Journalistic Writing & AP Style

**Overview**

This handout is designed to give you a brief overview of the primary goals and rules of journalistic writing. With over 5,000 entries, the official Associated Press (AP) Style Handbook provides guidelines for everything from state abbreviations to social media. If you have a question about formatting, make sure to look it up in the handbook!

As with any style, it’s very important that you start by carefully considering your intended audience in journalistic writing. Since most writing projects in this genre are meant for mass media – whether in the form of a newspaper article, press release, or other media outlet – you should be writing for a generally uninformed audience.

**Using the Inverted Pyramid Structure**

Many journalistic writers use a basic “inverted pyramid” structure for organizing paragraphs. This means that your **lede** (first paragraph) should only include essential information. To determine what is essential for your reader to know, rely on the tried-and-true “Five Ws (and H)”: *Who* did *What*, *When*, *Where*, *Why*, and *How*? Remember – the lead should be brief (usually 30-40 words), specific, honest, appropriate for your audience, and grab your reader’s attention (usually with a conflict).

Non-essential information (background, quotes, references, statistics, etc.) should be relegated to subsequent paragraphs, or “nut graphs,” based on order of importance. Think about yourself as a newsreader – don’t you usually pay most attention to the beginning of a story and scan or skim the remainder? Using this structure can also make it easier for editors to cut non-essential information.

**Accuracy & Ethics of Journalistic Writing**

Professional standards for ethical journalism are based on providing accurate, unbiased information that avoids stereotypes, offensive language, or potential harm to the people you are writing about (or those who may be reading). In this profession, your reputation is based on credibility. Here are a few strategies for ethical journalistic writing.

* Always try to gather the most current, accurate information from open and credible sources. This is especially important when evaluating the credibility of online sources. Pay close attention to organizational affiliations, potential biases, and other author information.
* Reference all sources clearly so your reader can also judge their credibility.
* Be aware of potential conflicts of interest between you and your sources; never accept special treatment, gifts, or money!
* Never, ever, EVER plagiarize; this is a surefire way to damage your long-term professional reputation.

**Basics to Do and Not to Do**

Since you (and your editors) also have limited time and space to capture your reader’s attention and present information, your writing should be **consistent**, **clear**, **accurate**, and **brief**. In this way, journalistic writing is similar to business writing style – you never want to make your reader work for it! To accomplish these goals,

* *Do* use active voice and strong verbs whenever possible.
* *Do* omit any unnecessary words or phrases.
* *Do* provide examples, metaphors, and anecdotes your audience can understand.
* *Don’t* use overly technical vocabulary or jargon.
* *Don’t* “bury your lede” by several paragraphs into the article.
* *Don’t* overlook the importance of a catchy **headline** (title) and **deck** (subheading) that capture the W/W/W/W/H information of your article.

**Additional Resources**

Although you will want to get your hands on an AP Stylebook for the most up-to-date information, you can also find useful (and free) resources online.

* <http://apstylebook.com>: Check out the “Ask the Editor” and Twitter features
* <http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php/Main_Page>: Reuters news service offers a comprehensive online guide for its writers

**Sources**

Associated Press (nd). AP news values and principles. *Associated Press*. Retrieved from <http://www.ap.org/company/news-values>

Society of Professional Journalists (1996). SPJ code of ethics. *SPJ*. <http://spj.org/ethicscode.asp>