

# Markdown to InDesign Simplified

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The path from author to InDesign is often fraught.  
Markdown offers writers and InDesigners a smoother path.  
Our new script makes this lightning fast.

Instructions  
for the script  
start on page 5

by Steve Laskevitch

If a Microsoft Word user employs styles, and does so reliably and consistently, placing the Word doc into an InDesign publication is a smooth process. I congratulate the several people who are able to enjoy this workflow.

The rest of us wrangle content that is formatted erratically, if at all. To be honest, it's not fair to ask content developers (aka, *writers*) to interrupt their train of thought to find formatting toolbars and apply styling. Their eyes are on the words, fingers forming *les mots justes*. Markdown is a way for a writer to easily add a few characters here and there so that someone doing layout with that text can recognize an intended header from a subhead and what should be bold from what should be italic. The writer *should* leave it to us to prettify their finely formed words.

## What is Markdown?

In the days of those machines known as “typewriters” (you can find them in museums and trendy cafés), a writer would create a plain text manuscript that someone later would “mark up.” A typesetter would consult a style guide to know how each markedup element should be formatted.

In other words, markup is a way of indicating what a given chunk of text is, whether a header, a regular paragraph, or some phrase that should be emphasized.

The image shows a side-by-side comparison of a text document. On the left, the document is in a plain text format with labels in red indicating different parts: 'title' for the main heading, 'subtitle' for the subheading, and 'body' for the paragraphs. On the right, the same document is shown in a formatted InDesign layout. The main heading is bold and centered, the subheading is bold and left-aligned, and the paragraphs are justified. A red circle highlights the word 'very' in the first paragraph, with a red arrow pointing to it from the word 'emphasis' written in red. Below the comparison, a caption reads: 'A fanciful example of markup and the resulting set type. In reality, markup is usually far more cryptic.'

title From Pride And Prejudice  
subtitle Paragraphs Taken At Random

body Their engagements at Rosings were as frequent during the last week of her stay as they had been at first. The very last evening was spent there; and her ladyship again inquired minutely into the particulars of their journey, gave them directions as to the best method of packing, and was so urgent on the necessity of placing gowns in the only right way, that Maria thought herself obliged, on her return, to undo all the work of the morning.

body When they parted a good journey, and Miss de Bourgh her hand to both.

body On Saturday morning Elizabeth and Mr. Collins met for breakfast a few minutes before the others appeared; and he took the opportunity of paying the parting civilities which he deemed indispensably necessary.

body "I know not, Miss Elizabeth," said he, "whether Mrs. Collins has yet expressed her sense of your kindness in coming to us; but I am very certain you will not leave the house without receiving her thanks for it. The favour of your company has been much felt, I assure you. We know how little there is to tempt anyone to our humble abode. Our plain manner of living, our small rooms and few domestics, and the

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When they parted, Lady Catherine, with great condescension, wished them a good journey, and invited them to come to Hunsford again next year; and Miss de Bourgh exerted herself so far as to curtsy and hold out her hand to both.

On Saturday morning Elizabeth and Mr. Collins met for breakfast a few minutes before the others appeared; and he took the opportunity of paying the parting civilities which he deemed indispensably necessary.

"I know not, Miss Elizabeth," said he, "whether Mrs. Collins has yet expressed her sense of your kindness in coming to us; but I am very certain you will not leave the house without receiving her thanks for it. The favour of your company has been much felt, I assure you. We know how little there is to tempt anyone to our humble abode. Our plain manner of living, our small rooms and few domestics, and the

Elizabeth was eager with her thanks and assurances of happiness. She had spent six weeks with great enjoyment; and the pleasure of being with Charlotte, and the kind attentions she had received, must make her feel the obliged. Mr. Collins was gratified, and with a more smiling solemnity replied:



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## Markdown Is Markup

In modern times, we have other markup. HTML documents of which websites are made are plain text documents which support no formatting. HTML, Hypertext Markup Language, is a markup “code” that a browser application can interpret and format appropriately. But HTML is laborious to type. Consider the title of a manuscript. In HTML. It would be written thus:

```
<h1>From Pride and Prejudice</h1>
```

Try typing that quickly! Some of the “tags” on either side of an element can be verbose, like the `<strong>` tag, which usually yields bold type.

## Markdown Is Easy to Type

Two decades ago, John Gruber and Aaron Swartz invented Markdown, an easier-to-type markup that can be converted to HTML if desired. Using Markdown, the top-level header above becomes:

```
# From Pride and Prejudice
```

With Markdown, instead of using in a `<strong>` tag to make a phrase bold, we use two underscores or asterisks. Both of the following designate text that should be bold:

```
**this is marked up to be bold**
```

```
__this is marked up to be bold__
```

Not only is this wrist-saving, but it’s fairly easy to learn and more likely to be used by content developers. That’s why it’s become a very popular tool. The basic syntax of Markdown can be found via the following URL. Much of it assumes we’re converting to HTML. That bit may be ignored for our use in InDesign.

<https://www.markdownguide.org/basic-syntax/>

What’s been missing is a fast and easy way to convert this code to styled text in InDesign.

## Getting Markdown Text Into InDesign

Since Markdown doesn’t have formatting *per se*, it can be written in any text editor: Notepad, TextEdit, Scrivener, Ulysses, BBEdit, Word, Apple Pages, and many more. Some apps even preview with provisional formatting. But the file that’s delivered to the InDesign user can really be just a plain text file (.TXT). You can copy and then paste into InDesign and this should strip any styles or formatting from the source app. Initially, the InDesign document’s current default styles can be applied to this text.

## Styling Markdown in InDesign

There are many paths for converting Markdown to HTML, since that is what it was originally developed to do. For other formats, we could use a computer’s command line (Terminal in macOS, for example) to use a utility known as PANDOC, which can convert a huge number of formats to almost any other, including Word and InCopy documents. But the conversion to InCopy sadly misses some common Markdown elements and the conversion to Word requires a lot prep in Word. And still, that text isn’t yet in InDesign.

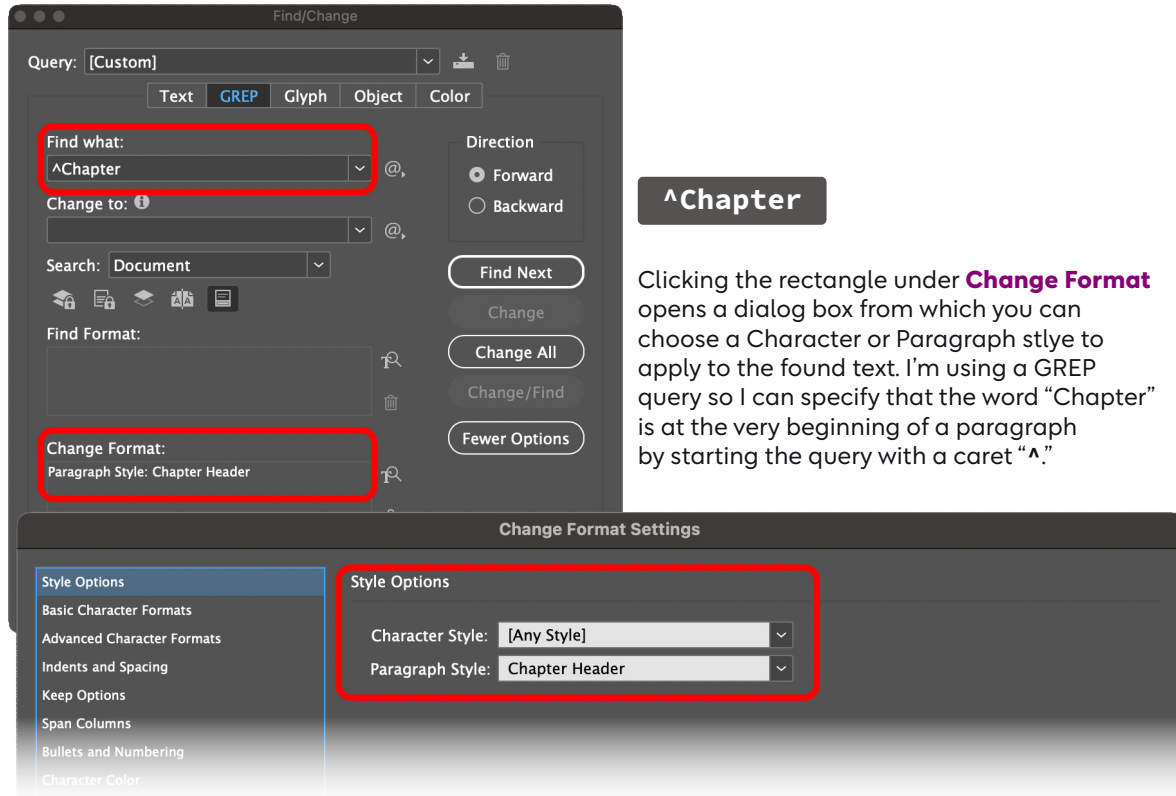
Also, many of my students lose interest as soon as I mention using the command line! They (and I) want something more direct, less code-laden, and less dangerous to the computer. We can use InDesign itself!



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## Find/Change to Style

In my classes and in my day-to-day layout work, I regularly use InDesign's powerful **Find/Change** to apply styles. If there's some "hook" in the text that I can hang the style on, I'm delighted. For example, in a novel I laid out, each chapter began like "Chapter Eighteen." I used a GREG query to find only paragraphs that *began* with the word "Chapter" and style them. This worked, since no other paragraphs led with "Chapter."



Clicking the rectangle under **Change Format** opens a dialog box from which you can choose a Character or Paragraph style to apply to the found text. I'm using a GREG query so I can specify that the word "Chapter" is at the very beginning of a paragraph by starting the query with a caret "^."

A GREG query that looks for Markdown is also effective. For example, in Markdown, a single underscore or asterisk is put on either side of text that should be emphasized (italized, usually). Double underscores or asterisks are for strong emphasis (bold).

**Here's a text that should be italized and here's more.**

The GREG code for "one or more characters" is `_.+` (a period means "any character," the plus sign means "one or more of those"). Don't worry—the script will be doing this, but a little GREG is good to know. To style the phrases above, that is, to find one or more characters bookended with underscores, we might try this query:

`_.+ _`

But GREG is greedy. It will actually present `"_should be italized_ and _here's more_"` as the result! That's because that is, after all, *one or more characters with underscores on either end*. It reminds me of an annoying person who mocks us saying, "I don't care what you meant, what you actually *said* was..."

We want the *shortest* match that fits that pattern. In GREG, it's an easy fix once you know the code!

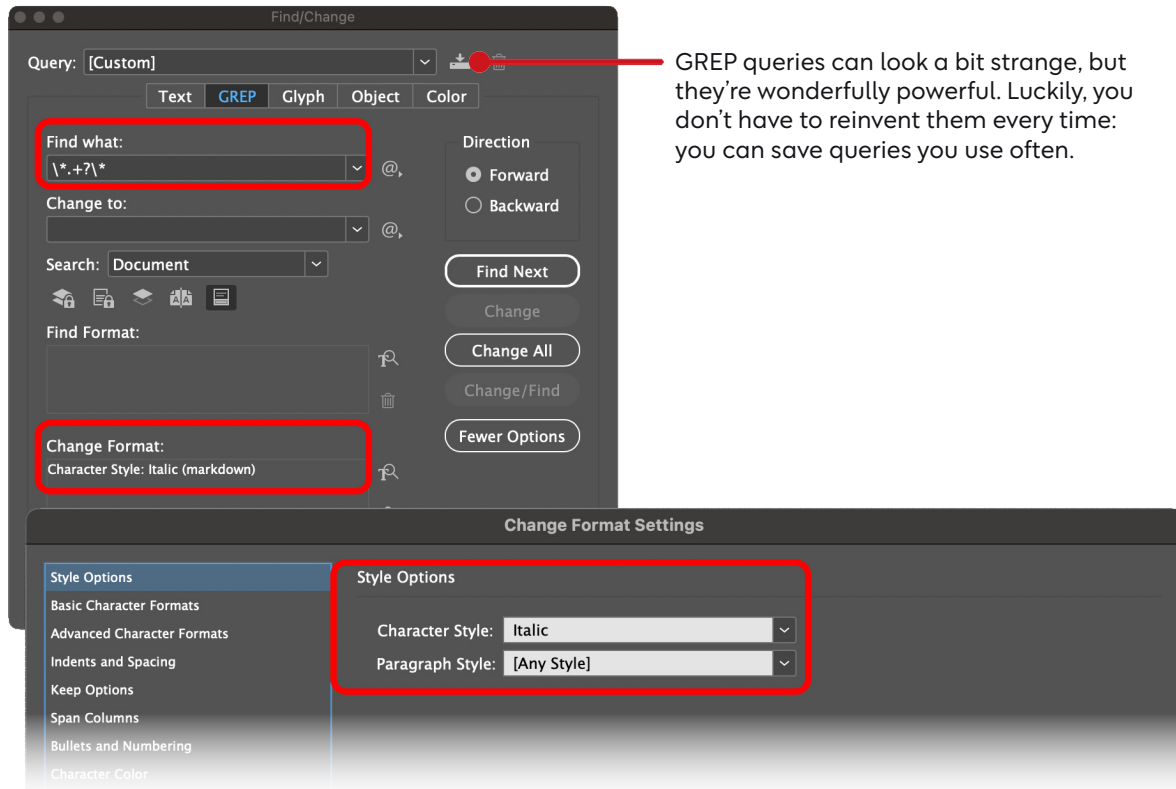
`_.+? _`

The plus and question mark combo means "one or more, but shortest match". No doubt you've noticed that a period, plus sign, and question mark all have special meaning in GREG? Turns out that asterisks do, too. That's why my examples above use underscores.

To find a literal character with GREP that usually has special meaning, we put a backslash in front of it. So if the writer uses asterisks instead of underscores (which is legal in Markdown), our GREP query would be:

```
\*.\+?\*
```

An odd-looking string! The **Find/Change** window would look like this:



As I've mentioned, the supplied script will be doing many such queries to apply styles, convert markdown text to tables, and more. To learn more about GREP and scripts in InDesign, seek out [the books by Peter Kahrel](#). For now, let's install and use the script I cobbled together for you.

Doing this dozens of times can get tedious. That's what scripts are for.

## FindChangeBylistMarkdown Script and its Helpers

For many years, InDesign has shipped with a script called FindChangeByList. It cleans up many annoyances like double spaces and returns, converts two hyphens to a single em dash, and more. A courteous feature of this script is its use of a human-readable text file that non-coders can edit to alter the list of queries it performs. The text file even has instructions on how to use it. To create my script, I started with FindChangeByList and my own text file and altered both extensively. The script applies styles that I'm providing in an InDesign file called MarkdownStyles.indd.

You can then edit those styles to reflect your aesthetic or replace them with styles you may already have in the destination document. Below, I'll tell you how to do that.

## Installing The Script

First, get the script and its assets.

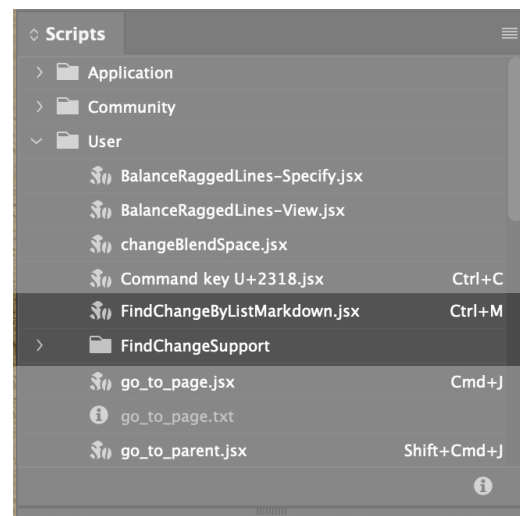
Download from <https://luminousworks.com/resources#markdown>. This will yield a zipped folder called Markdown2ID. Inside are several things in addition to this PDF:

- The script (FindChangeBylistMarkdown.jsx)
- The support folder containing the list of queries text file
- An InDesign doc called **MarkdownStyles.indd**

This script and its assets are supplied "AS IS." We make no warranties, express or implied. The script has performed well for our uses, but still, use at your own risk.

Let's put these where they're needed.

1. Put the InDesign file somewhere convenient and memorable. The script will prompt you for this file's location so it can load the styles. You can edit those styles to suit your taste, but don't rename or delete any or move them from their style groups. The script and its support folder together need to go somewhere very specific. InDesign can get you there:
2. Show ("invoke") InDesign's Scripts panel:  
Go to **Window > Utilities > Scripts**.  
That panel has three folders: Application, Community, and User.
3. In the Scripts panel, Right-click on the **User** folder then choose **Show in Finder** (macOS) or **Show in Explorer** (Windows).  
Now you're viewing the contents of a folder actually called **Scripts Panel** (weirdly, it's not called "User").
4. Copy the script (**FindChangeBylistMarkdown.jsx**) and **FindChangeSupport** folder that are in the **Markdown2ID** folder and paste them in that **Scripts Panel** folder.
5. Go back to InDesign. Those items should now be visible in the Scripts panel's User folder (see figure at right).



## Using The Script

Make sure you have an InDesign story with Markdown.

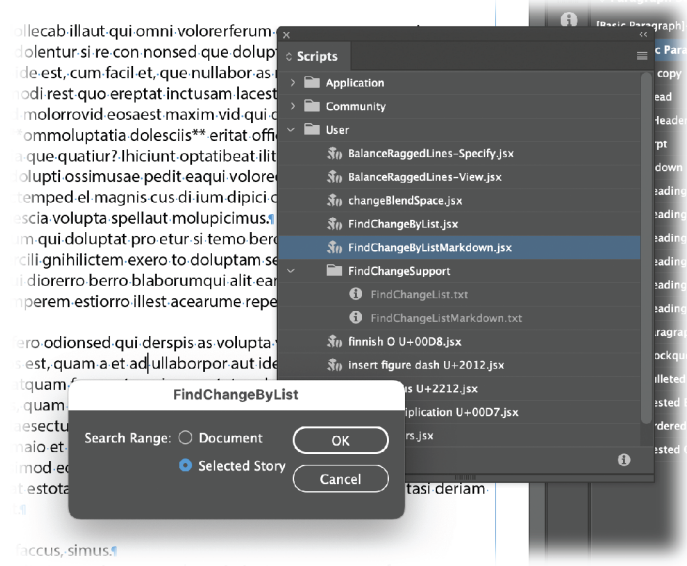
1. If you have other content that should be left alone, insert the Type tool cursor into the story with Markdown before running the script.
2. When you're ready, double-click the name of the script in the Scripts panel.



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3. It will ask you the location of the file **MarkdownStyles.indd**. Select that file and choose to load all the styles possibly excepting [Basic Paragraph].
4. If your cursor was in a story, the script will then ask you to specify whether you want to affect the entire document or just the story where your cursor is.

Since I had other text that I wanted unaffected by the script, I put my text cursor in the Markdown text's story before double-clicking the FindChangeByListMarkdown.jsx script.



If the script succeeds, all the Markdown text should have InDesign styles applied. At this point, you may edit those styles to taste or replace them with styles you already have in the document.

## Replacing My Styles With Yours

If you already have styles in the document to which you've added Markdown, you can swap out my styles for your versions. For example, you may have a style for body text that you'd prefer over my style called "Paragraph." Use the process below to do this substitution and eliminate unneeded styles at the same time. Do this by deleting the Style Groups called "markdown" in several panels. The order matters.

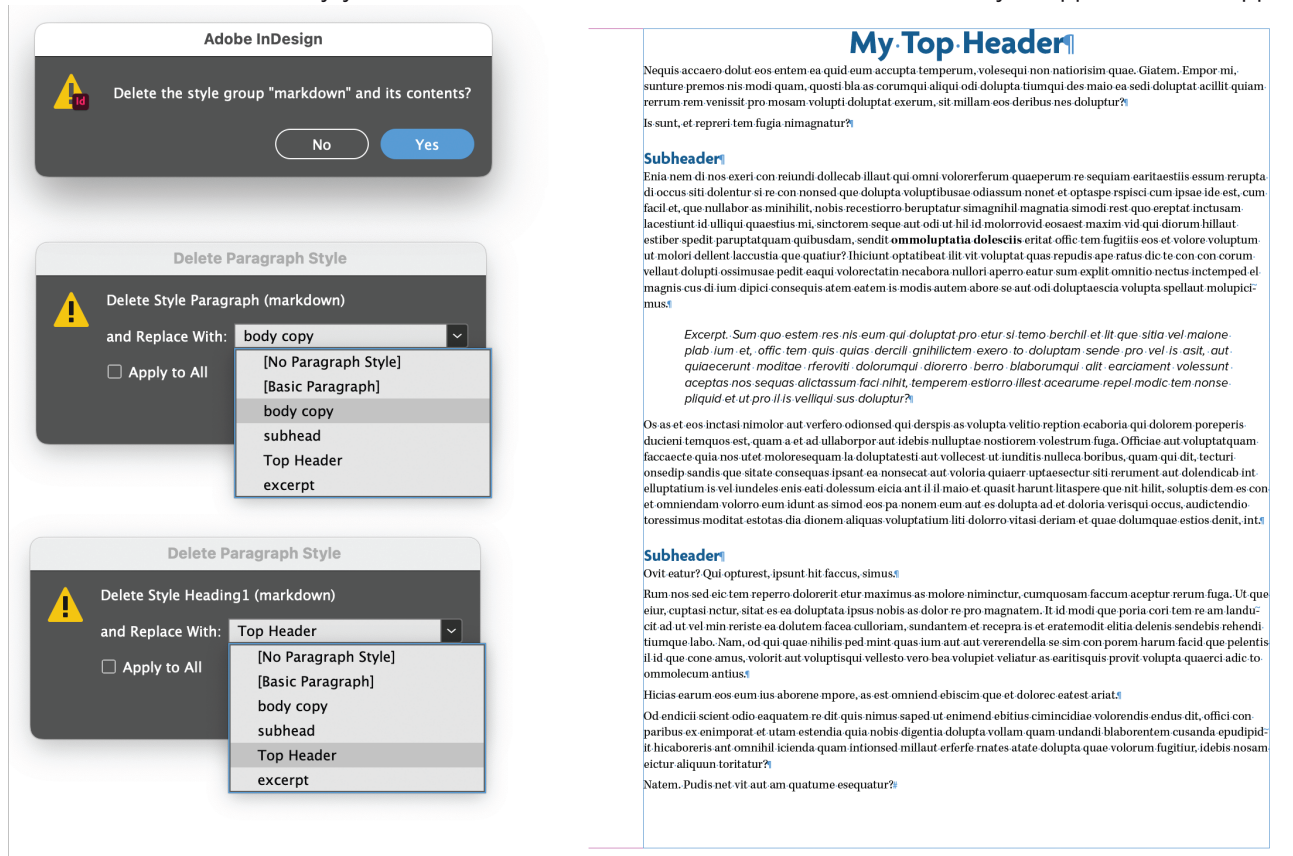
1. **Table Styles panel:** With *nothing selected*, highlight the folder (Style Group) called markdown in, first, the Table Styles panel. To replace the table style within it, click the small trashcan at the bottom of that panel.
2. You'll be asked if you want to delete that Style Group. The answer is **Yes**.
3. If there were tables in the text you just formatted, you can choose a replacement from table styles that weren't in the markdown group. In the case of the style niceTableStyle, choose whatever table style you have.
4. **Cell Styles panel:** highlight the folder (Style Group) called markdown in, first, the Table Styles panel. Then click the small trashcan at the bottom of that panel then choose substitutes for each one as prompted.
5. **Paragraph Styles panel:** Delete the markdown group by highlighting it then clicking the trashcan. For each of the styles that are actually used, such as the one called "Paragraph", you'll choose a replacement from your own styles that weren't in the markdown group. In the case of the style Paragraph, choose whatever you're using for body text. **Do NOT tick the box to Apply to All!**



6. **Character Styles panel:** Do exactly as with the Paragraph Styles panel, choosing your own styles as substitutes for mine.

In the example in the following figures, I used only four Paragraph Styles from that group, so I had to choose only four substitutes. The rest were deleted without comment.

Deleting the markdown style groups causes InDesign to prompt you to choose substitutes. If you have any, you can choose them one at a time for each Markdown style supplied in the Snippet.



If you think this script may be useful in the future, you should consider opening the file **MarkdownStyles.indd** to edit the styles it contains. (Don't rename them or move them from the style group folders they're in unless you want to edit the script and helper text file!) In that way, you can avoid the substitution steps above.

Note: You may assign a shortcut to scripts (and *many* other things) via **Edit > Keyboard Shortcuts...**

## Summary

1. Place Markdown text with no formatting in its own story (if there's other content)
2. Consider redefining the styles in the supplied document MarkdownStyles.indd
3. If other text is in the document, put the text cursor in the Markdown text story
4. Double-click the script **FindChangeByListMarkdown.jsx**
5. Locate the styles doc and set the scope of the script (if prompted)
6. To replace my supplied styles with your own, delete each Style Group (in the Table, Paragraph, and Character Styles panels) and choose a substitute style for each being deleted

With all the assets in place, this process really takes only about a minute! **Enjoy!**



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