
The Job-hunter's Guide to Style and Grammar

How to avoid the grammar goofs and style errors
that HR departments and hiring managers
often use to reject a résumé or cover letter



The reason why any of this matters

There are plenty of high-achievers and successful professionals who can't spell well and have poor grammar. But HR departments and hiring managers have come to believe that spelling and grammar mistakes are a sure sign of a poor employee, someone destined to continue making mistakes. It's silly, really. But many decision-makers will reject a résumé outright for even minor spelling and grammar gaffs.

The problem: The so-called "laws of grammar" would never hold up in court. More conventions than rigid rules, they change with the times, are different in academic and professional environments, are always being updated, and are much debated among individual writers. The truth is, much of the English language is open to interpretation ("style" it's called). Yet, every stylebook differs somewhat. Even more confounding: Most large companies have their own proprietary stylebooks. The best strategy is to choose a style (based on a respected style guide) and use it uniformly throughout your résumé and cover letter. Most professional résumé writers use the Associated Press Stylebook, combined with a personal style guide they've compiled on their own.

The following recommendations are all culled from the Associated Press Stylebook, Webster's New World Dictionary and the best practices of Crown Résumé.

Above all: Be consistent

The most important rule regarding grammar style: Be consistent. If you apply a style or grammar rule one way here, and another way there, readers have to assume it's a mistake, and not simply your interpretation of the often-confusing rules.

SPECIFIC TO RÉSUMÉS

Use first-person (minus the pronoun)

Your résumé should be written in the first-person (as if you're talking about yourself), but minus the pronoun "I." Why not use an "I"? Because readers will understand you're talking about yourself, it saves space, plus, including "I" in every sentence and phrase would be repetitive and annoying.

- **CORRECT:** "High-energy, goal-oriented sales professional with bachelor degree in science field, outside sales experience, proven sales proficiency and expertise in aggressive, creative sales strategies."
- **INCORRECT:** "I am a high-energy, goal-oriented sales professional with a bachelor degree in the science field, outside sales experience, proven sales proficiency and expertise in aggressive, creative sales strategies."
- **INCORRECT:** "Peter is a high-energy, goal-oriented sales professional with a bachelor degree in the science field, outside sales experience, proven sales proficiency and expertise in aggressive, creative sales strategies."

Limit the use of articles

Human resources departments and employers aren't expecting fully developed sentences. And articles ("a," "an," "the") are another grammar formality that can be jettisoned from your résumé to save space and limit repetition. Write sentences as you would normally, then look for any articles that can be removed without confusing the reader.

Writing percentages

The Associated Press Stylebook states that the word "percent" should always be used instead of the symbol (%). However, to save space, it's become standard practice within the résumé industry to do just the opposite (for résumés only). Use numerals (not number words), and avoid using sentences that begin with a number.

- CORRECT: “Produced a 50% increase in profits.”

For amounts less than one percent, include a zero and decimal as placeholders:

- CORRECT: “Produced a 0.6% increase in profits.”

SPECIFIC TO COVER LETTERS

Use a corporate-casual writing style

Too many cover letters are overly formal. While employers expect professionalism, they also want to get a peek at your personality. If your writing comes across as stiff, they may figure you’re distant, difficult or fussy (not traits that employers envy).

Use a corporate-casual writing style:

- Balanced between professional and friendly.
- A combination of first- and second-person (“I” and “you”) instead of the more formal third-person (“he,” “she”).
- Sprinkle in a few contractions to make your writing warmer and friendlier (for example, “I’m” and “there’s” instead of “I am” and “there is”).
- Include industry jargon to show your grasp of the subject, but limit the number of mind-numbing buzzwords (e.g., “client-centric process,” “symbiotic partnership”).
- Model your writing after the Wall St. Journal (widely considered one of the best-written business periodicals in the country, in part because the reporters write about complex subjects using everyday business language).

Writing percentages

The Associated Press Stylebook states that the word “percent” should always be used instead of the representative symbol (%). The guide also calls for the use of numerals with percentages (not number words), unless the sentence begins with a number.

- CORRECT: “Produced a 50 percent increase in profits.”
- INCORRECT: “Produced a 50% increase in profits.”
- CORRECT: “Fifty percent of the sales were the result of my extra efforts.”

For amounts less than one percent, include a zero and decimal as placeholders:

- CORRECT: “Produced a 0.6 percent increase in profits.”

APPLIES TO BOTH RÉSUMÉS AND COVER LETTERS

Addresses

For complete addresses, the Associated Press Stylebook says to abbreviate some street names (but not all). But if there’s room, use the full names. When abbreviating:

- Always use numerals (not number words) for the address number (e.g., “72 Sixth Avenue”).
- For street names, spell-out and capitalize “First” through “Ninth,” and use numerals for “10th” and above.

- Only abbreviate “Ave.” and “Blvd.” and “St.”
- Spell-out “Alley,” “Place,” “Drive,” “Road,” “Court,” “Terrace” and other street names.
- Abbreviate North (N), South (S), East (E) and West (W).
- Do not include periods within directional combinations (e.g., “NE” and “SW”).

Spell-out and capitalize formal street names when used in regular text (not a specific address):

- CORRECT: “I was born and raised on Grand Avenue.”

In regular text, do not capitalize “street,” “avenue” and the like when they’re used alone or with more than one street name:

- CORRECT: “I worked at the corner of Grand and Union avenues.”
- CORRECT: “The streets were nearly empty each morning when I went to work.”

Abbreviate state names (using U.S. Postal Service format) on your résumé and in the address portion of your cover letter. Spell them out (and include commas on both ends) in the body of your cover letter.

- CORRECT: “Seattle, WA”
- CORRECT: “I worked in Seattle, Washington, for 10 years before moving.”

Contractions

Contractions (e.g., “you’ll,” “I’m,” “won’t”) are considered informal in business writing, however, when used sparingly, they make the writing sound more natural, and make the job candidate appear more personable, friendly and youthful. The Associated Press Stylebook states, “Avoid excessive use of contractions. However, contractions listed in the dictionary are acceptable in informal contexts where they reflect the way a phrase commonly appears in speech or writing.”

- STUFFY / FORMAL: “I am hoping you will consider me for this position.”
- RELAXED / NATURAL: “I’m hoping you’ll consider me for this position.”

Beginning or ending sentences with a preposition

Beginning or ending a sentence with a preposition (e.g., “and,” “but,” “on”) is considered informal in business writing. However, it’s become routine – and when done sparingly, can make the writing sound more natural, and make the job candidate appear more personable, friendly and youthful.

- STUFFY / FORMAL: “I am someone on whom you can depend.”
- RELAXED / NATURAL: “I’m someone you can depend on.”

Accent marks for “résumé”

Webster’s New World Dictionary says the word résumé can also be written without the accent marks (“resume”). However, the résumé-writing industry strongly recommends that accent marks be used to avoid confusion with the word “resume” (which means “to begin again”).

To add the accent marks using Microsoft Word:

1. Type the “r” as you would normally.
2. Hold down the control key (“Ctrl”) and type the quote (”) key.

3. Type the “e.”
4. Type the “s,” “u,” and “m” as you would normally.
5. Hold down the control key (“Ctrl”) and type the quote (”) key.
6. Type the final “e.”

When to capitalize

Most job-hunters want to capitalize job titles, the names of programs and the names of departments – because those things all look more impressive when capitalized (and that’s what companies often do). The problem with that approach is, to be consistent, you end up having to capitalize all job titles (even titles like “Assistant,” “Associate,” and “Agent”), all programs (e.g., “Annual Review” and “Marketing Effort”) and all departments (e.g., “Mailroom,” “Reception,” “Landscape Maintenance,” “History Department”), which can turn even simple sentences and paragraphs into a jumble of upper and lowercase letters. To guard against this, the Associated Press Stylebook dictates that all of the above examples (job titles, programs and departments) be written all-lowercase.

An exception: When the person’s title immediately precedes their name, the title should be capitalized:

- CORRECT: Chief Executive Joe Bender.

Another exception (just for résumés): Capitalize your job title when it’s used as a bold header. That means, capitalize your job title in the header for a job description, but write it all-lowercase in the text that follows.

More about titles and headers: Most style guides differ slightly when it comes to capitalizing the words in a title or header. The Associated Press Stylebook now calls for only the first word and proper nouns to be capitalized in a headline. However, the approach advocated by most other style guides is far more common (and powerful):

- Make articles (“a,” “an,” “the”) all-lowercase – unless it is the first or last word in the title or header.
- Make coordinating conjunctions (e.g., “and,” “or,” “but,” “yet”) all-lowercase – unless it is the first or last word in the title or header.
- Make all prepositions with five or less letters (e.g., “after,” “over,” “past,” “from”) all-lowercase – unless it is the first or last word in the title or header.
- Capitalize all the other words in the title / header.

Other capitalization rules:

- Capitalize the names of physical areas only if those titles are widely accepted (e.g., “South Side Chicago,” “Near East,” “Wild West”). Otherwise, use lowercase (e.g., “north Seattle,” “west Seattle”).
- Don’t capitalize words such as “city,” “state,” “federal,” “government” or “national” when they’re used as modifiers (e.g., “federal regulations,” “state government”).
- Don’t capitalize seasons (e.g., “winter,” “spring,” “summer,” “fall”).
- Don’t capitalize “board” or “board of directors.”
- Don’t capitalize “baby boomer.”

- When a complete sentence follows a colon, capitalize the first word in the sentence. If it's an incomplete sentence, do not capitalize the first word.
- Capitalize the word "Page" when referring to page numbers (e.g., "Page 35").
- Refer to the latest version of Webster's New World Dictionary for guidance on the capitalization of specific words.
- Only capitalize family names (e.g., "mother," "father," "grandfather," "grandmother") when the title immediately precedes the person's name ("Grandfather Krause") or when the title is used as a substitute for the person's name ("Father suggested I contact you"). Do not capitalize the title when it is used as a common noun (e.g., "My father suggested I contact you").

Directions and regions

In general, do not capitalize compass directions (e.g., "north," "south," "east," "west," "eastward").

Capitalize the names of physical areas only if those titles are widely accepted (e.g., "South Side Chicago," "Southern California," "the Midwest," "the North," "Near East," "Wild West," "Southern accent"). Otherwise, use lowercase (e.g., "north Seattle," "west Seattle").

Also capitalize when a compass direction is combined with a common noun to form the proper name for a region or location (e.g., "West Coast," "South Pole," "Middle East," "North Woods").

Writing about money

Spell-out the word "cents" (all lowercase) for non-specific amounts:

- CORRECT: "The stock was worth only a few cents when I finally sold it."

Use the word "cents," together with numerals (not number words), for amounts less than one dollar:

- CORRECT: "When I started in the business, I had just 5 cents to my name."
- INCORRECT: "When I started in the business, I had just five cents to my name."

For cents combined with dollars, use numerals and the decimal system (without the word "cents"):

- CORRECT: "\$1.21"
- INCORRECT: "\$1.21 cents."

Spell-out the word "dollar" or "dollars" (all lowercase) for non-specific dollar amounts:

- CORRECT: "The stock was worth only a few dollars when I finally sold it."
- INCORRECT: "The stock was worth on a few \$\$ when I finally sold it."

Use numerals (not number words), together with the dollar sign ("\$"), for any specific amounts. Do not include a decimal point or numerals when the total does not include any cents.

- CORRECT: "\$1"
- CORRECT: "\$5,645"
- INCORRECT: "\$5,645.00"

For specific amounts less than millions or billions, use numerals and the dollar sign (\$). Do not include a decimal point or zeros when the total does not include any cents.

- CORRECT: "I managed a \$4,000 budget."
- CORRECT: "I had a \$500 budget to work with on the project."
- INCORRECT: "I had a \$500.00 budget to work with on the project."

When values rise above thousands, use the words "million" and "billion" (instead of zeros). Use numerals (not number words), and do not combine any of the words with hyphens.

- CORRECT: "I managed a million dollar budget."
- CORRECT: "I managed a \$2 million dollar budget."
- INCORRECT: "I managed a million-dollar budget."
- INCORRECT: "I managed a two-million-dollar budget."

Use decimals (not fractions or words) in large figures, but do not go beyond two decimal places:

- CORRECT: "I managed a \$6.25 million dollar budget."
- INCORRECT: "I managed a \$6.253 million dollar budget."
- INCORRECT: "I managed a \$6 1/4 million dollar budget."
- INCORRECT: "I managed a \$6 and one-half million dollar budget."

Specific amounts should be treated as a singular verb (not plural):

- CORRECT: "He said \$500,000 is what they want."
- INCORRECT: "He said \$500,000 are what they want."

When stating a range, be exact with both figures:

- CORRECT: "The savings ranged between \$2 million and \$4 million for all five years."
- INCORRECT: "The savings ranged between \$2 and \$4 million for all five years."

When to use numerals and number words

The Associated Press Stylebook states that, in general, numbers less than 10 should be spelled-out (e.g., "one," "five," "seven"), and that numerals be used for 10 and greater (e.g., "10," "32," "153"). However, it also lists a number of exceptions to this rule:

Exception #1: When stating percentages, always use numerals.

Exception #2: When stating age, always use numerals.

- CORRECT: "When I was just 22 years old, I successfully negotiated three partnership contracts for 10 companies, generating a 5 percent increase in sales."

Exception #3: When stating time, always use numerals.

Exception #3: When stating weight or measurements, always use numerals.

Exception #4: Always use numerals in headlines and titles.

Exception #5: When stating amounts of money, always use numerals.

Exception #6: When stating page numbers, always use numerals (and capitalize the word "Page").

Exception #7: When a number begins a sentence, it should be spelled-out (e.g., "Fifteen years of experience"), except when that number is a year (e.g., "1999 was my first year of service").

Stating your age

Typically, job seekers should not include age in their résumé or cover letter. However, you certainly can if it's to your advantage. Always use numerals when stating your age.

Typically you would follow the digits with the words, "years old." But when using your age as an adjective before a noun, hyphenate the phrase:

- CORRECT: "When I was 23 years old, I became CEO."
- CORRECT: "I was a 23-year-old CEO."

Because age is typically measured in years, it's not always necessary to include the word:

- CORRECT: "My assistant, 21, has a son who is 7."

However, when measuring in months, you must include the word:

- CORRECT: "My daughter is 2 months old."

When referring to an age decade, add a lowercase "s" (with no apostrophe):

- CORRECT: "That was when I was in my 30s."

Referring to non-specific amounts

- Few = not many; a small number.
- Several = more than two, but not many.
- A couple = While Webster's New World Dictionary defines it as "two" in formal writing, and "a small number" in informal writing, stick with the formal definition to avoid confusion in résumés and cover letters.
- A lot (not "alot") = a large number or amount; a great deal (too vague and informal for a résumé or cover letter).

Use "and" (not the ampersand symbol)

The Associated Press Stylebook says the ampersand (&) should only be used when it's part of a formal company name (e.g., "Anderson & Sons"). Otherwise, it should never be used in place of the word "and."

Dates

There are several ways to refer to your years of experience, but one is clearly the best:

- BEST: "A seasoned sales executive with 12 years of experience."
- SECOND BEST: "A seasoned sales executive with 12 years' experience."
- THIRD BEST: "A seasoned sales executive with 12 years experience."

Use all four digits for years: "1998," "2010," "2011."

Use a lowercase “s” without an apostrophe to indicate decades or centuries: “1990s” or “1900s.”

Abbreviate months (e.g., “Dec. 16,” “Jan. 3, 2010,”) when part of a specific date, but spell-out when used alone or with only a year (e.g., “In December of this year, I left” or “In December, 2010, I left”).

When including complete dates within a sentence, include a comma on either side of the year (e.g., “December 5, 2011, was my first day of work”). But when listing only the month and year (no day), do not separate the year with commas.

In all cases, capitalize the names of months.

The AP Stylebook requires that numbers be spelled-out when used to begin a sentence, however, that’s not the case when a year is used at the start of a sentence: “1999 was my first year of service.”

Time

When including the time zone with a specific time of day, abbreviate the time zone using capitals (e.g., “9 a.m. PT” or “1:30 p.m. EST”). Do not set off the abbreviation with a comma.

When referring to a time zone without a specific time, spell-out and capitalize the name (e.g., “Pacific Time” or “Eastern Daylight Time”).

Use “a.m.” and “p.m.” (all lowercase and with periods).

Dimensions

When stating dimensions, always use numerals (instead of number words), and spell-out “inches,” “feet,” “yards,” etc. (Only use commas between each measurement if there are more than two in a series.)

- CORRECT: “I am 5 feet 7 inches tall.”
- CORRECT: “The poster measured 36 inches high by 24 inches wide.”
- CORRECT: “The box is 12 inches long, 7 inches wide and 4 inches high.”
- CORRECT: “The storm dropped 3 inches of rain in the first hour.”

When dimensions are used as an adjective, hyphenate the measurement:

- CORRECT: “I was the first 5-foot-3-inch basketball player in the NBA.”
- CORRECT: “It was a 4-by-8 sheet of plywood.”
- CORRECT: “I was able to process 12-footers faster than any other worker.”

According to the Associated Press Stylebook: “Use an apostrophe to indicate feet and quote marks to indicate inches (5’6”) only in very technical contexts.”

Fractions

For fractional amounts larger than one, use decimals to represent them whenever possible. For amounts smaller than one, spell-out the fractional amounts and include hyphens between the words.

- CORRECT: “four-fifths,” “one-half,” “three-quarters.”
- CORRECT: “1.25,” “3.50,” “4.36.”

Trade and registration marks

Trade (™) and registration ® marks are designed to protect a company's intellectual property in the open marketplace. They have no place in a résumé or cover letter. Leave them out.

When to use a comma

The rules regarding comas are confounding. The Associated Press Stylebook includes two pages of rules and examples regarding their usage.

The situation that trips-up most people, is how to use commas when listing a series of things. The Chicago Style Manual says that a comma should be included before the conjunctions "and" and "or." However, the Associated Press Stylebook (the recommended resource) states you should not include that final comma:

- RECOMMENDED: Red, white and blue.
- RECOMMENDED: Bill, Pete or Mike.
- NOT RECOMMENDED: Red, white, and blue.
- NOT RECOMMENDED: Bill, Pete, or Mike.

When to use a comma between adjectives is another tripping point for many people. The answer: If the word "and" could be inserted between the adjectives without changing the sense, that means it's okay to include a comma between them.

- CORRECT: "Both options offer their own unique benefits."
- INCORRECT: "Both options offer their own, unique benefits."

Using "incorporated"

The Associated Press Stylebook states that "incorporated" should always be abbreviated and capitalized (Inc.) when used as part of a corporate name. It adds: "Do not set off with commas."

Use "he" or "his" when gender is generic or unknown

In English, there is no non-gender singular pronoun. Therefore, the use of "his" when referring to a non-specific person has become the norm. According to the Associated Press Stylebook, "Do not presume maleness in constructing a sentence, but use the pronoun 'he' or 'his' when an indefinite antecedent may be male or female."

- CORRECT: "If a person wants to get a promotion, he has to work for it."

More from the AP Stylebook: "Frequently, however, the best choice is a slight revision of the sentence":

- ALTERNATIVE: "To get a promotion, a person needs to work for it."
- ALTERNATIVE: "When people want promotions, they have to work for them."

Bulleted statements

All of the bulleted statements in your résumé and cover letter should either end with a period or not end with a period. It's incorrect to have some end with a period and some not. Play it safe: always include a period.

Also: Round or square bullet points seem more professional than an arrow or other bullet formats.

Avoid split infinitives

When infinitive forms of the preposition “to” (e.g., “to leave,” “to help”) are separated from the verb they complement by another word (usually an adjective), that creates a split infinitive. This is considered awkward and should be rephrased so that the word “to” immediately precedes the verb it complements:

- SPLIT INFINITIVE: “My aim was to always cooperate.”
- CORRECTLY REPHRASED: “My aim was always to cooperate.”

Avoid dangling modifiers

A dangling modifier is a phrase that is designed to modify another part of the sentence but fails to do so.

- DANGLING MODIFIER: “Working from home, the meeting began.”
- CORRECTLY REPHRASED: “Working from home, I was well prepared when the meeting began.”

Hyphenating words

Hyphenating words to form compound words and phrases is, as the AP Stylebook states, “Optional in most cases, a matter of taste, judgment and style sense. But the fewer hyphens the better; use them only when not using them causes confusion.” Legitimate uses include:

- To modify a noun. When two or more words expressing a single concept precede a noun and are used as an adjective, use hyphens to link them all (except the adverb “very” and all adverbs that end in “ly”). For example: “new-employee orientation.”
- When large numbers must be spelled-out (e.g., “sixty-two”).
- For business terms that haven’t yet achieved common usage (e.g., “pixel-animation”).
- Any use of the terms “full-time” or “part-time.”
- Refer to the latest version of Webster’s New World Dictionary for guidance on the hyphenation of specific words.

Note: Adverbs that end with the letters “ly” (and the word “very”) are not hyphenated when combined with an adjective. However, other words that are not adjectives but end with the letters “ly” can be hyphenated.

- CORRECT: “What I created was a fully functional, high-performance work team.”
- CORRECT: “I was mentored by a very well respected member of the senior management team.”
- INCORRECT: “What I created was a fully-functional, high-performance work team.”

Hyphenating prefixes

In general, a word with a prefix should be hyphenated only if the prefix ends in a vowel and the word that follows it begins with the same vowel. Otherwise, combine them to make one word.

- CORRECT: “re-establish,” “re-enlist,” “re-establish.”
- CORRECT: “renegotiate” “reform,” “recover.”
- CORRECT: “pre-election,” “pre-exist,” “pre-empt.”
- CORRECT: “predispose,” “pretax,” “precondition.”

Exception #1: Do not hyphenate the words “cooperate” or “coordinate.”

Exception #2: In general, do not hyphenate words that include the “dis” prefix (“dismember,” “dissemble,” “disservice,” “dissuade”).

Book and periodical titles

Use quotation marks with all book titles; computer game titles; movie titles; radio and TV show titles; magazine, newspaper and newsletter titles; and the titles of lectures and speeches (e.g., I am the author of “Business Leadership Principles for Non-leaders”). Do not use quotation marks with software programs.

Using italics

The Chicago Manual of Style calls for italics to be used for proper titles and example words. However, the Associated Press Stylebook (the recommended resource) recommends quotation marks. To avoid confusion – and disruptions to the writing flow – avoid the use of both whenever possible, but use quotation marks when the situation dictates (because they’re far easier for the reader to see). Also see next entry: “Using quote marks.”

Using quote marks

In general, avoid using quote marks in your résumé, because they’re often unnecessary and jarring to the reader. Legitimate uses include:

- When quoting the exact words spoken by a person.
- For nicknames.
- For terms unfamiliar to the reader (but only the first time that term is used in the document; all other references to the term should be written without quote marks).
- For all book titles; computer game titles; movie titles; radio and TV show titles; magazine, newspaper and newsletter titles; and the titles of lectures and speeches (e.g., I am the author of “Business Leadership Principles for Non-leaders”).

Do not use quotation marks with software programs.

When you do use quote marks, there are specific style rules regarding any associated punctuation:

- Periods and commas always go inside the quote marks.
- Colons, semi-colons, dashes, question marks and exclamation points go inside the quote marks only if they’re part of the quoted matter (spoken by the person, or part of a formal name) and outside the quote marks in all other cases.

Company names

According to the Associated Press Stylebook:

- Generally, follow the spelling and capitalization preferred by the company (e.g., “eBay”). But capitalize the first letter if it begins a sentence.
- Do not use all-capital-letter names unless the letters are individually pronounced (e.g., “BMW”). All other company names should be edited (e.g., “Ikea” not “IKEA”; “USA Today” not “USA TODAY”).
- Do not use symbols such as exclamation points, plus signs or asterisks that form contrived spellings that might distract or confuse a reader (e.g., “Yahoo” not “Yahoo!”, “E-Trade” not “E*Trade”).

Parenthesis versus dash

As the Associated Press Stylebook states, “Parentheses are jarring to the reader.” Instead, try to use a dash (technically an “en dash” to distinguish it from a hyphen).

- Use parenthesis when you want to provide an example: “(e.g., the first weather balloon).”
- Use parenthesis when you want to provide the reader with deep-rooted context or background: “(a failure the first time, but a big success in its second implementation).”
- Use an en-dash when you want to provide simple context, comment and background: “The program – the launching of the agency’s first weather balloon – was a big success.”

When stating a span of time, use an en dash or words, but not the two together:

- CORRECT: “2010 – 2011”
- CORRECT: “From 2010 to 2011”
- INCORRECT: “From 2010 – 2011”

Some style guides say no spaces should be included on either side of a dash. However, the Associated Press Stylebook (the recommended resource) says one space should be included on both sides.

When to use a possessive apostrophe

The Associated Press Stylebook includes two pages of rules and examples regarding the use of apostrophes. Included below are the rules regarding tricky situations with the possessive version (when you want to show something belongs to the subject):

- Use [s'] for plural nouns that end in “s” (e.g., “the girls’ toys”).
- Use [’s] for singular common nouns that end in “s,” unless the word that follows also begins with an “s” (e.g., “the hostess’s invitation” or “the hostess’ seat”).
- Always use [s'] for singular proper names that end in “s,” (e.g., “Dickens’ novels” or “Sears’ profit share”).
- It’s perfectly acceptable to use a possessive apostrophe with an inanimate object (e.g., “the company’s best employee”).
- Do not use a possessive apostrophe with personal interrogative and relative pronouns (e.g., “ours,” “yours,” “hers,” “its,” “theirs”).
- It’s perfectly acceptable to use a possessive apostrophe with an abbreviation: “Trans-America Co.’s profits were never better.”
- While not ideal, it’s perfectly acceptable to include the possessive noun at the end of your sentence: “The results were much better than Trans-America’s.

References to “staff,” “staffer” and “staffers”

Normally, “staff” is a reference to a collective, which means it should be treated as a singular noun. “Staffer” or “staffers” refers to a person or persons within the collective.

- CORRECT: “The staff has achieved much during that time.”
- INCORRECT: “The staff have achieved much during that time.”
- CORRECT: “The staff produced, even though it was under tremendous pressure.”

- INCORRECT: “The staff produced, even though they were under tremendous pressure.”
- CORRECT: “The staffers produced even though they were under tremendous pressure.”

References to “data”

While the word “data” is plural in form, it can also be used to refer to individual units:

- CORRECT: “Our customer data is stored in an encrypted file.”
- CORRECT: “Each piece of data was personally reviewed by me.”

Academic classes

Don’t capitalize classes and courses unless you use the specific, complete title (or the name includes a proper noun):

- CORRECT: “biology.”
- CORRECT: “English.”
- CORRECT: “Advanced Shakespeare.”

Academic degrees

To save space, academic degrees are usually abbreviated as follows (with periods):

- Correct: B.S. in Computer Science
- Incorrect: B.S., Computer Science
- Incorrect: BS in Computer Science

For a complete list of abbreviations for academic degrees, see: <http://yasharov.andrews-group.eu/Dictionary%20of%20Abbreviations%20for%20Academic%20Degrees.pdf>

If you want to spell-out the degree:

- Correct: Bachelor of Science in Computer Science
- Incorrect: Bachelor’s in Computer Science
- Incorrect: Bachelor of Science, Computer Science

Don’t capitalize references to academic degrees unless they include a specific (and complete) academic major:

- CORRECT: “I have a bachelor degree.”
- CORRECT: “I have a bachelor of arts degree.”
- CORRECT: “I hold a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature.”

“Doctorate” is a noun; “doctoral” is an adjective. You may have a doctorate, or a doctoral degree, but not a doctorate degree.

Abbreviations and acronyms

As the Associated Press Stylebook states: “In general, avoid alphabet soup. And do not use abbreviations or acronyms that the reader would not quickly recognize.” Legitimate uses include:

- Abbreviating personal titles when used before a full name (e.g., “Mr.” or “Mrs.”).
- Abbreviating the possession of an advanced degree after your name at the top of your résumé (e.g., “Ralph Edwards, M.B.A.”).
- Abbreviating the possession of a professional certification after your name at the top of your résumé (e.g., for a certified life insurance underwriter, it would be, “Beth Bolton, CLU”).
- Abbreviating junior or senior after your name at the top of your résumé (e.g., “Mike Haney Jr.” or “Sr.”). Note: Do not include a comma between the name and the abbreviation.
- Addresses (e.g., “Ave.” or “Blvd.”).
- States (e.g., “CA” or “WA”)
- Company formations (e.g., “Inc.” or “Co.”).
- The word etcetera (e.g., “etc.”).
- The acronyms for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (“SAT”) and other admissions exams (e.g., “GRE” and “GMAT”).
- The acronym for the term “also known as”): aka

Unfortunately, there is no universal rule regarding periods within abbreviations and acronyms. Some include periods, some do not. The only true guide is Webster’s New World Dictionary. In general, however, the AP Stylebook advises, “Omit periods in acronyms unless the results would spell an unrelated word.”

Use abbreviations liberally if your industry recognizes and uses them. But spell them out (in a parenthesis afterward) if there’s any chance of confusion – and to increase your keyword hits.

For the names of associations, companies, organizations, etc., use the official name on first reference. On second reference, just the abbreviation can be used.

When spelling-out acronyms, capitalize them as you would normally (just because all the letters in the acronym are capitalized does not mean all the words should be capitalized when spelled-out):

- SOP = standard operating procedure.
- AJE = American Journal of Education.
- MADD = Mothers against Drunk Drivers.

Abbreviate state names on your résumé and in the address portion of your cover letter. Spell them out (and include commas on both ends) in the body of your cover letter.

- CORRECT: “Seattle, WA”
- CORRECT: “I worked in Seattle, Washington, for 10 years before moving.”

Abbreviate months (e.g., “Dec.,” “Jan.,” “Feb.”) when used as part of a specific date. But spell-out months when used alone or with only a year.

Use “a.m.” and “p.m.” (all lowercase and with periods).

When abbreviating “United States,” use periods: “U.S.”

To make an acronym plural, add a lowercase “s” with no apostrophe (e.g., “BBBs,” or “SOPs”).

To make an acronym possessive, add a lowercase “s” with an apostrophe (e.g., “The U.S.’s worst recession.”).

Use single spaces between sentences

The practice of putting two spaces between sentences is a carryover from the days of typewriters and their monospaced typefaces. Including two spaces made it easier to see where one sentence ended and the next began. Computers – as well as modern-day typewriters – use proportionally spaced fonts, so only one space is required today.

Using an ellipsis (...)

An ellipsis (three periods in succession) signals the reader that words have been removed – usually from a quotation. A single space should be included on either side of an ellipsis to separate it from words and other punctuation – unless it is immediately followed by a final period (ending the sentence), in which case the final period should be added directly to the end of the ellipsis (creating four periods in succession).

- **CORRECT:** “Sam was one of the best employees we ever had ... and demonstrated great leadership.”
- **CORRECT:** “Sam was one of the best employees we ever had”

Using “it” and “its” to refer to a company

The word “company” is an inanimate genderless noun. Therefore, when using a pronoun to refer to a company, you would use the genderless pronoun “it” or “its” (not “they” or “their”):

- **CORRECT:** “The company slashed its expenses by 50%.”
- **INCORRECT:** “The company slashed their expenses by 50%.”

Using “myriad”

When used as an adjective, myriad means “countless.” And according to both Webster’s New World Dictionary and the Associated Press Stylebook, the article “a” should not precede the word “myriad,” and the preposition “of” should not follow it (as many writers are in the habit of doing). That said, it’s been incorrectly used so much that your best bet may be to simply use the phrase “a wide variety” instead.

- **TECHNICALLY CORRECT:** “I worked on myriad projects during my ten years with the company.”
- **COMMONLY MISUSED AS:** “I worked on a myriad of projects during my ten years with the company.”
- **RECOMMENDED SUBSTITUTE:** “I worked on a wide variety of projects during my ten years with the company.”

The Great Recession

Officially, our last recession lasted from late 2007 to the middle of 2009. It is often referred to as “the Great Recession.” If you want to refer to a time period greater than that span, you might use the phrase “severe economic downturn.”

- **CORRECT:** “Managed to increase sales by 15% during a severe economic downturn.”

The spelling of Internet terms

- Internet (this is a proper name, so always use a capital “I”).

- website (no longer spelled “Web site” in the Associated Press Stylebook).
- webmaster, webcast, webcam (all one-word with a lowercase “w”).
- email (no longer spelled “e-mail” in the Associated Press Stylebook).
- Other “e” words are hyphenated (e.g., “e-commerce,” “e-book”).
- online (one-word, lowercase “o”).

OFTEN MISUSED WORDS AND TERMS

The difference between “bi-monthly” and “semi-monthly”

The adjective “bi-monthly” means every-other-month. “Semi-monthly” means twice per month. However, many readers are confused by both terms, so you’re better off using the terms “every-other-month” and “twice-per-month.”

The same is true for “bi-weekly” and “semi-weekly.”

When to use “follow up” and “follow-up”

Use “follow up” as a verb, and “follow-up” as an adjective:

- CORRECT: “I will follow up on this immediately.”
- CORRECT: “My follow-up was impeccable.”

The difference between “principal” and “principle”

“Principal” means someone first in rank. “Principle” means fundamental truth.

The difference between “flout” and “flaunt”

To “flout” is to show contempt for something (e.g., “He flouted authority”). To “flaunt” is to make a display of something (e.g., “He flaunted his superior skills”).

The difference between “forego” and “forgo”

To “forego” is to precede or to go in front (e.g., “it was a foregone conclusion”). To “forgo” is to decline or abstain from something (e.g., “I’ll forgo the formalities and get right to the point”).

The difference between “gantlet” and “gauntlet”

A “gantlet” is a form of punishment; usually a flogging. A “gauntlet” is a glove; and is often used to symbolically signal intent (e.g., “I threw down the gauntlet” or “I took up the gauntlet”).

The difference between “its” and “it’s”

“It’s” is a contraction that means “it is” or “it has.” Meanwhile, “its” is a pronoun stand-in for the subject of the sentence (e.g., “the company lost its assets”).

The difference between “aid” and “aide”

An “aide” is an assistant. “Aid” is a form of assistance.

The difference between “pore” and “pour”

The verb “pore” means to gaze intently at something. The verb “pour” means to let something flow.

The differences between “adopt,” “approve,” “enact,” and “pass”

According to the Associated Press Stylebook: Amendments, ordinances, resolutions and rules are “adopted” or “approved.” Bills are “passed.” Laws are “enacted.”

When to use “good” or “well”

“Good” means something is as it should be or better than average. According to the Associated Press Stylebook, it is perfectly acceptable to say, “I feel good today,” as this is “the idiomatic equivalent of ‘I feel well.’”

“Well,” when used as an adjective, means “suitable,” “proper” or “healthy.” When the word is used as an adverb, it means that something was done in a satisfactory or skillful manner.

When to use “because” or “since”

The Associated Press Stylebook states:

- Use “because” to denote a specific cause-effect relationship (e.g., “He went because he was told”).
- “Since” is acceptable in a casual sense, when the first event in a sequence led logically to the second but was not its direct cause (e.g., “They went to the game, since they had been given tickets”).

When to use “its” and “their”

The word “company” is an inanimate genderless noun. Therefore, when using a pronoun to refer to a company, you would use the genderless pronoun “it” or “its” (not “they” or “their”):

- CORRECT: “The company slashed its expenses by 50%.”
- INCORRECT: “The company slashed their expenses by 50%.”

Using “or” and “nor”

With only a few exceptions, the words “neither” and “nor” should always be used together:

- CORRECT: “An independent investigation revealed that I was responsible for neither the spill nor the accident that followed.”

Likewise, with only a few exceptions, “either” and “or” should always be used together:

- CORRECT: “If I was offered the choice between either a promotion or a raise, I would choose the promotion.”

The difference between “farther” and “further”

The adjective “farther” is a non-specific measurement of physical distance:

- “I walked to work farther than any other employee.”

The adjective “further” is a non-specific measurement of time or degree:

- “Upon further inspection, we found the system to be in tatters.”

The difference between “there,” “their” and “they’re”

The adverb “there” is used to indicate direction:

- CORRECT: “I used to work there.”

The pronoun “their” is used to show possession:

- CORRECT: “I transferred to their newest branch.”

“They’re” is a contraction for the words “they are”:

- CORRECT: “They’re still using the new-employee orientation program I created.”

The difference between “who” and “whom”

The pronoun “who” should only be used as a stand-in for the subject of a sentence (the person or thing you’re talking about).

The pronoun “whom” should only be used as a stand-in for the object of a sentence (the person or thing to which action, thought or feeling is directed).

- CORRECT: “The person who ran the program said I was his best employee.”
- CORRECT: “The person to whom the program was left said I was his best employee.”

The difference between “differ from” and “differ with”

To “differ from” means to be unlike. To “differ with” means to disagree.

- CORRECT: “I differed from the other candidates.”
- CORRECT: “I differed with his initial opinion.”

The difference between “effect” and “affect”

Technically, “effect” and “affect” can be used as both verbs and nouns. However, it’s become common practice to use “affect” only as a verb (in which case it means, to cause or influence something).

- CORRECT: “The marketing initiative affected the bottom-line in a big way.”
- CORRECT: “The effect brought about by the marketing initiative was powerful.”

The difference between “among” and “between”

The preposition “between” is usually used when referring to just two things. The preposition “among” is most often used when referring to more than two things.

The difference between “that” and “who”

Use “that” to refer to a thing; use “who” to refer to a person:

- CORRECT: “The company that referred me.”
- CORRECT: “The person who referred me.”

The difference between “which” and “that”

According to the Associated Press Stylebook, “that” is the “preferred pronoun” to introduce information that is essential for the reader to understand (an essential clause). However, “which” may be substituted if “that” is used in the same sentence (to avoid reusing the same word):

- CORRECT: “It was a high point for the company that was my first employer.”
- INCORRECT: “It was a high point for the company which was my first employer.”

- CORRECT: “We decided that the division which posted the highest sales would be given the greatest rewards.”

Also according to the Associated Press Stylebook, “which” is the “only acceptable pronoun” to introduce information that is not essential to the reader’s understanding (a nonessential clause). Also note that any nonessential clauses need to be set off from the other information with a comma, a hyphen or a parenthesis.

- CORRECT: “The division, which was only founded last year, soon became my responsibility.”

When to use “e.g.” and “i.e.”

The acronyms e.g. and i.e. are both abbreviations for Latin terms. Unfortunately, translating them doesn’t help to better understand them; so instead:

- Pretend that i.e. stands for “in essence,” or “in other words.”
- Pretend that e.g., stands for “example given.”

Both should always be followed by a comma.

The difference between “complement” and “compliment”

Use “complement” to communicate the completeness or the supplementing of something:

- CORRECT: “I carry a full complement of pens in my pocket at all times.”

Use “compliment” as an expression of praise or courtesy:

- CORRECT: “My boss complimented me for a job well done.”

The difference between “every day” and “everyday”

The word “everyday” is an adjective (it describes a thing), while “every day” is an adverb phrase:

- CORRECT: “It was an everyday occurrence.”
- CORRECT: “Every day I worked there, I contributed as a team-player.”

The difference between “any body” and “anybody”; “any one” and “anyone”

Use these as one word when referring to an indefinite entity. Use them as two words when you want to single out one element of a group:

- CORRECT: “Anyone could have done it.”
- CORRECT: “Any one of those people could have done it.”

The difference between “every one” and “everyone”

Use the pronoun “everyone” when referring to all persons. Use the words “every one” when referring to individual people or items:

- CORRECT: “Everyone wants a boss who respects them.”
- CORRECT: “I was responsible for every one of those employees.”

The difference between “in” and “into”

The preposition “in” indicates location. “Into” indicates motion.

- CORRECT: “I was overjoyed with your offer as soon as I tore into the envelope.”
- CORRECT: “I stared in to the envelope, not knowing what to think.”

The difference between “long term” and “long-term”

Use the compound version (“long-term”) like an adjective when modifying a noun. Use the term “long term” as a noun.

- CORRECT: “It was a long-term assignment.”
- CORRECT: “In the long term, the project should be a success.”

The difference between “anything” and “any thing”

Always use it as one word. Neither Webster’s New World Dictionary nor the Associated Press Stylebook lists “any thing” (two words).

The difference between “among” and “amongst”

Use “among.” The preposition “amongst” is a British version of “among.”

The difference between “layoff” and “lay off”

Use “layoff” as a noun and “lay off” as a verb:

- CORRECT: “The layoff has not affected my positive attitude.”
- CORRECT: “I had to lay off many of my coworkers.”

When to use “myself”

Not sure whether to use “me” or “I” in a sentence, many people try to substitute the word “myself.” Others simply prefer to use “myself” because they think it sounds more sophisticated. In almost all cases, it would be more appropriate to use either “I” or “me” (see the separate entry directly below for details on how to use those two options). The most appropriate use of “myself” is:

- As a reflexive pronoun (e.g., “I taught myself”).
- As an intensifier (e.g., “I did it all myself”).

When to use “me” and “I” with another subject

When confused about whether to use “me” or “I” when referring to you and another person / thing, mentally remove the other subject from the sentence and it should become clear:

- CORRECT: “I was transferred to another department.”
- CORRECT: “My boss and I were transferred to another department.”
- INCORRECT: “Me was transferred to another department.”
- INCORRECT: “Me and my boss were transferred to another department.”

When to use “a” or “an”

Use the article “a” when the word that follows it begins with a consonant (or a consonant sound):

- CORRECT: “A 10% increase in profits.”

Use the article “an” when the word that follows it begins with a vowel (or a vowel sound):

- CORRECT: "An effective leader."

When to use "fewer" or "less"

If you can count the thing(s) you're referring to, use the word "fewer"; if you can't count them, use the word "less."

- CORRECT: Fewer animals.
- CORRECT: Less compassion.

INDEX

[Specific to résumés](#)

[Specific to cover letters](#)

[Addresses](#)

[Contractions](#)

[Beginning or ending sentences with a preposition](#)

[Accent marks for “résumé”](#)

[When to capitalize](#)

[Directions and regions](#)

[Writing about money](#)

[When to use numerals and number words](#)

[Stating your age](#)

[Referring to non-specific amounts](#)

[Use “and” \(not the ampersand symbol\)](#)

[Dates](#)

[Time](#)

[Dimensions](#)

[Fractions](#)

[Trade and registration marks](#)

[When to use a comma](#)

[Using “incorporated”](#)

[Use “he” or “his” when gender is generic or unknown](#)

[Bulleted statements](#)

[Avoid split infinitives](#)

[Avoid dangling modifiers](#)

[Hyphenating words](#)

[Hyphenating prefixes](#)

[Book and periodical titles](#)

[Using italics](#)

[Using quote marks](#)

[Company names](#)

[Parenthesis versus dash](#)

[When to use a possessive apostrophe](#)

[References to “staff,” “staffer” and “staffers”](#)

[References to “data”](#)

[Academic degrees](#)

[Academic classes](#)

[Abbreviations and acronyms](#)

[Use single spaces between sentences](#)

[Using an ellipsis \(... \)](#)

[Using “it” and “its” to refer to a company](#)

[Using “myriad”](#)

[The Great Recession](#)

[The spelling of Internet terms](#)

[The difference between “bi-monthly” and “semi-monthly”](#)

[When to use “follow up” and “follow-up”](#)

[The difference between “principal” and “principle”](#)

[The difference between “flout” and “flaunt”](#)

[The difference between “forego” and “forgo”](#)

[The difference between “gantlet” and “gauntlet”](#)

[The difference between “its” and “it’s”](#)

[The difference between “aid” and “aide”](#)

[The difference between “pore” and “pour”](#)

[The differences between “adopt,” “approve,” “enact,” and “pass”](#)

[When to use “good” or “well”](#)

[When to use “because” or “since”](#)

[When to use “its” and “their”](#)

[Using “or” and “nor”](#)

[The difference between “farther” and “further”](#)

[The difference between “there,” “their” and “they’re”](#)

[The difference between “who” and “whom”](#)

The difference between “differ from” and “differ with”

The difference between “effect” and “affect”

The difference between “among” and “between”

The difference between “that” and “who”

The difference between “which” and “that”

When to use “e.g.” and “i.e.”

The difference between “complement” and “compliment”

The difference between “every day” and “everyday”

The difference between “any body” and “anybody”; “any one” and “anyone”

The difference between “every one” and “everyone”

The difference between “in” and “into”

The difference between “long term” and “long-term”

The difference between “anything” and “any thing”

The difference between “among” and “amongst”

The difference between “layoff” and “lay off”

When to use “myself”

When to use “me” and “I” with another subject

When to use “a” or “an”

When to use “fewer” or “less”