

Getting to Know Associated Press Style

Center for Writing Excellence



Writing is 1% inspiration, and 99% elimination. — Louise Brooks

There is no great writing, only great rewriting. — Justice Brandeis

Why is Knowing AP Style Important?

- It is the gold standard for journalism—print and online—and is used by the vast majority of newspapers in the U.S.
- It is the standard against which all news writing is measured.
- It promotes a common understanding of punctuation and grammar conventions.
- Simply put, it's a standardized way to write everything from dates to street addresses to job titles.



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AP Writing Style: Inverted Pyramid

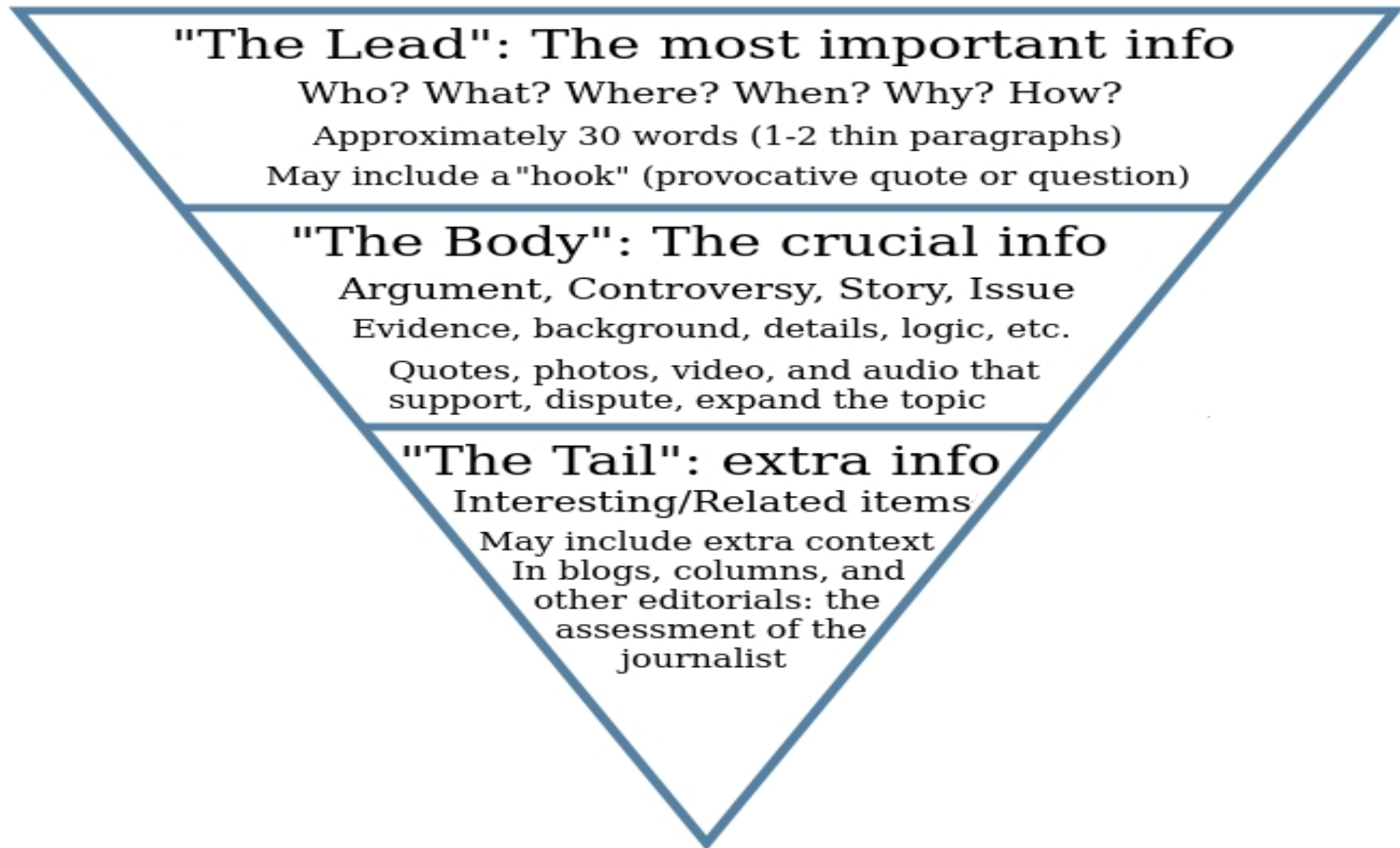
- News stories are generally organized using the inverted pyramid style, in which information is presented in descending order of importance.
- The pyramid allows the audience to read the most crucial details quickly, so they can decide whether to continue or stop reading the story.
- From an editing perspective, using the inverted pyramid style makes it easier to cut a story from the bottom, if necessary.
- Used since the middle of the 19th century, the inverted pyramid style remains the basic formula for news writing.



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Inverted Pyramid Structure



AP Style Writing: The 5 W's

- **What? Where? Who? When? Why?** and **How?** Writing a news story—no matter how long or short it is— should (most often) include these basic elements:
- **What** is the story about
- **Where** is it happening
- **Who** is involved
- **When** will it or did it happen
- **Why** is it happening
- **How** did it all come about or how will it occur



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Tips for Writing a Lead

- **Conflict:** Good stories have conflict. So do many good leads.
- **Specificity:** Though you are essentially summarizing information in most leads, try to be specific as possible. If your lead is too broad, it won't be informative or interesting.
- **Brevity:** Readers want to know why the story matters to them and they won't wait long for the answer. Leads are often one sentence, sometimes two. Generally, they are 25 to 30 words and should rarely be more than 40.



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Tips for Writing a Lead (Cont'd)

Active sentences

- Strong verbs will make your lead lively and interesting.
- Passive constructions, on the other hand, can sound dull and leave out important information.
- Incomplete reporting is often a source of passive leads.

Honesty

- A lead is an implicit promise to your readers.
- You must be able to deliver what you promise in your lead.



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Summary Lead

The **summary lead** is perhaps the most traditional lead in news writing. It is often used for breaking news. Straight news leads tend to provide answers to the most important three or four of the 5 W's and H.

Newspapers are adjusting to today's media reality by posting breaking news online as it happens and filling the print edition with more evaluative and analytical stories focused on why and how. Leads should reflect this trend.



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Examples of Summary Leads

“A 17-year-old boy chased his pet squirrel up a tree in Washington Square Park yesterday afternoon, touching off a series of incidents in which 22 persons were arrested and eight persons, including five policemen, were injured.”

Mark Hawthorne, *New York Times*

“After mass street protests in Poland, legislators with the country’s ruling party have abruptly reversed their positions and voted against a proposal to completely ban abortion.”

Camilla Domonoske, *National Public Radio*

“On more than 170 occasions this year, lobbyists failed to file disclosure forms when they visited Clark County commissioners, leaving the public in the dark about what issues they were pushing and on whose behalf.”

Tony Cook and Michael Mishak, *Las Vegas Sun*



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Anecdotal Leads

Sometimes, beginning a story with a quick **anecdote** can draw in readers. The anecdote must closely illustrate the article's broader point.

Specificity and **concrete details** are essential. The broader significance of the anecdote should be explained within the first few sentences following the lead.



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Example of Anecdotal Lead

"BEIJING — The first sign of trouble was powder in the baby's urine. Then there was blood. By the time the parents took their son to the hospital, he had no urine at all."

"Kidney stones were the problem, doctors told the parents. The baby died on May 1 in the hospital, just two weeks after the first symptoms appeared. His name was Yi Kaixuan. He was 6 months old."

"The parents filed a lawsuit on Monday in the arid northwest province of Gansu, where the family lives, asking for compensation from Sanlu Group, the maker of the powdered baby formula that Kaixuan had been drinking. It seemed like a clear-cut liability case; since last month, Sanlu has been at the center of China's biggest contaminated food crisis in years. But as in two other courts dealing with related lawsuits, judges have so far declined to hear the case."

Edward Wong, *The New York Times*



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Nut Graf

The **nut graf** tells the reader what the writer is up to; it delivers a promise of the story's content and message. It contains the “kernel,” or essential theme of the story.

The nut graf—

- justifies the story by telling readers why they should care.
- provides a transition from the lead and explains the lead and its connection to the rest of the story.
- tells readers why the story is timely.
- includes supporting material that helps readers see why the story is important.



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AP Style Writing: What To Avoid

Unnecessary words or phrases

- You can't afford to waste space in a news story, especially in the lead.
- Avoid clutter and cut right to the heart of the story.
- Watch out for redundancy: "2pm Wednesday afternoon" or "very unique."

Flowery language

- Don't overuse adverbs and adjectives.
- Concentrate on using strong verbs and nouns.



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Differences Between Print and Online Journalism

- Predetermined length vs. unlimited space
- Online is more opinion and commentary than print, which tends to be based on factual reporting.
- Print readers invest more time and money for articles, so content tends to be complex and longer.
- In print, sourcing requirements are relatively stricter.
- Online, hyperlinks are used to source material instead of attribution and fact checking.
- While both print and online report the same facts, digital emphasizes user engagement, which greatly impacts content.
- Digital journalists are moderators and aggregators of opinion.



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AP Style Basics: Abbreviations for Organizations

- Only use the most recognizable abbreviations, such as FBI, NASA and CIA.
- References such as OSHA or NATO that aren't as familiar can be used after you spell out the full name when it is first mentioned.
- However in most cases, generic references such as “the agency” and “the alliance” are used.
- Don't put unfamiliar abbreviations in parentheses after the first reference. Example: The American Copy Editors Society (ACES). Instead always use the full name or generic reference, such as “Society.”



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AP Style Basics: Abbreviating State Names

- Spell out the name of states when used alone.
- Abbreviate state names with seven or more letters when used with a city.
 - “Pittsburgh, PA is a weekend spot for people who live in Youngstown, Ohio.”
- Be sure to use AP Style abbreviations NOT those used by the U.S. Postal Service.



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Here is how each state is abbreviated in AP style (with the postal code abbreviations in parentheses). You will notice that eight states are missing from this list. That is because Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas and Utah are never abbreviated.

State Abbreviations

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/journalism_and_journalistic_writing/ap_style.html

Ala. (AL)	Ill. (IL)	Miss. (MS)	N.C. (NC)	Vt. (VT)
Ariz. (AZ)	Ind. (IN)	Mo. (MO)	N.D. (ND)	Va. (VA)
Ark. (AR)	Kan. (KS)	Mont. (MT)	Okla. (OK)	Wash. (WA)
Calif. (CA)	Ky. (KY)	Neb. (NE)	Ore. (OR)	W.Va. (WV)
Colo. (CO)	La. (LA)	Nev. (NV)	Pa. (PA)	Wis. (WI)
Conn. (CT)	Md. (MD)	N.H. (NH)	R.I. (RI)	Wyo. (WY)
Del. (DE)	Mass. (MA)	N.J. (NJ)	S.C. (SC)	
Fla. (FL)	Mich. (MI)	N.M. (NM)	S.D. (SD)	
Ga. (GA)	Minn. (MN)	N.Y. (NY)	Tenn. (TN)	

AP style does not require the name of a state to accompany the names of the following 30 cities:

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

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AP Style Basics: Abbreviating Months and Names

Months

- Spell out months when used without a specific date:
 - “August is too hot for a visit to Florida.”
- Abbreviate months with six or more letters if used with a specific date:
 - “Sept. 28”
- Always spell out the rest:
 - “May 15”

Names

Abbreviate junior or senior directly after the name with no comma:

Joe Smith Jr.



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AP Style Basics: Abbreviating Titles

Job titles

- Spell out titles when used alone:
 - *“She was the first female senator from her state.”*
- Abbreviate and capitalize titles when used before a name:
 - *“Senator Boxer posed hard questions for Rice.”*
- Spell out titles with names used in quotes with the exception of Dr., Mr., Mrs., and Ms.
 - *“Governor Murphy is no Chris Christie.”*



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AP Style Basics: Abbreviating Addresses

Street addresses

- Numerals are used for number addresses.
- Street (St.), Avenue (Ave.) and Boulevard (Blvd.) are abbreviated when used with a numbered address but otherwise are spelled out.
- Route and Road are **never** abbreviated.
 - *We live at 24 Main St.*
 - *His office is on Main Street.*
 - *Her school is located at 234 Elm Road.*



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AP Style Basics: Abbreviating Other Words

Never abbreviate—

- Days of the week
- Percentage as %
- Cents
- Christmas as Xmas
- “And” unless the symbol “&” is part of an official name
 - Key & Peele



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AP Style Basics: Capitalization of Nouns

Capitalize—

- common nouns such as party, river and street when they are part of a proper name for a place, person or thing.
 - the Libertarian Party
 - the Ohio River

Lower case—

- used for nouns when they stand alone or in subsequent references.
 - “The party does not have a candidate for president.”
 - “She nearly drowned in the river.”



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AP Style Basics: Capitalization of Seasons, Directions, and Formal Titles

Lower case—

- the name of seasons unless they are used in a proper name.
- directional indicators except when they refer to specific geographic regions: ***“the Northeast”*** or ***“the Midwest.”***
- formal titles that appear on their own or follow a name:
“The president is traveling to China.”



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