

The SBL Handbook of Style, 2nd Edition

SBL Press. *The SBL Handbook of Style*. 2nd ed. Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014. 351 pp. \$39.95. Hardcover. ISBN: 9781589839649.

The SBL Handbook of Style (SBLHS) is a substantial supplement to the *Chicago Manual of Style (CMS)* for biblical studies and ancillary disciplines that goes beyond and at times differs from the rules found in *CMS*. Since its first edition in 1999, *SBLHS* has become an indispensable resource for students and scholars in biblical studies. While it has helped to standardize style, it is meant to reflect actual usage and “not make new law” (1). As such, it’s expected that “scholars and publishers will and should make decisions that trump standard styles” (1). Assuming familiarity with style guides in general and with the first edition in particular, I will first summarize the contents of *SBLHS*, focusing only on the updates and changes. Then I will consider a few aspects that I think need improvement. Lastly, I will discuss its physical and electronic versions.

The technicality of style guides has prompted the editors of *SBLHS* to simplify its contents to be more intuitive and logical by restructuring the chapters and appendices (see table below).

First Edition (1999)	Second Edition (2014)
1 Introduction: Using This Handbook	1 Introduction
2 Editorial Responsibilities	2 Responsibilities of an Author
3 Responsibilities of an Author	3 Responsibilities of an Editor
4 General Style	4 General Style
5 Transliterating and Transcribing Ancient Texts	5 Transliterating and Transcribing Ancient Texts
6 Indexes and Bibliographies	6 Notes and Bibliographies
7 Notes and Bibliographies	7 Indexes
8 Abbreviations	8 Abbreviations
Appendix A: Capitalization and Spelling Examples‡	Appendix A: Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Canons
Appendix B: Ancient Near Eastern Dates and Periods‡	Appendix B: English/Hebrew/Greek Versification
Appendix C: Ezra Traditions†	Appendix C: Texts from the Judean Desert
Appendix D: Hebrew Bible/ Old Testament Canons	Appendix D: Shepherd of Hermas*
Appendix E: Eng./Heb./Gk. Versification Compared	
Appendix F: Texts from the Judean Desert	
Appendix G: Concordance of Ugaritic Texts†	
Appendix H: Greek and Latin Works and their Abbrv.‡	
Appendix I: Hebrew and Greek Numbers†	
Appendix J: Editing and Proofreading Marks†	

†Dropped entirely for the second edition

‡Folded into an appropriate place in the main chapters of the second edition

*New in the second edition

The most noticeable change is the reduction of appendices. However, it is not as drastic as it seems. Three of the old appendices (A, B, and H) have been folded into §4 (A=§4.3.6 and B=§4.3.7.2) and §8 (H=§8.3.14.3). The new appendix D lays out the older and the newer numbering schemes for that work. As to the four dropped appendices, I began to speculate as to why they were excised and no doubt could have concocted some elaborate redaction theory

about the editors' choices and theological commitments. Instead, I just e-mailed SBL Press. They informed me that appendices C, G, and I were cut because their value was "informational rather than stylistic." Regarding appendix J, the decision to cut it was more practical: editorial and proofreading practices have shifted "to an almost entirely computer-based workflow" rendering "all these marks superfluous."

Chapters 2 and 3 have been transposed. Chapter 2 has been slightly reorganized and expanded. The second edition does not assume stylistic conformity to *SBLHS* as the first did. Technical discussions have been updated and submission workflows made entirely electronic. Chapter 3 places a greater stress on *CMS* for editorial style, and many authorities for names and terms have been updated to more recent publications.

Chapter 4 has been substantially expanded from thirteen to forty-three pages. Expanded discussions include use of ellipses (§4.1.3), hyphenation and compounds (§4.3.2.2), and use of words from foreign languages (§4.3.2.5). The new material includes how to cite ancient texts in the main text (§§4.1.7–4.1.8.4), a listing of archaeological site names (§4.3.3.4), and general style for the Qur'an and Islamic sources (§4.3.5).

In chapter 5, there are two changes for Hebrew transliteration: first, "ə" is now used for a vocal *shewa* for academic style (§5.1.1.2), and second, the stems/*binyanim* are now consistently rendered with the general purpose style (§5.1.1.3). Transliteration conventions are addressed or listed for a dozen additional languages (§5.8), and eleven more symbols for transcribing ancient texts have been added (§5.9).

In chapter 6, the sequence of information in bibliographic citations has stayed roughly the same with the addition of electronic source information (§6.1.6). As in *CMS*, including access dates for electronic sources is now no longer recommended. Also, *SBLHS* now follows *CMS* footnotes in placing only the basic publication information in parentheses (city, publisher, and date), and not series, numbers, etc. (§6.1.1). Moreover, abbreviations for journals and series should now be used in the notes and bibliography (70). Following *CMS*, there's a slight change in the capitalization of modern Latin titles (§6.1.3.8). Expanded treatment is given to standard personal names (§6.1.2), and the list of press names (§6.1.4.1) has been substantially expanded to over 400 publishers. New bibliographic examples include multiple publishers for a single book (§6.2.15), a chapter in a multivolume work (§6.2.22), an electronic book (§6.2.25), an electronic journal article (§6.3.10), text editions published online with no print counterpart (§6.4.13), online databases (§6.4.14), and websites and blogs (§6.4.15). These last five supplement and replace previous electronic format examples.

The title of chapter 7 has been helpfully shortened to just "Indexes." While the principles in this chapter are virtually the same as in the first edition, the second edition points more readily to *CMS* and external authorities on indexes.

In general, the abbreviation lists in chapter 8 have been substantially updated to reflect more recent versions (e.g., ESV and NETS) and secondary sources (e.g., *GELS* and *NIDB*). But there are a few major changes. North American state and province abbreviations now reflect postal codes (§8.1.1). Era abbreviations like BCE are now regular caps without periods (§8.1.2), and versions of the Bible are also just regular caps (§8.2.1). The titles of unattributed ancient primary sources are no longer italicized (§§8.3.4 – 8.3.13). Abbreviations are one of the handbook's major strong points, which helps enable the new rule on their use in notes and bibliographies. Yet the editors state, "We wish to be quite clear that authors and publishers may freely choose to vary from the usages we describe, provided they appropriately document their chosen abbreviations for readers" (118).

The same reasoning applies to the whole of *SBLHS* where it may explicitly prefer one convention, but where the audience readily uses another. The rules are more descriptive than prescriptive. What matters is that references and conventions are not obscure to the intended readership and that usage is documented somewhere — either in the text itself, or in a style guide like *SBLHS* or *CMS*, or an organization's own.

Since for years I've used *SBLHS* primarily for citation, the following comments reflect the added scrutiny I have given to this concern in hope that future revisions or editions will take them into consideration.

Biblical commentaries are complex items. In the second edition, examples for citing a single volume of a multivolume commentary in a series (§6.4.10) have been removed. It now suggests using §6.2.21 — citing a titled volume in a multivolume work. The first edition's examples are from Anchor Bible (AB) commentary, but they and the suggested §6.2.21 overcomplicate the citation. Here is how it looks as a footnote:

³Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I: 1-50*, vol. 1 of *Psalms*, AB 16 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1965), 44.

The volume has its own unique title, publication year, and number in AB. I think it is superfluous to include “vol. 1 of *Psalms*.” Without that bit, it is just cited like a Bible commentary (§6.4.9). Moreover, I cannot think of a multivolume commentary within a commentary series that would need this treatment — not in AB, *Hermeneia*, *World Biblical Commentary*, etc. — and neither, it seems, can the editors of the Student Supplement (<http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/SBLHSsupp2015-02.pdf>).

Yet commentaries of a bibliographically complicated type — like the *New Interpreter’s Bible (NIB)* — are not at all addressed. The Student Supplement tries to address them, and here’s where the new rule, that “[s]eries and journal titles are now abbreviated in both the bibliography and notes” (1), gets messy. The Student Supplement applies it to the *NIB*, apparently following *SBLHS*’s own extension of the rule to encyclopedias and dictionaries (§6.3.6). But what confuses me is that the rule is not also extended to prominent primary source and reference sets like *COS*, *ANET*, *TDNT*, et al. in its own examples. The new rule is, I think, inconsistently applied, making citation more complicated than it needs to be.

How to treat e-books in citations is an evolving practice. The second edition has made a significant advance from the first in treating them, but a couple issues still need further discussion. The differentiation between PDF e-books and other formats for e-readers is emphasized (§6.2.25). But increasingly e-books are provided via platforms like EBSCOhost or MyiLibrary, with a mix of PDF and EPUB formats. While the PDFs can be read in a browser and cited as the print version, the EPUB version may be read in a browser but not downloaded to a device and cannot be cited as the print version. Yet it is not a book-converted-to-a-website like the Oxford Handbooks in Oxford Online Reference. My suggestion is that, in addition to being able to cite the e-reader device, *SBLHS* should also indicate that citing the file format (usually EPUB) is also acceptable since it may be consulted without a device.

Another clarification is needed for URLs. While *SBLHS* prefers a DOI, many resources do not have one, and a URL will have to do. However, it needs to be explicit that URLs should be *stable*, not just what displays in the browser’s address bar. Another complication is that stable URLs on some platforms tend to resolve via a proxy server (e.g., permalinks on EBSCOhost usually include institution-specific authentication resolvers). Future editions should note that stable URLs should not include proxy server information.

Finally, the sewn binding of the print version is very tight and should hold up for a long time even with heavy use. The paper is a durable weight and is slightly tinted. The typeface has also changed for the better. The design layout, however, is a step backwards. Whereas the first edition’s third-level headings (e.g., §6.4.6) were not exactly pretty, they were at least distinguishable from the main text. In the second edition, they are the exact style and indentation as the main text, which makes locating the desired section more difficult than it should be on pages containing a lot of breaks and spaces (e.g., the pages in §6). In a reference book where users repeatedly flip from section to section, this is unfortunate.

The SBL Press addressed some questions early on about the availability of a digital version (http://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/SBLHS2_FAQ.pdf). In short, there will be digital versions, but not a free one for SBL members anytime soon. Digital versions have since been made available on several platforms. This past spring, Amazon published a “print replica” Kindle version, and the Google Play store released an “original pages” version. Both terms (“print replica” and “original pages”) mean that the e-book is just a PDF with some enhancements. Perhaps of more interest and use to individual students and scholars is the handbook’s 2016 release on the Bible study applications Accordance and Logos. These versions are *not* print replica PDFs.

Theological libraries should have the second edition of *SBLHS* readily accessible for reference. While such libraries and their institutions may have local style guides, *SBLHS* is still an essential resource for biblical studies. The second edition has made major improvements despite the need for some ongoing refinements as the new rules are put into practice and as information resources continue to evolve.

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