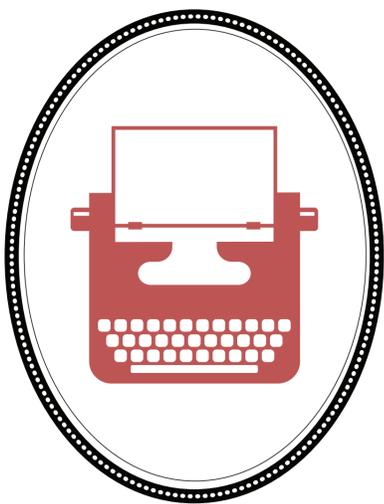




## WHAT IS THE AP STYLEBOOK?

*The Associated Press Stylebook: 2012 Edition* is the latest revision of the most widely available media stylebook in publication. The Associated Press (AP) has produced the stylebook for over 50 years to impose consistency, clarity, and understanding in the fast-changing world of journalism. Under the guidance and of expert editors and distilled from the consensus of media practitioners, the stylebook serves as an industry standard primer for journalists and an excellent reference tool for writers.

The quality, content, and precision of The AP Stylebook is evaluated here according to a modified set of criteria found in Kay Ann Cassell and Uma Hiremath's *Reference and Information Services* (2013, p. 361-364).



## SCOPE

The AP Stylebook is primarily concerned with best usage and accuracy—the highest authorities of journalism. The credibility of any reporter relies on having the precision to avoid ambiguity or offence. Incorrect grammar, spelling, and terminology can obscure meaning and lead to easily avoidable misunderstandings. The fundamental principles and ideas gathered together by the Associated Press serve as an excellent reference for the common understanding of language as it appears in thousands of publications worldwide.

## ARRANGEMENT OF MATERIAL

The largest section of the book, which deals with word-level issues and meanings, is organised like a dictionary. The entries cover a wide range of topics such as acronyms for government agencies; capitalisation for notables; formatting for dates, times, and numbers; and appropriate contexts for confusable words. Each entry is brief and deals with issues that journalists would face in everyday writing. Many entries simply give the correct spelling, punctuation, or capitalisation. The alphabetical structure of the entries is generally very user-friendly; however, at times the layout can be maddening when trying to locate an answer with no hints as to which entry to check.

The AP Stylebook goes beyond word level mechanics and includes exhaustive appendices for common questions a writer could ask. Detailed topics in the stylebook, like military hierarchies and metric conversions, are given their own extended entries complete with helpful tables and charts. These reference tools are substantially expanded on in the 'Guidelines' chapters. They transform the stylebook into an indispensable source of information for those who wish to speak the language of the press.

Entire chapters are devoted to guidelines for disseminating messy data in a variety of fields from cookery to sports. The sports section—with a wealth of charts, tables, and scorecards—provides breakdowns describing every popular sport with rules, terminology, and guidelines for presenting the data correctly. The large appendices on media law and libel are just as insightful, but not mechanically useful outside the United States. Also included are in-depth chapters on business writing, religion, and firearms—areas of general knowledge that any reporter should have a grasp of.

## EASE OF USE

Writers want a resource that they can consult at their leisure as well as use on a deadline. They want to be able to find specific material they need fast and implement it immediately, but they also want to build skills and eliminate guesswork. Make no mistake; the AP Stylebook is a journalist's tool first and foremost. Exploring the mechanics underlying the how and why of punctuation isn't important to the harried journalist. 'Do I use an apostrophe right now?' and a correspondingly direct answer is all that is necessary, and all that is provided. It is therefore frustrating that the section dealing with the basics of clear writing is the clumsiest and hardest to navigate. The punctuation entries continue to adhere to the dictionary-style format of the stylebook, and concepts are left disjointed without common purpose or reference.

By way of contrast, stylebooks such as the *Media Writer's Handbook* and the *Australian Style Manual for authors, editors and printers* contain procedural steps for understanding language mechanics. These stylebooks provide a firm grounding in the how and why of language mechanics rather than just easy answers. This highlights the differing needs of journalists compared to academics and others who write formally: journalists want answers—fast.



## CURRENCY

Writing effectively as a journalist relies not only on having extensive knowledge, good grammar, and punctuation skills but also sensitivity. Keeping stylebooks updated is critical for maintaining current standards of sensitive language. The AP Stylebook is revised annually, and contemporary use of words is usually well represented. However, glaring omissions and archaisms appear throughout.

The 2012 edition has finally discarded 'mentally retarded' in favour of the still dubious 'mentally disabled' as the preferred usage, as well as adopting standards for lower-case, non-hyphenated versions of 'email' and 'website'. New entries for 2012's technical jargon include 'cloud computing', 'direct message', and 'retweet'. But, amongst the updates, consensus-defying usage has emerged in basic terminology, such as endorsing 'hopefully' as an adverb—hopefully, a decision they will reverse.

Other controversies have criticised the AP for their decision to remove words including 'homophobia' and 'Islamophobia' from the stylebook (Signorile, 2013) citing that phobias with political and social contexts are inaccurate uses of language. Whether or not the terms are outdated is secondary to the fact they are important to understanding cultural attitudes—however unfavourable.

The update cycle necessitates re-purchasing of the newest iteration of the guide each year, which can be costly. The printed stylebook is available globally for \$18.95 USD, but may also be purchased as an online-subscription, which updates constantly, for \$25 USD or \$28.99 as an iOS app. The digital version is arguably superior, providing greater currency and flexibility through regular updates, but requires an active—more expensive—subscription to access any previously purchased releases.

## APPROPRIATENESS

To that end, the Associated Press Stylebook is still an excellent resource. It encourages media writers to communicate accurately and with accountability. It offers clear and concise answers to specific questions—a necessity in the fast-paced world of journalism. Although the technical mechanics of the AP Stylebook may be imperfect, the explanations of best usage and general-reference chapters are indispensable. If you aren't sure about something it is quick and easy to check; if you are sure, it's a perfect way to double check.

