

AFGE COMMUNICATIONS STYLE GUIDE

The American Federation of
Government Employees, AFL-CIO
www.afge.org

**AFGE Communications Department
Style Guide**

The following writing guidelines can be found in *The Associated Press (AP) Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law*, also referred to as "the journalists' bible," and *Random House Webster's College Dictionary, Second Edition*. Every staff member in the Communications Department refers to these reference books to keep AFGE documents and publications stylistically consistent.

This guide provides tips on writing, formatting of documents (e.g., press releases), and ways to avoid frequently made errors. The AFGE Communications Department follows the guidelines outlined herein to maintain consistency among documents produced by the national office. If you are not sure about a style, grammar or other issue, don't be afraid to look up the answer. As always, feel free to contact the communications department for additional clarification. Additional information, including sample press releases, media advisories and statements, are available on the AFGE Web site at www.afge.org/Index.cfm?Page=MediaGuide.

Happy writing!

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PRINCIPLES OF GOOD WRITING

- **Write in short sentences and short paragraphs.** Break up long, complex sentences into smaller sentences so your writing doesn't run on. Keep your paragraphs simple with one idea per paragraph.
- **Use active voice.** In general, avoid writing in the passive voice, such as in the sentence, "The report was released by AFGE." It is usually best to write in the active voice, such as, "AFGE released the report." However, there may be times when you wish to use the passive voice, such as in a business letter, so the thoughts you are attempting to express are not conveyed in a harsh manner.
- **Be economical with wording.** Use only the words that are necessary. Non-specific adverbs and adjectives (e.g., more, very, truly) can be problematic and should be avoided. Also be sure to eliminate redundant wording like in the following examples:
 - advance planning = planning
 - ATM machine = ATM
 - hot water heater = water heater
- **Use common language.** Which sentence do you prefer?
 - It behooves the writer to eschew archaic expressions.
 - It is better to use commonly understood language in your writing.

Don't try to show off with your writing. The goal of your writing should be to convey ideas to the reader. Attempts to impress the reader by using big words and unending sentences are more likely to confuse or be off putting. Simple language can be crafted so that it is also sophisticated and elegant.

- **Maintain consistent verb tenses.** If you change verb tense be sure to have a justifiable reason. Don't be afraid to write in the present tense.
- **Avoid clichés like the plague.** Don't even touch one with a ten-foot pole. Enough said.
- **Maintain parallelism.** Don't mix nouns, verbs and adjectives (or verb tenses for that matter) in a list. Instead of, "AFGE's challenge is to defend the rights of workers, representing employees and successful lobbying," organize your thoughts in parallel construction. One possible sentence that maintains parallelism is, "AFGE's challenge is to defend the rights of workers, represent employees and wage successful lobbying."
- **Show. Don't tell.** Use concrete nouns and real world examples. Follow a generalization with an example. Anecdotes and quotes can help the reader understand the relevance of an issue or point of a story. Don't be afraid to incorporate anecdotes and quotes into your writing.

ALPHABET SOUP

Be sure to define an acronym before it is used either by spelling out the full name of the organization or by defining the acronym. Typically the acronym is placed in parentheses immediately following the definition and only the acronym is used thereafter.

- The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)...
- The National Security Personnel System (NSPS)...

Exception: If the first usage of the acronym appears close to the definition, it is not necessary to place the acronym in parentheses immediately following the definition, such as in the following example:

The American Federation of Government Employees is a strong and established union. AFGE has more than 200,000 members and was founded on Aug. 18, 1932.

When mentioning the AFL-CIO, you do not need to spell out the entire name of the organization.

You do not need to list the acronym if it is not used later in the document.

Listed below are commonly used acronyms for labor constituency groups, organizations and sponsored programs. To get a complete and updated listing of all the organizations and their acronyms affiliated with the AFL-CIO, visit www.aflcio.org.

A. Philip Randolph Institute (APRI)
American Radio Association (ARA)
Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW)
George Meany Center for Labor Studies (GMCLS)
Labor Council for Latin American Advancement (LCLAA)
United Steelworkers of America (USWA)

Listed below are commonly used acronyms for government agencies:

DoD – Department of Defense	DoE – Department of Energy
DoEd – Department of Education	DoJ – Department of Justice
DoL – Department of Labor	DoT – Department of Transportation
DHS – Department of Homeland Security	VA – Department of Veterans Affairs
HUD – Department of Housing and Urban Development	SSA – Social Security Administration
	BoP – Bureau of Prisons

CAPITALIZATION

Titles are capitalized only if they immediately precede the name of the person.

- “AFGE **N**ational **P**resident John Gage” vs. “John Gage, **n**ational **p**resident of the AFGE”
- “**P**resident George W. Bush” vs. “The **p**resident issued a statement”

Some titles should be capitalized and abbreviated when appearing before a name (Dr., Gov., Lt. Gov., Sen., Rep.).

The first time a name is used in a written piece, you have the option of **bolding** the person's name. After a person's full name is mentioned only the un-bolded last name should be used for the remainder of the piece. The first time a member of Congress is referenced, spell out the full name followed by their party affiliation and state in parentheses. After the first time the member of Congress is mentioned, they should be referred to as Rep. (last name) or Sen. (last name).

Example: Sen. **Edward M. Kennedy** (D-Mass.) is a leader on Capitol Hill for workers. Sen. Kennedy is a friend of labor.

The *AFGE Legislative Directory* provides additional information on members of Congress. In most cases, the first name of a current or former U.S. president is not necessary on first reference: President **Clinton**. Use first names when necessary to avoid confusion: President **Andrew Johnson**, President **Lyndon Johnson**.

First names and nicknames may be used for literary effect, or in a feature or personality context (e.g., “Bill” for President Clinton, “W” for President Bush, “Oprah”, “P. Diddy”).

Capitalize the names of company or academic departments only if the official name is mentioned.

Example: The AFGE Communications Department provides media training and reference materials. The communications department also develops press releases.

Capitalize and italicize newspaper and magazine titles. For books, TV shows and movies, capitalize and place in quotes. However the Bible is never italicized or place in quotes.

Examples: "Gone With the Wind," "Nightline," *Time* magazine and *The Washington Post*.

If you are unsure of the correct name of a publication, check the masthead for the formal title. For AFGE publications, these are the correct titles:

The Government Standard *The Rep Wing* *The Capital Report* *The Equalizer*

Titles of documents should be capitalized if they are proper nouns. General references of documents are lowercased:

Example: Executive Order 12345 was signed last week. The president signed five executive orders this year.

CITIES, STATES & ADDRESSES

When a city is named in text, it generally is followed by the abbreviation for the appropriate state where it is located.

Example: *Silver Spring, Md.* *Falls Church, Va.* *Augusta, Maine*

However some cities are so widely known that it is not necessary to write the state afterward. When mentioning the following cities, do not write the state afterward:

- | | | |
|------------------|-----------------|----------------|
| • Atlanta | • Baltimore | • Boston |
| • Chicago | • Cincinnati | • Cleveland |
| • Dallas | • Denver | • Detroit |
| • Honolulu | • Houston | • Indianapolis |
| • Las Vegas | • Los Angeles | • Miami |
| • Milwaukee | • Minneapolis | • New Orleans |
| • New York | • Oklahoma City | • Philadelphia |
| • Phoenix | • Pittsburgh | • St. Louis |
| • Salt Lake City | • San Antonio | • San Diego |
| • San Francisco | • Seattle | • Washington |

When a state follows a city, use the following abbreviations, and always enclose the state in commas when it appears in the middle of a sentence.

- | | | | | |
|---------|---------|---------|----------|---------|
| • 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. | | | |

Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas and Utah are not abbreviated.

Also, when a state is mentioned without a city in a sentence, do not abbreviate the name of the state.

The postal abbreviation for a state should only be used if it is part of a complete address with zip code.

In general, lowercase all directions—north, south, northeast, etc.—when they refer to compass directions. When talking about a particular region, uppercase—the Midwest, the Northeast, settlers from the East went West, the South Pole.

DATES

When a month is used with a specific date, abbreviate the months listed below. However, **never** abbreviate March, April, May, June and July.

• Jan. • Feb. • Aug. • Sept. • Oct. • Nov. • Dec.

Spell out all months when using them alone or with a year:

Examples: August 1993 was a hot month.
Her birthday is Jan. 12.
They started the project in November 1987.
They started the project on Nov. 1, 1987.

NUMBERS

Spell out all numbers "one" through "nine." Use figures for 10 and above. Avoid starting a sentence with a number. When you cannot avoid this, no matter what the number, **spell it out**. The exceptions to this rule are when you start a sentence with a year or are using numbers for marketing purposes.

Example: 1998 was a great year.

When a number describes an adjective, hyphenate the number:

Examples: A 10-day conference.
A three-year agreement.

Spell out "first" through "ninth" when they indicate sequence in time or location. Starting with 10th, use figures. An exception to this rule is when mentioning AFGE districts.

Examples: She was first in line.
He won 10th place.
Exception: 2nd district or district 2

When dealing with money, spell out the word "cents" and use numbers when the amount is less than one dollar. When more than one dollar, use a dollar sign and decimal point with numbers. Large amounts, use a dollar sign and spell out the word:

Examples: She bought the loaf of bread for \$1.21.
I can't believe I paid \$6 for popcorn!
The fundraiser netted \$4 million.
The banana cost 50 cents.

THE HYPHEN

1. Use a hyphen to join two or more words that serve as a single adjective before a noun.

Example: He was a bronco-busting, tough-talking Westerner.

2. Use hyphens to form certain compound words.

mother-in-law half-moon

3. Use hyphens for numbers and fractions.

one-half twenty-three one thousand fifty-four

4. Use hyphens between prefixes and words beginning with capital letters.

post-Reagan era un-American non-Caucasian all-American

5. Use hyphens between words and the prefixes of self-, all- and ex- (when it means "formerly"). And use a hyphen with the suffix -elect.

self-sufficient president-elect ex-president all-state

6. Use a hyphen between a capital letter and a word that serves as a suffix.

U-turn X-ray T-shirt F-sharp

7. Use hyphens to avoid doubling vowels and tripling consonants.

anti-intellectual bell-like co-owner wall-less

8. Use the "suspended hyphen" for hyphenated words in series.

Example: Her mother-, father- and brother-in-law joined her.

9. Use a hyphen to avoid ambiguity.

re-creation (something created new)	vs.	recreation (fun)
re-signed (signed again)	vs.	resigned (quit)
re-count (count again)	vs.	recount (tell)

Hyphenate the following:

- anti-labor
- grown-up
- red-handed
- second-rate
- white-collar
- know-how
- blue-collar
- light-year
- re-election
- short-lived
- worn-out
- mo-ped
- grass-roots (as an adjective)
- pro-labor
- right-to-work
- well-being
- year-end
- co-worker

The following always appear as one word:

- antigovernment
- firefighter
- online
- backyard
- middleman
- workweek
- counterattack
- monthlong

The following are two words:

- hot line
- grass roots (as a noun)
- under way
- work force
- Web site
- back pay

GRAMMAR

Correct grammar and punctuation is extremely important in making your point clear. To brush up on basic grammar skills, *The AP Stylebook* recommends reading *The Elements of Style* by E.B. White and William Strunk, Jr.

The Colon

Used most frequently at the end of a sentence to start a list, capitalize the first word after a colon only if it is a proper noun or if the word starts a complete sentence. I promise this: The style guide will help. The guide explains three things: punctuation, grammar and tricky words.

The Comma

The comma is often the most overused piece of punctuation. For our publications we use the following guidelines:

For serial commas omit the final comma before the word "and."

Example: I bought three books, four pencils, and a box of crayons.

When joining two clauses that could each stand alone as a sentence, include the comma before the conjunction. If the clauses could not stand alone as two complete sentences, omit the comma.

Example: I filled the car with gasoline, and I took the dog for a walk. I filled the car with gasoline then took the dog for a walk.

For essential clauses and nonessential clauses: An essential clause cannot be eliminated from a sentence without changing the meaning of that sentence—it restricts the meaning of the word or phrase in such a way that without it, it would change the interpretation of the sentence. With a nonessential clause, however, the clause could be eliminated without altering the meaning of the sentence.

An essential clause must not be set off from the sentence with commas while a nonessential clause is set off with commas.

Example: *Reporters who do not read their stylebooks should not criticize their editors.* The clause "who do not read their stylebooks" identifies a particular group of reporters and therefore is essential to the sentence.

If commas were inserted into the sentence a very different idea would be conveyed: *Reporters, who do not read their stylebooks, should not criticize their editors.* In this example the clause "who do not read their stylebooks" describes all reporters.

With introductory clauses and phrases, omit the comma unless it clarifies the sentence. With shorter clauses, the comma can easily be omitted. A safe rule to follow: If the introductory clause is less than five words, omit the comma. *When he had tired of the mad pace of the big city, he moved to Sperryville. During the night he heard many animal noises.* But use a comma

if leaving it out would slow comprehension. *On the street below, a curious crowd gathered.*

Commas always go inside of quotation marks. *"I'll go now," she said.*

Always put a comma after the word *etc.*, when it appears in the middle of a sentence.

The Semicolon

Use a semicolon in a series when at least one of the items is also set off by commas: *He leaves a son, John Smith of Chicago; three daughters, Jane Smith of New York, Mary Smith of Denver and Janet Smith of Boston; and a sister Martha, wife of Robert Jones, of Omaha, Neb.* Note that the semicolon is used before the final *and* in such a series.

Also use a semicolon to link two independent clauses when a coordinating conjunction is not present. *The package was due last week; it arrived today.* It is also acceptable and often preferred to break the above sentence into two shorter sentences. Also use a semicolon in a compound sentence which includes other punctuation.

You do not need semi-colons when running a series of bullets. Instead, use a period (.) if each bullet point is a complete sentence. If each point is not a complete sentence, no punctuation is necessary.

Parentheses vs. Dashes

A safe rule to follow is to use parentheses to set off information that is incidental. Use dashes to set off material you wish to highlight. If you do use parentheses, follow these punctuation guidelines:

Place a period outside a closing parenthesis if the material inside is not a complete sentence (*such as this fragment*).

(An independent parenthetical sentence like this one takes a period before the closing parenthesis.)

PRESS RELEASES, MEDIA ADVISORIES AND STATEMENTS

Press releases, media advisories and statements all follow a basic format. Press releases notify the media about a particular issue. Advisories notify the media about an upcoming event. Statements provide commentary on an issue or event.

Press releases, media advisories and statements should be typed. Be sure that all documents that are distributed to the media or the public are proofread carefully with particular attention paid to grammar and spelling, and be sure that all facts are correct.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE Date	CONTACT: Name Phone
HEADLINE IN ALL CAPS/BOLD/CENTERED	
CITY, State—Lead paragraph...should include most important information.	
Supporting paragraphs.	
### ←	Denotes end of release

Dateline: The city and state are always listed in what is called the dateline. The state is abbreviated following the guidelines on page 5.

Next page: If the release or advisory flows onto a second page, the text “—more—“ should appear centered at the bottom of page one to indicate that a second page follows. At the top of the second page, write the headline and “p. 2/2”. Releases, advisories and statements should be kept to one page if possible but should never exceed two pages in length.

Closing notation: Releases, media advisories and statements are closed using either “###” (three pound signs) or “—30—“.

Highlight event information: For media advisories, it is a good idea to place the essential event information (what, where, when, who) on separate lines immediately following the headline. This information should be repeated in the lead paragraph.

Media advisory notation: The text “**MEDIA ADVISORY**” should appear at the top of a media advisory in place of “**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**”.

Organization Description: You have the option of adding a brief description of your organization following the closing “###”.