

Associated Press Style Guidelines

Summarized by Professor Jack Gillespie, Rowan University, Ret.

The style items that follow deal with the problems most often found in news stories. In fact, they account for 99 percent of all style errors. If you learn to follow these guidelines, you'll produce clean copy free of unnecessary mistakes.

Academic Degrees

The preferred form is bachelor's degree, master's degree and doctorate, all lowercase and with an apostrophe for the first two. Use B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. only when the need to identify many individuals by degree on first reference would make the preferred form cumbersome. Use the abbreviations only after a full name, never after just a last name.

When used after a name, the abbreviation is set off with commas: George Youknowwho, Ph.D., spoke at the dedication ceremony.

Do not use two titles with a name as in: Dr. George Youknowwho, Ph.D., spoke at the dedication ceremony.

Acronyms

Do not put an acronym in parentheses after the full name of an organization. For example: Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA). You can use the acronym in subsequent references but only if readers can easily recognize what it means. You can use some well-known acronyms, such as FBI, CIA and YMCA, in all references.

Addresses

Use the abbreviations Ave., Blvd. and St. only with numbered addresses: 1400 Massachusetts Ave., but Massachusetts Avenue. Spell out alley, circle, drive, road, terrace, court in all address forms. Spell out and capitalize First through Ninth when used as street names. Use figures and suitable endings for 10th and above. Some publications do abbreviate words like terrace, road and drive, and some even lowercase all letters of the abbreviation, but most follow the above guidelines. Learn the styles of the publications you deal with.

Book and other titles

Capitalize the principal words, including prepositions and conjunctions of four or more letters, and put quotation marks around book, movie, opera, play, poem, song, television program, lecture, speech and works of art titles. Do not underline titles.

Follow the same capitalization rules but do not put quotes around the Bible.

Use italics for catalogs of reference material, almanacs, directories, dictionaries, encyclopedias, gazettes, handbooks, magazines and newspapers.

Cents

Always use an Arabic number and the word cents with penny amounts:
1 cent, 2 cents, 25 cents, 43 cents.

Compound adjectives

Hyphenate all compound adjectives except when the first word ends in *ly*. For example: odd-numbered years, up-to-date material, newly discovered manuscript, early blooming rose. Also, 5-year-old boy (note Arabic number). He is a 5-year-old, but a boy 5 years old.

Dates and days

Do not use *st*, *nd*, *rd* or *th* with dates. Use figures alone. Do not use on before dates. It's an excess word. The committee will meet May 8, not on May 8.

Do not abbreviate days of the week except in tabular material. Don't use on with days. They met Thursday, not on Thursday.

Dimensions

Use figures and spell out inches, feet, yards, etc. to indicate depth, height, length and width. Hyphenate adjectival forms before nouns. Some examples: He is 5 feet 10 inches tall. She is a 5-foot-4-inch dynamo. The team signed a 7-footer. The tool shed is 20 feet long, 10 feet wide and 8 feet high. The room is 9 feet by 12 feet. She bought a 9-by-12 rug for the room.

Dollars

Use the dollar sign and Arabic numbers. Examples: \$15, \$24, \$2, \$463. Do not use a decimal and two zeroes with even-numbered amounts such as those in the examples. But do use the decimal with amounts such as \$15.25, \$4.95 and \$365.85.

For large dollar amounts, use a dollar sign, Arabic number and the appropriate word: \$2 million, \$15 billion. For amounts like \$2,543,000, \$3,100,000 and \$15,637,000,000, the correct form is \$2.5 million, \$3.1 million and \$15.6 billion.

Hours

Do not use a colon and two zeroes with an even-numbered hour. For example: 2 a.m., not 2:00 a.m.; 9 p.m., not 9:00 p.m. But use the colon with 8:15 a.m., 6:45 a.m., etc.

Months

When you use a date with them, abbreviate all months that can be abbreviated. For example: Dec.15, Jan. 3, Oct. 4. When the month stands alone or is used with the year only, do not abbreviate. Examples: December, December 1982. (Note: No comma between December and 1982.)

Numbers

Use Arabic numbers for acts of a play, addresses, ages, aircraft names, betting odds, TV channels, chapters, congressional or other political districts, course numbers, court decisions, dates, decimals, distances, earthquake magnitudes, election results, formulas, fractions, handicaps, heights, highway designations, latitude, longitude, miles, model numbers, monetary units, with No., page numbers, percents, political divisions, proportions, ratios, recipes, room numbers, route numbers, scene numbers, scores, serial numbers, sizes, spacecraft designations, speeds, telephone numbers, temperatures and years.

For amendments to the United States Constitution, spell out and capitalize First through Ninth, as in the Fifth Amendment. Use figures and the appropriate ending for 10th and above, as in the 21st Amendment. Always capitalize amendment when you use it with a number

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For centuries, spell out and use lowercase for first through ninth. All others use an Arabic number with the appropriate ending, such as 10th and 20th. The word century is always lowercase unless it's part of a proper name, as in 20th Century Fox.

For court names, use Arabic numbers with endings and capitalize the name of the court: 5th Circuit Court.

For decades, use Arabic numbers and add s with no apostrophe. Examples: 1920s, 1890s.

For fleet designations, use Arabic numbers with appropriate endings: 6th Fleet.

For uses not covered above, spell out whole numbers below 10, use figures for 10 and above: two cars, 43 trucks, six buses, 475 bicycles.

Generally, spell out large numbers like two million and three billion.

People titles

Put long titles after names and in lowercase, except for the words that are usually capitalized. For example: Carlton Quackenbush, Yale University vice president for planning, will speak here tonight.

Short titles used in front of names usually take capitals if the title is official. For example: President George Goodman, Vice President Harry Throckmorton. The exception: occupational titles, as in attorney George Flowers and editor Paul Petunia.

Do not use Mr. in any reference except in an obituary. (Note: the New York Times and a few others are exceptions to this rule.) Some publications continue to use Mrs., Miss and Ms. (only after the first reference) in all stories. Some use them in all stories except sports stories. The trend now leans toward not using them at all, just as with male subjects. Whatever you do, make sure you're consistent throughout the story.

Abbreviate the following titles before full names: Dr., Gov., Lt. Gov., Rep., the Rev. and Sen. Do not continue to use the title beyond the first reference. For example, the first reference might be Sen. Claude Claghorn, but in subsequent references, use only Claghorn. The first reference might be Dr. Michael Malapractiss, but in subsequent references, use only Malapractiss.

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Spell out all titles except Dr. and Mrs. when you use them in a direct quote. Examples: He said, "Dr. Paul Sampson saved my life." "Mrs. Helen Murphy will get the award," the chief said. "Senator George Capp introduced the bill," Flagstaff said. "I trust Reverend Harry Tyson," the woman said.

Punctuation

Do not use a comma before the last item in a simple series: They picked Claude, Carmichael and Luther.

The period and the comma always go inside the quotation marks. The rule holds for full quotes, partial quotes and even for quotes used for emphasis. "No one can break this rule and expect to pass the course," the professor said. He made an exception for the young man in the front row other students call "Scoop."

The question mark and the exclamation point go inside when they apply to the quoted matter only and outside when they apply to the whole sentence. Some examples:

Who wrote "Gone With the Wind"?
He asked, "How long will it take?"
Did you hear him say, "I won't go"?
"Never!" she shouted.
I hated reading "Silas Marner!"
"Well, I like that!" she exclaimed.

According to the AP Stylebook, the semicolon goes inside when it applies to the quoted matter only and outside when it applies to the whole sentence. Most other stylebooks insist it always goes outside. Common practice these days seems to show it on the inside more than the outside. So take your choice but be consistent.

Seasons

Lowercase spring, summer, fall and winter and all derivations, such as springtime. Capitalize only when part of a formal name, as in Winter Olympics.

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States

Abbreviate all states when they are used with a town or city except for Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas and Utah. For example: Alexandria, Va., but Bangor, Maine.

Do not abbreviate states when they stand alone. For example: He was a Nebraska resident.

Suspensive Hyphenation

Use suspensive hyphenation to cut down on the number of words in a sentence. Some examples:

We designed the program for 3- and 4-year-old children.

He received a 10- to 20-year sentence after he was convicted of armed robbery.