

The five-minute stylebook

10 percent of the rules cover 90 percent of style questions

By Fred Vultee

PEOPLE

Capitalize formal titles when they appear before names (The message was sent to **President** Vicente Fox).

Lowercase titles when they follow a name or stand alone (Bashar 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 given name and family name the first time they appear in a story (**Laura Bush**) and by family name only on later references (**Bush**).

Children 17 or younger are usually referred to by both names on first reference and first name only on later references. Children in “adult situations” – common examples are 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 on later references. A story mentioning Dick Cheney and Lynne Cheney should usually refer to them as “Dick Cheney” and “Lynne Cheney” even after they are introduced if there’s any chance of confusion. Sometimes a title can be repeated to make the distinction (Dick Cheney could be “Vice President Cheney” or “the vice president” on later references). Only rarely, in some feature stories, will you want to refer to adults by given name on later references.

Do not use courtesy titles (Mr., Mrs., Ms.) in news reports except in direct quotes.

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 cities that are assumed to be understood without having the name of the state (**Boston, New York, Los Angeles**) or country (**New York, 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 and Hawaii.

Do not abbreviate such designations as “street” when they stand alone. Only three of these are abbreviated – “street,” “avenue” and “boulevard” – and they are only abbreviated when they appear with a numbered address. 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.; 221 Abbey Road**).

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 Law and Order Restoration Council; **the council** or **the junta**) on later references.

Generally, don't abbreviate units of measure (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 "last" or "next" only if needed for clarity (The summit ended Monday, and the negotiators will meet again **next Monday**).

Never abbreviate days of the week.

Use "today" to refer to the day of publication or broadcast only. Do not use "yesterday" or "tomorrow" except in direct quotes.

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, 2007**).

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. Use "noon" and "midnight" rather than the unclear "12 a.m." or the redundant "12 noon." Always use figures for time, in this form: **8 a.m., 10:30 p.m., 1:45 a.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.**

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, 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 when they stand alone (use **one-half** cup of flour). Otherwise write them as mixed fractions (**1½** 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.