

# The 5-minute stylebook

(How 10 percent of the rules cover 90 percent of style questions)

*Entries come from the Missouriian stylebook, the AP stylebook and the dictionary listings.*

*Below are style guidelines that you should know without having to refer to a stylebook.*

*Learn these and your life will be easier and your editor will be happier.*

## PEOPLE

- Capitalize formal titles when they appear before names, and lowercase titles when they follow a name or stand alone (former **President** Vicente Fox; **President** Bill Clinton).
- Lowercase occupational or descriptive titles before or after a name. Mere job descriptions (such as astronaut, announcer, teacher) are not capitalized before or after a name. If you are not sure whether a title is a formal, official title or merely a job description, put the title after the name and lowercase it. (**reporter** Ziyad Kilani).
- Refer to adults in news reports by first name and family name the first time they appear in a story (**Jane Smith**) and by family name only on later references (**Smith**).
- Children 15 or younger are usually referred to by both names (first and family) on first reference and first name only on later references. Children in “adult situations” — common examples are in international sports and serious crimes in which they are charged as adults — are referred to by last name only on later references.
- To avoid confusing two people with the same family name, such as husband and wife or mother and son, use both names (first and family) on later references. A story mentioning **Joe Biden and Jill Biden** should usually refer to them as Joe Biden and Jill Biden even after they are introduced if there’s any chance of confusion. Sometimes a title can be repeated to make the distinction (Vice President Biden or “the vice president” on later references). Only rarely, in some feature stories, will you want to refer to adults by their first names on later references.
- Do not use courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms., Dr.) in news reports. Most newspapers have eliminated courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms.), except in obituaries (for the deceased only) and in editorials.
- Abbreviate military and police titles before names according to a standard reference list, such as the one in the AP Stylebook. Don’t abbreviate titles when they stand alone or follow a name (**Gen.** Douglas MacArthur; the **general**). Exceptions are allowed for widely used initialisms (The Microsoft CEO was executed at dawn).

## DATELINES, PLACES and ADDRESSES

- A dateline is the designation before the start of a story of the city from which the story was filed. The name of the city in a dateline is written in capital letters, the name of the state or country in upper and lowercase: GRAND RAPIDS, Mich.
- With rare exception, **every online article should include a dateline**. (In print, we remove Columbia datelines but keep datelines for all other locations.)
- Most stylebooks will have a list of dateline cities that are assumed to be understood without having the name of the state (**Boston, New York, Los Angeles**) or country (**Baghdad, London, Cairo**) attached. Follow those guidelines with the usual

exceptions for common sense if needed (Books that are popular in **London, Ontario**, might not be popular in **London, England**).

- Some cities (such as Washington) are so well known that they are not followed by a state or country. A list of cities in the United States and abroad that stand alone can be found in the AP Stylebook under the dateline entry.
- In addition, other cities within your state or readership area may be designated as dateline cities that stand alone — check Missouriian stylebook.
- Notice that Washington or New York always refer to the **cities** by those names, not the states, unless otherwise indicated. In other words, you would **not** normally write Washington, D.C., or New York City but simply Washington or New York.
- When a city is a “dateline city,” that is, one that stands alone without a state or country in a dateline, it also stands alone within the body of a story.
- The dateline is typically followed by parentheses in which is written the name of the wire service providing the story, then by a dash. The story would then follow, beginning on the same line: WASHINGTON — The Senate voted 52-48 Thursday
- Many cities and towns in Missouri could be confused with other places. These cities should take a *Mo.* after them in datelines and wherever necessary in body copy (sometimes only needed on first reference). Examples are (but not limited to): Mexico, California, Paris, Houston, Cuba, etc.
- Do not abbreviate the names of states when they stand alone. Never abbreviate Alaska or Hawaii and only abbreviate state names of six or more letters and only when they are used with a city or county (**Roswell, N.M.; Fairfax County, Va.**).
- Do not abbreviate such designations as “street” when they stand alone without a numbered address. Only three of these are abbreviated — “street,” “avenue” and “boulevard” — and they are only abbreviated when they appear with a numbered address. (This is usually referred to as the STAB Rule — street, avenue and boulevard). If the street name has a direction in it, abbreviate the direction only with a specific street address. For example: West Hickory Avenue; 103 W. Hickory Ave.; Southeast Avalon Drive; 2608 S.E. Avalon Drive.
- When an address follows a person’s name, either separate them with the word “of” and no commas or use commas around the address without the word of. **Example:** Hank Jones of 678 S. Elm St. was arrested; Hank Jones, 678 S. Elm St., was arrested.
- In an exception to AP style, do not set off a hometown with commas when the word “of” is used. **Example:** Tom Smith of Columbia or Tom Smith, Columbia, ran home. When an address follows a person’s name and age, separate them with both a comma after the age and the word “of” in front of the address. Do not put a comma after the address in this instance because the comma is there to separate the age, not the address. For example: Hank Jones, 36, of 678 S. Elm St. was arrested.

### THINGS

- Capitalize proper nouns; lowercase common nouns. Capitalize trademarks (I drank a **Pepsi**) or use a common noun as a substitute (I drank a **soft drink**).
- Use abbreviations on first reference only if they are widely known (**CIA** agents helped overthrow the prime minister of Iran). Otherwise, spell out the names of agencies on first reference (the U.S. Agency for International Development; **USAID**). If an abbreviation would be confusing, use a common-noun substitute (the State

Peace and Development Council; **the council or the junta**). **As much as possible, avoid using acronyms.**

- Generally, don't abbreviate units of measurement (**pounds, miles, hours**, etc.).

### **CAPITALIZATION**

- Common nouns are lowercase: dog, apple.
- Proper nouns are uppercase: Fido, Sears.
- Names of months and days of the week are capitalized, but seasons are not: Wednesday, January, spring.
- For names of varieties of plants and animals or of particular foods, capitalize only the proper noun: German shepherd, MacIntosh apple (the fruit — the computer has a lowercase i), red delicious apple, Boston cream pie.
- Many product names that people think are generic terms (common nouns) are actually trade names (proper nouns) and should be capitalized: Band-Aid, Dumpster, Frisbee, Jell-O, Kitty Litter, Kleenex, Scotch tape, Styrofoam, Thermos, Touch-Tone, Vaseline, Velcro, Windbreaker, Xerox.

### **TIME, DATE, PLACE**

- Use only the day of the week for events within a week of publication (The summit ended **Monday**. The negotiators will meet **Thursday**).
- Use “next” only if needed for clarity (The summit ended Monday, and the negotiators will meet again next Monday). Use cautiously.
- Never abbreviate days of the week. Do not include both a day and a date. (The exception is Missourian obituary/life story style when we use day, date and year.)
- Use “today” to refer to the day of print publication. Do not use “yesterday” or “tomorrow” except in direct quotes. On the website, use only days of the week (not today, yesterday or tomorrow).
- Use month and day to refer to events happening a week or more before or after publication. Use cardinal numbers, not ordinal numbers, for dates (The summit began **July 11**. The seminar will be held **March 3**).
- Don't use the year unless the event is more than a year before or after publication (He died **March 17, 1999**. The currency will be introduced **Nov. 1, 2013**). The only exception is in life stories or obituaries. (**John Doe died Aug. 16, 2012**).
- Do not abbreviate a month unless it has a date (**January; January 2012, but Jan. 1, 2012**). The months with five letters or less are not abbreviated: March, April, May, June and July.
- Use lowercase “a.m.” and “p.m.” to indicate morning, afternoon and night.
- Always use figures for time in this form: **8 a.m., 10:30 p.m., 1:45 a.m.** Do not leave in the zeroes, as in “8:00 a.m.”
- For time spans, use this format: 1 to 4 p.m. (not 1-4 p.m.)
- Follow time-date-place order: Martial law was declared at **noon Friday in Jesse Hall**. Trials of collaborators will begin at **2 p.m. Oct. 14 in Mexico, Mo.**
- **There is no such time as 12 p.m. or 12 a.m. It's noon or midnight.**

## ABBREVIATIONS

- States are abbreviated only following the name of a city. The abbreviations used are not the two-letter postal abbreviations (MI for Michigan), but rather the older, more easily recognized abbreviations (Mich. for Michigan). See state names in the AP Stylebook for a complete list of state abbreviations. The following eight states are never abbreviated: Alaska, Hawaii, Maine, Utah, Texas, Ohio, Iowa and Idaho.
- Most initials of three letters or more do not take periods. Exception: c.o.d.

## NUMBERS

- Generally speaking, the numbers zero through nine are written out, and the numbers 10 and above are written as numerals.
- **Exceptions to the general rule about numbers:** Use numerals, even if less than 1, with ages, dates, money, percentages, time and the words million, billion and trillion. Spell out any number, except a year, that begins a sentence (**Twelve students attended. 1999 was an important year.**).
- Use figures for **dates, weights, heights, ages, times, addresses and percentages.**
- For most numbers of a million or more, use this form, rounded off to no more than two decimal places: **1.45 million**; the **\$18.1 billion budget**. If the exact number is important, write it out: He received **1,253,667** votes to **988,401** for his opponent.
- Spell out numbers used as figures of speech (**Thanks a million**).
- Spell out fractions less than 1 when they stand alone (Use **one-half** cup of flour). Otherwise, write them as mixed fractions (**1 1/2** cups of flour) or decimals (**1.5** liters of water). Generally, use a 0 to precede a decimal smaller than zero (**0.75** kilograms).
- Convert metric measurements to English ones.
- Always write out the words million, billion and trillion: 1 million, 13 billion (this applies to headlines, too).

## A few more tips to remember

- Avoid the use of exclamation points. Few things are spoken with the emphasis that should be reserved for an exclamation point. This includes children saying really cute things. A period will do the job.
- Do not use brackets. Use parentheses. [This is a bracket. Do not use.] (This is a parenthesis. Do use.)
- Do not include “U.S.” before Army, Navy, Marines or Air Force when referring to service members from the United States. It’s not needed because, after all, it’s illegal for a U.S. citizen to serve for another country.
- Do not use “http://” with Web addresses. It’s not needed. And be sure to check if “www.” is needed as well.
- Do not use “1-” before any telephone number; 800-888-8888 will suffice.
- Do not use “Dr.” before a name except in Life Stories. It’s much better to explain what kind of doctor he/she is in context (Sara Smith, an orthopedic surgeon).

*Source: Fred Vultee, amended 2009 by Maggie Walter and Allison McGee; James Pinson; amended 2012 by Maggie Walter and Audrey Moon*