

A Primer on AP Style

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The AP Stylebook is the second most important book you will use as a journalist, after a dictionary. As AP has added entries over the years, the stylebook has grown more useful and comprehensive, but also more daunting. It isn't really, once you become familiar with it. But even for many of us who have used the stylebook for years, some of the entries seem ambiguous, even confusing.

This is a quick overview of some of the most common style errors that writers make and some of the entries you will use most often. It is by no means comprehensive, and the stylebook goes into far greater detail on each of these entries. Think of this as the highlights. It's still up to you to learn how to use the stylebook and then refer to it routinely. You do not need to memorize the stylebook, but you do need to be familiar enough with it that you know what to look up and where.

A

Addresses and street names

With specific addresses, capitalize and abbreviate *Ave.*, *Bldv.* and *St.*, as in *1435 Jayhawk Blvd.* If you are referring to a street but not a specific address, don't abbreviate: *The School of Journalism is on Jayhawk Boulevard.* Always spell out *road*, *terrace*, *drive*.

Ages

Always use numerals when referring to people: *She turned 21 last week. The boy is 3 years old.*

Hyphenate when used as an adjective or a noun:

The 3-year-old boy fell down. The 12-year-old is in middle school.

C

Capitalization

Proper names are capitalized, as is the first word of a sentence. Formal titles are capitalized if they come before a name, as in *President Harry Truman*. But that same title is lowercase if it comes after a name or is used generically:

Harry Truman was once president.

How many presidents have visited Kansas?

Also see **Titles**.

The proper name of a group, an institution or an organization is capitalized: *the National Committee to Use Style Correctly*. (Note that *the* is lowercase. Most of the time, that's how you'll use it.) But lowercase the group's name when referring to it informally: *the style committee*.

In all your writing, take a close look at words and phrases and ask whether they should really be capitalized. Unnecessary capitalization diverts attention from the writing itself, and that's not what you want.

Cities

The names of many cities stand on their own, without a state or country name, such as Philadelphia, Denver, Beijing and Paris. See AP's list in the **Datelines** entry. Also see individual state names.

C

Collective nouns

Words such as *committee*, *group*, *team*, *class* and *company* are considered singular and take singular verbs and pronouns.

Correct: The company is closing on Thursday. **It** will reopen on Tuesday.

Incorrect: The company hired a consultant to help **them** evaluate **their** budget.

Commas

Don't use a comma before *and* in a simple series:

I went to the movie with Bill, Jane and Jack.

Germany's flag is black, red and yellow.

Always use commas to separate a city from its state: *He lives in Wahoo, Neb.*

If the sentence continues, use a second comma after the state name:

He drove to Reno, Nev., before heading north toward Walla Walla, Wash.

The same principle applies to **dates** and to **nonessential phrases and clauses**.

Company names

In general, follow the company's preference for spelling and capitalization. Do not render a name in all capital letters unless it is initials (such as IBM or AIG). Always capitalize the first letter if the name starts a sentence.

Abbreviate and capitalize *Corp.*, *Co.* and *Inc.* and use them **without commas** if they follow a company name, although you often don't need them at all. Also see the entries for **company**, **companies**; **corporation**; and **incorporated**. The stylebook contains individual entries for many companies. See, for instance, **J.C. Penney Co.**, **Microsoft Corp.** and **Wal-Mart Stores Inc.**

Composition titles

This is the entry to consult when deciding how to render the names of books, movies, plays and the like. In general, capitalize these titles and put quotation marks around them:

After finishing "The Grapes of Wrath," he went to "The Rocky Horror Picture Show."

AP favors quotation marks to italics. (Examples here are in italics to set them apart from the guidelines.) Some publications and organizations use italics instead of quotation marks, though, so make sure you know your local style guidelines.

D

Dates, days, months and years

Always spell out March, April, May, June and July. Otherwise abbreviate the names of months and use numerals in specific dates: *She was born on Oct. 23. He was in New York City on Sept. 11, 2001. We will leave on April 3.* Note that the numbers in specific dates do NOT take suffixes such as *th*, *rd* or *nd* (as in *April 3rd*).

When using months alone, spell them out: *Halloween is in October. I'm planning to go on a big trip in December.* Do the same if you use a month and a year but not a specific date: *I went to Italy in August 2003.*

Always put a comma between a specific date and a year. If the sentence continues after such a date, use a comma after the year: *She turned 21 on May 5, 2008. Once the law takes effect on July 1, 2011, the state may never be the same.* But do not use a comma with just a month and a year: *We took a trip in May 2006.* If you refer to something in the previous 11 months or the coming 11 months, don't include the year (usually):

School will start on Aug. 18. She left for Europe on Dec. 26.

Always spell out the days of the week: *He didn't go to work on Monday.*

E

Essential and nonessential phrases and clauses:

Entries on these grammatical points will help you punctuate your work properly. Read them and ask for help if you don't understand them. Basically, if a phrase or clause is not essential to the meaning of a sentence, it should be set off by commas. If it is essential to the meaning of a sentence, it should not have commas.

For example: *Students who read every day become better writers.* The clause *who read every day* is essential to the meaning of the sentence. You wouldn't say *Students become better writers* or *Students, who read every day, become better writers.* Those sentences don't mean the same thing.

These guidelines trip up many people when they use *that* and *which*. Remember this: ***That* never takes a comma. *Which* almost always does.** But make sure you know what you want to say.

For example: *The snow that fell Monday needs to be shoveled.* That suggests that we have had more than one snowstorm, that previous snow has been shoveled but that the snow from Monday has not.

But: *The snow, which fell Monday, needs to be shoveled.* In this case, we have had only one snowstorm. It was Monday and that snow needs to be shoveled.

H

Hyphens

When you use a compound modifier before a noun, usually hyphenate it.

He waded through waist-high water. She drove on a one-way street.

When those same modifiers are used after a noun, though, they are usually *not* hyphenated:

The water was waist high. The street runs one way.

There are many exceptions, though, so always check the stylebook.

Don't use a hyphen with most adverbs. The thinking is that *-ly* acts the same way a hyphen does to connect words:

The United States sent some badly needed supplies. He ran a poorly financed campaign.

But not all words that end in *-ly* are adverbs, so be careful: *-ly* adjectives usually take a hyphen when part of a compound modifier:

The unit was plagued by friendly-fire incidents. She loves early-morning flights.

M

Money

Use numerals most of the time. Use the \$ with a figure, but spell out *cents* with amounts less than \$1:

He had only 3 cents in his pockets. Grandma gave me \$20 for my birthday. He paid \$21,000 for his new car.

But spell out *dollar* or *dollars* in a casual reference: *He saved a few hundred dollars.*

With amounts larger than \$999,999, use a figure and the words *million*, *billion*, *trillion*:

\$4.38 billion, \$1 trillion. (There are exceptions.)

See AP's entries on **dollars**, **cents**, and **millions**, **billions**.

N

Names

On second reference, use only a person's last name. *Smith and Jones celebrated after their victory.* Most of the time, don't use courtesy titles such as *Mr.*, *Mrs.* or *Ms.* The stylebook lists some exceptions, though. See AP's entry on **courtesy titles**.

N

Numbers

In general, spell out numbers below 10:
She graduated in four years. The building is eight stories high. I met three students from Alaska.

Use numerals for 10 and above:
He drove 70 mph on the interstate. He cut down 26 trees last week.

With numbers between 1,000 and 999,999, use commas:
He collected 1,436 political buttons. Enrollment at the University of Kansas exceeded 30,000 this year.

Numbers of a million or more

Most of the time, use only the first few digits (rarely more than two decimal places) followed by *million*, *billion* or *trillion*:
The population of the United States is 307 million. The governor offered a budget of \$48.87 million.

If a story needs the exact amount of a large number, use numerals: *301,468,593*.

In casual uses, don't use numerals:
He said he could give a million reasons for avoiding math class.

There are many exceptions, so check AP's **numerals** entry.

P

Periods

Use them often. AP shows you how. Don't let yourself fall into the trap of overly long sentences or run-on sentences like these:

He's going to the grocery store, he needs to buy bread.

That's really two sentences separated with a comma. It's an error known as a comma splice.

Punctuation

AP has an entire chapter on punctuation. Read it thoroughly and refer to it often.

Q

Quotation marks

Periods and commas always go inside quotation marks:

"I'm tired of punctuation marks," he said. "Case closed."

Semicolons and colons almost always go outside closing quotes. Other punctuation marks go inside if they apply only to the quoted matter, outside if the punctuation applies to the full sentence.

For instance: *Have you seen "Rain Man"?*

But: *Jones stirred up the crowd by asking, "Haven't you had enough of this place?"*

S

State names

Spell out the names of the states when they stand alone:
I went to Montana last month. How far is it to Pennsylvania?

When used after city names, state names are spelled out in body copy but abbreviated in datelines and headlines:

He went to Scranton, Pennsylvania, for a meeting.

Cheyenne, Wyo. – A 21-car pileup on I-80 during a blizzard killed three people, police said.

Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Texas and Utah are never abbreviated.

Important note: AP's abbreviations for state names are not the ones used by the U.S. Postal Service, so look them up if you're not sure.



Time

Use numerals and lowercase *a.m.* or *p.m.*: *He went to work at 7 a.m.*

But always use *noon* or *midnight*, **never** 12 p.m. or 12 a.m.

Titles

Short formal titles are capitalized when used before a name. Some are abbreviated. If a title is used before a name, it should *not* be set off by commas:

Right: *Vice President Joyce Laskowski met with state Sen. Vicki J. Epstein.*

Wrong: *Vice President, Joyce Laskowski, met with state Sen., Vicki J. Epstein.*

When used alone or after a name, those same titles are spelled out and used lowercase:

Each state has two U.S. senators. Al Gore, vice president under Bill Clinton, isn't in the news much anymore. When did you last see the secretary of state?

When a title is longer than a couple of words, place it after the name, lowercase it and set it off with commas:

Right: *Jeremy Jones, treasurer of the homecoming committee, spoke at the meeting.*

Wrong: *Treasurer of the Homecoming Committee Jeremy Jones spoke at the meeting.*

Informal titles: AP also allows short, descriptive phrases to be used as informal titles before names: *Lawrence store owner Emily Wilmoth*. Be careful with them, though. They often sound more natural after the name, set off with commas:

Emily Wilmoth, owner of Emily's Boutique, said she planned to expand her store.

The “good morning rule”: The New York Times uses what is informally called the “good morning rule” in deciding whether to put a title before or after a name. AP isn't as strict, but the idea is still useful. If a title before a name sounds natural when you say good morning to someone, you can safely use it as a title in print:

Good morning, President Obama. Good morning, Chancellor Gray-Little.

But you wouldn't say: *Good morning, Vice Chairman for Academic Affairs Smith*. Or: *Good morning, Secretary of the Lodging Committee Nelson*.

In those cases, you'd lowercase the titles and put them after the names.



Attribution

This isn't in the stylebook, but it's an important thing to keep in mind. *Said* is the best word of attribution most of the time. Other words of attribution can easily imply additional, usually editorial, meaning. They are appropriate only if that additional meaning is proper and accurate. Even *stated* carries some baggage: It implies formality, something read from a prepared script. The phrase *according to* is generally neutral, but use it sparingly with human sources. In most cases, use *charged* in attribution only in the context of a formal legal action.

Placement of attribution: Almost always place the word of attribution after the proper name of the speaker: *Jones said*, **NOT** *said Jones*. But place the attribution before the speaker's name when the name is followed by a long identification, an appositive or a nonessential clause:

The train had sounded its whistle and had flares burning on the back car, said H.D. Muldoon, a brakeman on the train.

See AP's entry on **quotations in the news**.



Other important stylebook entries

abbreviations and acronyms	it's, its
academic degrees	last
accept, except	lawyer
accident, crash	lay, lie
admit, admitted	-like, like-
adviser	like, as
among, between	millions, billions
anybody, any body, anyone, any one	newspaper names
average, mean, median, norm	none
bad, badly	obscenities, profanities, vulgarities
chairman, chairwoman	off-
city council	one-
compared to, compared with	organizations and institutions
complement, compliment	-out, out-
convince, persuade	-over, over, over-
courtesy titles	people, persons
damage, damages	percent
datelines	plurals
decades	possessives
demolish, destroy	post-
dimensions	prefixes
directions and regions	principal, principle
disabled, handicapped	prior to
disinterested, uninterested	pro-
do's and don'ts	prove, proved, proving
drunk, drunken	race
email	re-
emigrate, immigrate	reign, rein
entitled	sentences
federal	should, would
felony, misdemeanor	sub-
female	subjunctive mood
fewer, less	suffixes
flaunt, flout	teen, teenager, teenage
flier, flyer	temperatures
fractions	that (conjunction)
full-	their, there, they're
geographic names	time element
good, well	tonight
governmental bodies	total, totaled, totaling
gray	toward
half-	U.S.
hike	verbs
imply, infer	well
in, into	who, whom
internet	web, website, web page, etc.