

The five-minute stylebook

10 percent of the rules cover 90 percent of style questions

PEOPLE

- Capitalize formal titles when they appear before names (The message was sent to former **President** Vicente Fox).
- Lowercase titles when they follow a name or stand alone (Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian **president**, fired his **foreign minister**).
- Lowercase occupational or descriptive titles before or after a name (The story was written by **reporter** Ziyad Kilani).
- Refer to adults in news reports by first name and family name the first time they appear in a story (**Michelle Obama**) and by family name only on later references (**Obama**).
- 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.
- 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).

PLACES

- 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**).
- Do not abbreviate the names of states when they stand alone. Abbreviate state names of six or more letters only, and only when they are used with a city or county (**Roswell, N.M.; Fairfax County, Va.**). Never abbreviate Alaska or Hawaii.
- 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 rule is usually referred to as the STAB (street, avenue, and boulevard)

Rule.) Do not abbreviate “south” or “north” indicating a part of a road unless it appears with an address (**South Eighth Street; 221 S. Eighth St.**).

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.**).

TIME

- 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.
- 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 **Jan. 1, 2012**).
- Do not abbreviate a month unless it has a date (**January; Jan. 1**). Do not abbreviate months of less than six letters (**March; March 12, 1998**).
- 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.**

NUMBERS

- **The basic rule:** Spell out numbers under 10. Use figures for 10 and above.
- **The main exceptions:** 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.

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. Columbia is crawling with folks who have a doctorate – whether academic, medical or dental. It’s much better to explain what kind of doctor he/she is in context (Sara Smith, an orthopedic surgeon).
- Always write headlines for advice columns (Dear Abby, Smart Money, etc.) based on the answer to the first letter.

Source: Fred Vultee, amended 2009 by Maggie Walter and Allison McGee; amended 2011 by Maggie Walter