In journalism, we write in a standard set by the Associated Press news agency. This ensures that articles look consistent in a publication. Many publications also have their own supplemental stylebook with rules that diverge from the AP style. The following are basic style rules for the Prison Journalism Project, incorporating the most important AP style rules.

**abbreviations:** Use abbreviations before a name: Dr., Gov., Mr., Rep., etc. Spell out and lower case titles after a name: Jerry Brown, the governor of California. Do NOT use a comma after a name for Jr., Sr. (see titles for more)

**academic degrees:** If mention of degrees is necessary, avoid the abbreviation and use a phrase such as “Sam Cook, who has a doctorate in psychology.” Use an apostrophe and no capitalization in bachelor’s degree and master’s degree, but it should be Bachelor of Arts or Master of Science. An associate degree does not use an apostrophe. When necessary, use B.A., M.A., PhD.

**academic subjects** and **majors** should be lowercase unless they are proper nouns (e.g. American history, English, Jewish studies)

**acronyms:** Always spell out the full name on first use and put the acronym in parentheses. It is ok to use an acronym on its own on second reference and beyond but avoid overuse of too many acronyms because it confuses the reader. You may use just the acronym only for well-known entities like FBI or CIA.

**affect/effect:** Affect is typically a verb and means to influence. Effect, as a verb, means to cause. Effect, as a noun, means result. Example: Her speech affected their voting. The pattern is considered an effect of climate change.

**ages:** Use numerals for all ages of people or animals. Use hyphens for ages expressed as adjectives. Examples: 50-year-old man. The man is 50 years old.

**a.m., p.m.** Lowercase with periods generally, but use noon or midnight instead of 12 p.m. or 12 a.m. Avoid today, tonight, tomorrow, etc.

**attorney general:** Do not abbreviate. Capitalize as part of formal title in front of a name; lower case with comma after name. Plural is attorneys general.

**Bible:** Capitalize Bible and related terms such as the Gospels, Gospel of St. Mark, the Scriptures, etc. Lowercase biblical in all uses. Do not abbreviate books of the Bible.

**biweekly:** Refers to every other week. Semiweekly means twice a week.
books, movies, plays, TV programs, works of art: Capitalize major words and put in quotes. Example: “Star Wars.”

capital: Refers to the seat of government in a state: We visited two state capitals, Harrisburg and Trenton, during our vacation.

capitol, Capitol: Refers to a building housing the seat of government. Capitalize when referring to the building in Washington, D.C., or to specific state buildings: Congress meets in the Capitol.

cellie: PJP uses “cellie,” not “celly.”

cellphone is one word.

comma: Use commas to separate elements in a series, but do not put a comma before the conjunction in most simple series: I like apples, oranges and bananas.

constitutional amendments: Spell out the number up to the Ninth Amendment, but use numerals thereafter: 10th Amendment, 13th Amendment.

corrections officer: Not correctional officer. Put (CO) in parentheses after first reference and use CO thereafter.

COVID-19: Use full name in all caps in every mention. Coronavirus is also acceptable. COVID as an abbreviated term is acceptable only in a headline. Variant names such as delta and mu should be lowercase.

dates: Spell out and capitalize months when standing alone or with a year (January 2020). In full specific dates, abbreviate long months as Jan., Feb., Aug., etc. Never abbreviate March, April, May and June.

dead row and condemned row are NOT capitalized. (This is a change from before.)

defense attorney, prosecuting attorney are never capitalized.

ellipses (...): To be used when you omit words out of a quote

em-dash: A long dash used in punctuation. Use em-dashes to denote an abrupt change in thought in a sentence or an emphatic pause, but avoid overuse. When using an em-dash, put a space before and after the word. On a Mac, press SHIFT + OPTION + Minus key. Short dashes (en-dashes) are used to mark ranges such as dates (e.g. 1950-1989). On a Mac, press OPTION + Minus key.
**exclamation point:** Avoid overuse of the exclamation point. It indicates shouting. When used, use only one. Multiple exclamation points are amateurish.

**greater than/more than/less than/fewer than:** When referring to numbers, use “greater than” or “more than.” When referring to physical space or spatial relationships use “over” or “under.” Example: more than 15,000 people, but over the counter or “under the table.”

**homeless** is acceptable as an adjective to describe people without a fixed residence. Avoid the dehumanizing collective noun the homeless, instead using constructions like homeless people, people without housing or people without homes. The principle applies for people with mental illness and other labels.

**inmate/felon/offender:** PJP will honor the wishes of a writer if they choose to use one of these words, but we prefer person-first language such as “incarcerated person” or “person in prison.” Prisoner is also acceptable. (See The Marshall Project’s Language Project for more)

**Islam** is the religion, **Muslim** is the preferred term used to describe followers of Islam. Their holy book is the **Quran**.

**italics:** AP style does NOT use italics.

**lockdown** is one word.

**numbers:** Generally, use numerals for 10 and above; spell out zero through nine. Example: *He had two dogs and 14 cats.* Exceptions: Use numerals for percentages, ages, measurements, dates and street addresses. Avoid starting a sentence with a number, but you can start a sentence with a year.

**obscenities, profanities and vulgarities:** Try not to use them unless they are part of direct quotations or there is a compelling reason for their use.

**OK, OK’d, OK’ing, OKs.** Do not use okay.

**publication names:** Magazine and newspaper names should be capitalized but do not place in quotes. Capitalize “the” only if it is an official part of the publication’s name.

**prison locations (yard, hole and others):** lowercase all general terms for locations inside prison such as yard, the hole, chow hall, death row etc. Only capitalize if using the official name such as North Block or E Unit. Do not use acronyms for locations without spelling out what they signify and, if necessary, describing the function of the location. (This is a change from before.)

**quotes:** Use double quote mark (‘”) at the beginning and end of a direct quote. Put punctuation inside the quote mark. Use single quote mark (‘’) for quotes within a quote.
seasons: Never capitalize winter, spring, summer and fall. The only exception is when a season is used in a proper name. “I go to the Winter Olympics every four years.” Springtime and summertime are both one word.


titles, jobs: Formal titles should be capitalized when they immediately precede one or more names: President Abraham Lincoln. When a title stands alone or is offset from a name by commas, it should be lowercase: The lieutenant governor, Gavin Newsom, was serving in the governor’s absence. Occupational descriptions are not capitalized even when positioned directly before an individual’s name: writer Shonda Rhimes. First references to clergymen and women should include a capitalized title before their name (Rabbi, Imam, Rev.). Include an explanation of the job associated with the title when it’s not obvious.


A NOTE ON RACE
Always consider whether the mention of race is necessary in a story. Oftentimes, it does not matter.

Capitalize Black and White when referring to racial identity. Use African American or Caucasian only in quotes, in the names of organizations or if a person refers to themselves that way. (The AP style requires the capitalization of Black, but not of white. We take exception to this, and recommend that you capitalize White as well.)

Latino, Latina and Hispanic are all acceptable. Use Latinx only in quotes, in names of organizations or if an individual requests it. Brown (with a capital B) is also acceptable, especially when mentioned alongside Black and White.

Native Americans: When describing an individual, try to find their tribal affiliation. Some tribes refer to their people as members. Others use citizens. When in doubt, use citizen. First Nation is the preferred term for Canadian native tribes. Indian is only used to describe people from India. Capitalize Indigenous.

Asian American can be used to describe people of Asian descent. Whenever possible, refer to the person’s country of origin. Oriental should never be used to describe a person.
GENDER & SEXUALITY

LGBT, LGBTQ: Preferred abbreviation for all references for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning and/or queer. If the writer prefers it, we can include the “+” sign to denote other sexual and gender minorities that belong to this particular community such as asexual, questioning, two spirit and intersex, among others.

Note that sex, gender, and sexual orientation are not synonymous.

sex: The anatomical classification of a person as male, female or intersex. This is assigned at birth. Some use the term “sex assigned at birth.”

gender: a term used to identify a person’s internal identification and relationship with gender. This means that the person can individually and internally identify as male, female, both or any other gender on the spectrum. This can be used interchangeably with “gender identity.”

gender pronouns: PJP honors whatever gender pronoun the writer identifies with. They/them/their is acceptable as a singular pronoun.

queer is an umbrella term covering people who are not heterosexual or cisgender and is acceptable for people and organizations that use the term to identify themselves. Do not use it when intended as a slur.

COMMON GRAMMAR RULES

Tense: PJP principally publishes in the PAST tense. Only use present tense if something is happening as you are writing it.

Write in the active voice, not passive voice. An active verb describes an action (example: I love my kids). In the passive voice, something is done to or by the subject (example: My kids are loved). Active voice almost always makes a sentence more powerful.

Minimize the use of adjectives and adverbs. Use description and detail instead. Instead of describing someone as “jolly,” use an example that shows how she is jolly or describe a character trait that makes her jolly. Perhaps she always has a twinkle in her eye or she is always telling jokes.

Write in complete sentences. Every sentence must have a subject and a verb. Otherwise, it’s a fragmented sentence. Instead of “Tired of waiting,” write, “I am tired of waiting,” or find a way to combine it with the sentence before it with the use of a colon or a comma.

Subject and verb must agree. A sentence must have subjects and verbs that agree and number. If the subject is plural, the verb must be plural. Example: The apples are good, not the apples is good.
Avoid exclamation marks. An exclamation mark is used to express a high degree of surprise or passion, but it can be a turnoff for readers if they think that the writer cannot see beyond their emotions. Instead, provide descriptions and use words to convey emotion. You do not need to say, “This is crazy!” if your sentence describing the situation implies it. It’s much more powerful if your description makes a reader think that the situation is crazy rather than telling them so.

Do not capitalize or italicize words for emphasis. In journalism, we do not change the way the words are printed to emphasize a point. Capitalizing a word can make it seem like the writer is shouting or shrieking and italics are not used in AP style. Instead choose words and descriptions.