

PJP STYLE GUIDE

(Updated February 2023)

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.

America/United States: PJP favors the use of United States or U.S. instead of America because equating America with the U.S. is exclusionary to Central and South American countries. However, use of “America” may be used discreetly, particularly to avoid the overuse of U.S. in a story.

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."

burglary, larceny, robbery, theft. Legal definitions of burglary vary, but in general a burglary involves entering a building (not necessarily by breaking in) and remaining unlawfully with the intention of committing a crime.

Larceny is the legal term for the wrongful taking of property. Its nonlegal equivalents are stealing or theft.

Robbery in the legal sense involves the use of violence or threat in committing larceny. In a wider sense it means to plunder or rifle, and may thus be used even if a person was not present: His house was robbed while he was away.

Theft describes a larceny that did not involve threat, violence or plundering.

USAGE NOTE: You rob a person, bank, house, etc., but you steal the money or the jewels.

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.

Court documents: Do not italicize court case names. Omit lists of co-petitioners, co-respondents and the "et al." (e.g. "Engel v. Vitale," not "*Engel et al. v. Vitale et al.*"). In instances where a court case name

contains the first reference of either of its plaintiffs, opt for the unabbreviated version first, then the abbreviated version upon subsequent usage. When necessary to clarify the chronology of a ruling, be sure to specify the date in the sentence. Some publications may include the docket number, but PJP does not. (e.g. Biden v. Texas, which was petitioned to the Supreme Court in Dec. 2021)

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 omicron 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*.

death 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. PUT A SPACE BEFORE AND AFTER.

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**. See **Religion Styleguide** below.

italics: AP style does NOT use italics.

lockdown is one word.

names: In general follow AP style. However, in republications from prison newspapers, leave name

references as they appear in the original story. Here's an example of how some names are presented in *Endeavor*, of Everglades Correctional Institution: "*Library Supervisor Ms. T. Crumbley, Coach Hankerson and Compass Supervisor Ms. D. Placeres.*" These can illuminate relationship dynamics specific to the prison in question.

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. For dimensions, use numerals and spell out inches, feet, yards, etc., to indicate depth, height, length and width. Hyphenate adjectives before nouns (e.g. 6-foot-tall man).

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.

poetry: When quoting verse, use the following style. For two lines from the same stanza: "**Poetry, you are more than words written on a sheet / You are expressions revealing my heartbeat.**" For multiple lines from one or multiple stanzas, format the verse in its own indented paragraph without quotations, as follows:

Poetry, you are more than words written on a sheet
You are expressions revealing my heartbeat

... Poetry moves me in ways that are so real
The way poetry feeds my soul, like a full course meal.

When quoting part of a stanza and foregoing some of the text, indicate the removal with an ellipses, as above.

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 security level: When referring to the security level of a prison, it is preferable to not reference the number (1, 2, 3, or 4), but instead describe the security level as **minimum-security prison, low-security prison, medium-security prison, maximum-security prison.**

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.

religion: See Religion Styleguide below.

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.

states: **Spell out state names in headlines and inside a story when they stand alone.** When referring to a city and state, use a comma after the city name and abbreviate these states as follows: *Ala., Ariz., Ark., Calif. Colo., Conn., Del., Fla., Ga., Ill., Ind., Kan., Ky., La., Md., Mass., Mich., Minn., Miss., Mo., Mont., Neb., Nev., N.H., N.J., N.M., N.Y., N.C., N.D., Okla., Ore., Pa., R.I., S.C., S.D., Tenn., Vt., Va., Wash., W.Va., Wis., Wyo.* Do not abbreviate these state names: *Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas, and Utah.* **Do not use postal abbreviations.**

titles, jobs: Confine capitalization to formal titles when they immediately precede one or more names: President Abraham Lincoln. **When a title comes after the person’s name or when it 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.**

U.S., USA, U.N. for United States, United States of America and United Nations.

A NOTE ON RACE

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

Capitalize **Black** **but not white** when referring to racial identity (this conforms with AP style and is a change from earlier). Use *African American* or *Caucasian* only in quotes, in the names of organizations or if a person refers to themselves that way.

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.

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 or "IA+" 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.

PJP RELIGION STYLE GUIDE

ISLAM

Alhamdulillah: All Praise is with Allah

Allah: Arabic word for God.

Asr prayer: One of five mandatory prayers held in the afternoon

Dhuhr prayer: One of five mandatory prayers held at midday

dua: A prayer of invocation, supplication or request from God

Eid al Adha: Holiday following the Islamic pilgrimage of Hajj

Eid al Fitr: Holiday following Ramadan

Fajr prayer: One of five mandatory prayers held before sunrise

Hajj: One of the five pillars of Islam, it is the mandatory pilgrimage to Mecca that all Muslims must perform in their lifetime

iftar: the meal consumed at sunset by Muslims after fasting during Ramadan

imam: The person who leads prayers in a mosque.

Isha prayer: One of five mandatory prayers held at night

Islam: The name of the religion

Jumma: Arabic for Friday; often used to signify Friday midday prayer.

musalla: separate congregational area for prayer.

Maghrib prayer: One of the five mandatory prayers held at sunset

Muslim: Follower of Islam.

Quran: Central religious text of Islam. This is also written as Qur'an, but PJP style is Quran.

saum: fasting. Not capitalized.

Subhanallah: Glory be to be Allah

Sunnah: the traditions and practices of Prophet Muhammad that are a model for Muslims to follow.

suhoor: the meal consumed early in the morning by Muslims before fasting during Ramadan.

Sunni: The biggest single branch in Islam.

Shiite: The second-largest branch.

tarawih: Translates as "special Ramadan night time prayers." The word means "rest and relaxation." PJP does not capitalize the first letter.

tahajjud: also known as "night prayer"; voluntary prayer performed after midnight

ummah: collective community. Not capitalized.

Umrah: Islamic pilgrimage that can be taken any time of the year.

wudu: cleansing of the body. Not capitalized.

COMMON GRAMMAR RULES

Tense: PJP principally publishes in the PAST tense, particularly for news articles and prison reports. In those categories, we only use present tense if something is happening as the writer is writing it. In personal essays, PJP will allow present tense if there is intentionality behind its use. In other words, if the writer is deliberately employing present tense to put the reader in the moment they are describing.

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 in 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. Show, don’t tell.

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.