly well, choosing not to use styles can create greater problems.

Consider the experience of one law firm:

While the legal secretaries were working to adopt styles into their best practices, some of the attorneys were less willing to change their ways. When one such attorney emailed a document to a client familiar with styles, the client rejected the product and refused future work with the firm.

Of course, that firm immediately adopted a policy that all documents should be formatted properly with styles after that, but it was a hard lesson to learn.



SAVE TIME AND LOOK GOOD

Once you master using styles, you can significantly reduce the amount of time it takes to navigate the document, add/delete/rearrange numbered paragraphs, check cross-references for accuracy, generate and update a table of contents and reformat a scanned document. For a busy legal secretary, this can impact an entire day.

It is particularly valuable when attorneys and staff are on deadlines to submit briefs or other documents. Even a minor change to a citation or numbering scheme can create a lot of work when you have to make updates manually. The consistent use of styles allows you to update documents within minutes, not hours.

Using styles also improves standardization. Favorite styles can be saved as schemes for each attorney in your group and shared between users.

REMOVING THE STUMBLING BLOCKS TO USING STYLES

Some may not consider document formatting as carefully as they do logos and other brand marketing, but small details matter. When a firm sends out a product that doesn't demonstrate skill in formatting, clients may question the levels of expertise, skill and efficiency across the firm.

FINDING YOUR STYLE

You do not need to master every single style that exists in Microsoft Word. The key is to identify which are the most common or important to your work and learn to use them until they become second nature. Some good places to target include: numbered paragraphs, body paragraphs, block indents and titles.

Adopting styles doesn't have to be difficult. It is possible to incorporate styles into your office routine without resorting to hours of training or dramatically reworking the way you manage and complete tasks.

Often a firm will bring in a third-party provider who offers tools, training and support to make this transition easier. It's important to work with knowledgeable partners who can give you short, practical training sessions that will teach you what you need to know in ways that are efficient and easy to remember.

Learning to use styles in Microsoft Word takes a little time and lots of practice, but the overall rewards of consistent, easily editable, stable and professional-looking documents can give your firm faster response times and show your clients a very high appreciation for attention to all the important details.

Not only that, but it can make your job as a busy legal secretary just a little a bit easier every day, and that's always in style.

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Helpful Websites

Supreme Court of the United States

<http://www.supremecourt.gov>

Office of the Attorney General

www.ag.ca.gov

California Courts

<http://www.courts.ca.gov>

California Association of Legal Support Professionals

www.calspro.org

California Codes

<http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/calaw.html>

California State Bar

<http://www.calbar.ca.gov>

California Legislative Information

<http://www.leginfo.ca.gov>

U.S. Citizen and Immigration Services

<http://www.uscis.gov>

Public Access to Court Electronic Records

<http://pacer.gov>



American Medical Association

<http://www.ama-assn.org>

American Association of Law Libraries

<http://www.aallnet.org>

National Notary Association

<http://www.nationalnotary.org>

California Secretary of State

www.sos.ca.gov