

THE SMART WRITER'S

AP Style Cheat Sheet



Clarity and consistency are building blocks of great content.

https://www.instagram.com/gopro/?utm_source=ig_embed&ig_rid=4e8eaea9-b5fe-49d7-9556-76756769a025 When your writing is crisp, clear, and easy to understand, audiences are more likely to leave your site with a positive impression.

Unfortunately, many brands forego style guides, and choose to wing it instead. This isn't necessarily a fatal mistake by any means. However, it does often lead to content that looks sloppy.

Without guidelines to enforce consistency, it's easy to allow your content to become a formatting free-for-all where commas roam free and nothing follows clear logic. The results leave your blog or website looking at the Wild West of basic grammatical conventions.

If this sounds hyperbolic, consider this: newspapers are written to be as effortless to read as possible. Concise writing and consistent style go a long way toward achieving this goal. There's a reason why your daily paper sounds how it does. It isn't just stubborn commitment to rules for their own sake.

Does your content need to be perfect to be effective? Not nearly, no. But, everything you can do to enforce consistency and clarity will help your cause.

What is AP Style?

The Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law official style guide of the Associated Press, a not-for-profit news agency that's been around since 1846. It's often used by news organizations, magazines, and web publications, but brands often use it to form the basis of their own style guides, too.

The official Associated Press style guide gets updated year to year. Arguably, these changes have led to bloat. Detractors say the guide is excessively detailed, beyond the point of being necessary, or even useful. This author doesn't disagree with this criticism (hence the creation of this simplified blog post).

If following this specific style is important for your situation, though, consider buying the official version. It's available in both digital and hard copies.

Who Uses AP Style?

Associated Press style is generally used by journalists, but they aren't alone in using it. Here's a short list of folks who might need to get familiar with it:

- Journalists
- Editors
- PR Professionals
- Marketers

Press Release Datelines

News articles often start with a dateline indicating the location, month, date, and year a story took place. Include city (and state if necessary in the U.S.).

Examples:

- FARGO, N.D. (July 1, 2022)
- MILWAUKEE (July 1, 2022)
- LONDON (July 1, 2022)

Months, Days, and Times

Dates and times have a number of formatting considerations.

- **Dates:** Follow this format: *Monday (day), July 1 (month + date), 2018 (year)*.
- **Times:** Do not use colons for times on the hour (e.g. *3 p.m.* not *3:00 p.m.*).
- **Morning and evening:** *a.m.* and *p.m.* should use periods and lower case letters.
- **Days:** Omit st., th., rd., and th. (e.g. *July 1* not *July 1st*).
- **Months:** Abbreviate Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov. and Dec. when writing out a specific date. Spell out names of months when not used to indicate a specific date (e.g. *Aug. 3, 2018*).
- **Yesterday:** Never say “yesterday.” Use the day of the week instead.

Years

Use numerals rather than spelling them out (e.g. *2018*, not *twenty-eighteen*).

Avoid starting sentences with a number, unless referencing a year (e.g. *1977 was the last year the Minnesota Vikings went to the Super Bowl*).

Ages

A person’s age should always use numerals. When using age as an adjective (using age to describe an individual), use hyphens to separate numerals and words.

Examples:

- *The 20-year-old was arrested for underage consumption of an alcoholic beverage.*
- *At 34-years-old, Larry Fitzgerald remains impressively athletic.*
- *The five-year-old dog greets its owner every morning.*

Roman Numerals

Use Roman numerals when referring to a sequence of events or people.

Examples:

- *Super Bowl XLV*
- *Queen Elizabeth II*
- *World War I*

Sizes, Dimensions, and Distances

Sizes and dimensions should use figures and spell out units of measurement. The same goes for distances.

Hyphens separate figures and words as adjectives (e.g. *The 3-foot-tall boy*).

Examples:

- *The party sandwich was 10 feet long.*
- *The delivery driver traveled 12 miles during harsh weather.*
- *Bill Smith is 6-foot-5 and plays basketball in his spare time.*

Percentages

Always use the full word “percent” and avoid the % sign (e.g. *The analyst predicted a 100 percent increase in site traffic*).

Serial Commas

Use commas to separate items in a list, but do not place a comma before the conjunction in most simple series (e.g. *I need to buy milk, cheese and bread*). However, if omitting that final comma could lead to confusion, then include it for clarity.

Quotes & Quotations

How should you format quotes in AP Style?

- Periods and commas always go within quotation marks.
- Use single quotations for quotes within quotes.

Example: “The candy truck spilled all over the highway,” said the driver. “It’s a real ‘sticky situation’ on I-94.”

Hyphens

Use hyphens to connect words in compound adjectives (e.g. *The larger-than-life performer juggled seven swords.*).

Compound verbs also require hyphens (e.g. *She spoon-fed the baby.*).

En & Em Dashes

While sometimes used in other styles to indicate a range of time, AP Style does **not** use *en dashes*.

Em dashes, in contrast, are frequently used to signal an abrupt change, suggest a pause, or set off a clause within a sentence. AP refers to these simply as *dashes* and requires a space on either side of it.

Colons

Capitalize the first word after a colon only if it is a proper noun or the start of a complete sentence.

If used in combination with quotation marks, the colon should be placed on the outside, unless part of the quotation itself.

Parentheses

Parentheses can awkwardly contort a sentence or appear jarring to the reader, so it’s often best to avoid them. That said, there are instances when parentheses insert helpful information, so if its use is necessary, follow these guidelines:

- Place a period outside the parentheses if the text inside is an incomplete sentence (*such as this fragment*).
- If the phrase in parentheses is a complete sentence, but remains dependent on the surrounding material, do not capitalize the first word.
- Use parentheses if a state name or similar information is inserted within a proper name (e.g. *The Newport (Rhode Island) Daily News*).

Ellipses

When condensing a quote, piece of text or a document, use an ellipsis to indicate the deletion of one more or more words. However, be cautious to avoid deletions that would distort the genuine meaning of the text.

An ellipsis can also be used to show a thought that the writer did not complete.

Periods

Lean toward using periods in abbreviations where applicable (e.g. *U.N.*, *M.A.*, *U.S.A.*).

Exclamation Marks

Use an exclamation mark to express a high degree of amazement, disbelief, or other strong emotion. Avoid overuse by ending mildly exclamatory sentences in a period.

Question Marks

Place a question mark at the end of a direct question (e.g. *Who is there?*). Do not use a question mark to indicate the end of an indirect question (e.g. *I want to know who is there.*).

In a quotation, a question mark replaces the comma that normally comes before attribution (e.g. *"Who started the protest?" She asked.*).

Apostrophes

When proper and plural nouns end in an S, add an apostrophe at the end (e.g. *Sally Jones' red stapler has been stolen.*).

Possessive singular nouns ending in S require an apostrophe before the S (e.g. *The witness's testimony*).

Pronouns

When constructing a sentence, do not presume maleness or femaleness by defaulting to *he/his/him* or *she/hers/her*. Rewording the sentence to avoid gender is generally possible and preferred.

While *They/Them/Their* is accepted as a gender-neutral pronoun, the singular use of *they* can be unfamiliar. Use the person's name in place of a pronoun or be clear in the phrasing to not imply more than one person.

Addresses

Always use figures for building numbers (e.g. *318 E. Broadway Ave.*).

Denote directions following building numbers with *N.*, *E.*, *S.*, *W.*, but do not include periods for abbreviations such as *NW* (e.g. *1316 N. Sixth St.* but *410 NW Eighth Ave.*).

Spell out streetway numbers under ten. Use digits for numbers 10 and greater (e.g. *620 10th St. S.*).

The only roadway abbreviations are *St.*, *Blvd.*, and *Ave.* only when following a numbered address (e.g. *318 First Ave.* but *The office is on first avenue*).

Abbreviate *post office* as *P.O.*

States

Every state in the United States has a specific abbreviation. Some of these may not seem obvious. Follow this list to get them right.

- Alabama: Ala.
- Arizona: Ariz.
- Arkansas: Ark.
- California: Calif.
- Colorado: Colo.
- Connecticut: Conn.
- Delaware: Del.
- Florida: Fla.
- Georgia: Ga.
- Illinois: Ill.
- Indiana: Ind.
- Kansas: Kan.
- Kentucky: Ky.
- Louisiana: La.
- Maryland: Md.
- Massachusetts: Mass.
- Michigan: Mich.
- Minnesota: Minn.
- Mississippi: Miss.
- Missouri: Mo.
- Montana: Mont.
- Nebraska: Neb.
- Nevada: Nev.
- New Hampshire: N.H.
- New Jersey: N.J.
- New Mexico: N.M.

- New York: N.Y.
- North Carolina: N.C.
- North Dakota: N.D.
- Oklahoma: Okla.
- Oregon: Ore.
- Pennsylvania: Pa.
- Rhode Island: R.I.
- South Carolina: S.C.
- South Dakota: S.D.
- Tennessee: Tenn.
- Virginia: Va.
- Vermont: Vt.
- Washington: Wash.
- West Virginia: W. Va.
- Wisconsin: Wis.
- Wyoming: Wyo.

U.S. Cities

Some American cities are considered well-known enough they don't need a state abbreviation. This makes sense, since most people know where they're located. Here's the full list of U.S. cities that fall under this criteria:

- Atlanta
- Baltimore
- Boston
- Chicago
- Cincinnati
- Cleveland
- Dallas
- Denver
- Detroit
- Honolulu
- Houston
- Indianapolis
- Las Vegas
- Los Angeles
- Miami
- Milwaukee
- Minneapolis
- New Orleans
- New York
- Oklahoma City

- Philadelphia
- Phoenix
- Pittsburgh
- St. Louis
- Salt Lake City
- San Antonio
- San Diego
- San Francisco
- Seattle
- Washington

International Cities & Countries

The following international cities do not require country abbreviations:

- Amsterdam
- Baghdad
- Bangkok
- Beijing
- Beirut
- Berlin
- Brussels
- Cairo
- Djibouti
- Dublin
- Geneva
- Gibraltar
- Guatemala City
- Havana
- Helsinki
- Hong Kong
- Islamabad
- Mexico City
- Milan
- Monaco
- Montreal
- Moscow
- Munich
- New Delhi
- Panama City
- Paris
- Prague
- Quebec City

- Rio De Janeiro
- Rome
- San Marino
- São Paulo
- Shanghai
- Singapore
- Istanbul
- Jerusalem
- Johannesburg
- Kuwait City
- London
- Luxembourg
- Macau
- Madrid
- Stockholm
- Sydney
- Tokyo
- Toronto
- Vatican City
- Vienna
- Zurich

Article Headlines & Titles

A successful article headline must stand on its own, captivating the reader and providing key details. To achieve this, follow these guidelines:

- AP headlines are limited to sixty characters; be creative in word choice
- Only the first word and proper nouns are capitalized. Exception: the first word after a colon is always capitalized
- Use single quotation marks
- Only use universally recognized abbreviations (e.g. *US*, *EU*, and *UN*); avoid abbreviating state names

Composition Titles

Capitalize all words except articles, prepositions of three or fewer letters, and conjunctions of three or fewer letters.

Capitalize articles, prepositions, and conjunctions if they begin or end the name of the piece.

Capitalize both words in phrasal verbs.

Capitalize *to infinitives*.

Place composition titles such as books, songs, movies, and speeches inside quotation marks.

Book Titles

Use quotation marks rather than italics (e.g. *J.K. Rowling is the author of “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone.”*).

Song Titles

Like all compositions, place song names within quotation marks (e.g. *“Party in the USA” does not make me feel like partying.*).

Movie Titles

Movie titles must be in quotation marks. (e.g. *It turns out that “Total Recall” was not a documentary.*).

Newspaper Names

Use composition title capitalization but no quotation marks or italics (e.g. *The Guardian is a well-respected newspaper.*).

Magazine Names

Like newspaper names, magazines are simply capitalized following the composition title guidelines (e.g. *Wired is a popular magazine for tech enthusiasts.*).

Website Names

Website names require composition title capitalization.

Software Titles

Capitalize system softwares (e.g. *Windows, Mac OS, Chrome OS, Android, etc.*).

Job Titles

Capitalization is not needed if the title is informal, appears without a person’s name, follows a person’s name, or is set off before a name by commas.

Formal Title Prefixes

Make sure your writing respects people's formal titles. Some examples include political and medical titles. Follow these guidelines:

- Abbreviate political titles before full names outside of direct quotes (e.g. *Sen. Heidi Heitkamp*, *Gov. Doug Bergum*, *Rep. Kelly Armstrong*).
- Medical titles follow a similar format (e.g. *Dr. Michaela Quinn*).

Title Suffixes

Abbreviate suffixes such as junior (e.g. *Jeremiah Johnson, Jr.*), degrees (e.g. *James Newton, Ph.D.*).

Organization Name Abbreviations & Acronyms

Use abbreviations for well-known organizations (e.g. *FBI*, *NASA*, *IRS*, *NFL*, *MLB*, *NHL*, *FIFA*).

For other organizations, spell it out on first mention, then use abbreviations for subsequent mentions.

Use your best judgment. If people are unlikely to understand an abbreviation, then don't use it.

Examples:

- *The FBI agent was assigned the case.*
- *NASA announced plans to visit Mars.*
- *The MLB has not announced hot dog price restrictions for this year.*