Media Writing Tips

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Adjectives that are absolute have no degrees. They either are, or they aren't. For example, a building can't be partly destroyed. Destroyed means there's nothing left of the building. A "partly destroyed" building is really a damaged building or even a severely damaged building. Similarly, something can't be "more unique" or "less unique." Unique means one of a kind.

Action verb:

An action verb conveys that its subject acted somehow, that the subject did something more than "be." For example: Sally ran. Sally is running. Sally will run. Sally jumped. Salley had been jumping. Sally had jumped. Each of the verbs in these short senteces is an action verb. Subjects of nonaction verbs do nothing but exist. For example: Sally was tired. Sally is short. Sally and her friends are nice. Sally and her friends will be at the party. It's best to avoid such inactive verbs in writing. They're just not all that interesting. Back in J-School, a professor once challenged me to "Stand up and 'was.'" His point: You can stand up and shout, wave your arms, spin around, scratch your head, or whatever, and all of those things are actions - the kinds of actions that make writing interesting. But if you just stand up and "was," you're really doing nothing at all. See also: passive voice.

Addresses:

Much depends on whether the address includes a house number. Follow these rules:

Abbreviate "Street," "Avenue" and "Boulevard" only when these words appear with a numbered address. Like this: 119 Oak St., 119 Oak Ave., 119 Oak Blvd. But: "I live on Main Street," or "The accident happened on Thompson Avenue."

Lowercase and pluralize designations like "streets," "avenues" etc. when used with two or more street names. For example: Oak and Madison streets. Broadway and Carlton avenues.

Spell out all other street designations: 119 Oak Court, 119 Oak Lane, 119 Oak Place, etc.

Abbreviate compass points in a street name if there's a numbered address. Otherwise, spell the compass point out. Like this: 119 E. Oak Lane. East Oak Lane.

See also: Highway designations.

Affect/Effect:

"Affect" is the verb. "Effect" is the noun. For example: "The movie's special effects (noun) positively affected (verb) its realism."

Ages:

Always use figures, unless the age is the first word of a sentence. The rule is an exception to AP Style's "spell out one through nine" rule for numerals. Some examples of correct format: The 5-year-old girl. The girl, 10. The 2-year-old. The man is 32 years old. See also "numerals." If the age is the first word of a sentence, spell it out or rewrite the sentence so the age is no longer the first word. For example: "Twenty-four-year-old Joe Smith said ..." or "Joe Smith, 24, said ..."

Alphabet soup:

A term for a story heavily laden with acronyms like TVA, NAACP, AARP, FBI, etc. Alphabet soup can result when an author spells out the name of an organization on first reference and then uses the organization's acronym to refer to the organization throughout the rest of the story. It's usually better to adopt one- or two-word "tag" for the organization and use the tag instead of the acronym. For example: "The National Education Association has endorsed Sen. John Smith's re-election bid. The association, in a statement released Friday, described Smith as a reliable supporter of pro-teacher legislation throughout his first two terms in office."

a.m./p.m.:

Note periods and lowercase. Also, avoid redundancies like "9 a.m. this morning" or "6:30 p.m. tonight." See also: time.

Amount v. number:

Use “amount” when you’re referring to things that can’t be reduced to individual, countable subparts. For example, “It’s important to add the right amount of sugar.” “The damaged pipeline leaked a large amount of crude oil.” But use “number” for things that can be reduced to individual, countable subparts. “Police who raided the apartment discovered a number of fully automatic weapons.” “The number of on-the-job injuries at the factory has climbed 23 percent over the past five years.”

Antecedent:

An antecedent of a pronoun is the word the pronoun stands for. For example, in the sentence "The police officer drew his weapon," the pronoun is "his," and the antecedent of "his" is "officer."

Whenever you use a pronoun, you must make absolutely sure that the pronoun has one and only one possible antecedent. If you don't, the result can get pretty confusing. Consider this sentence: "The police officer wrestled the suspect for control of his gun." There's no way to tell whether the gun belonged to the officer or to the suspect. Why? Because the pronoun "his" has two possible antecedents, "officer" and "suspect." A rewrite -- in this case, one that eliminates the pronoun -- makes the meaning clear: "The police officer and the suspect wrestled for control of the officer's gun" or "The police officer and the suspect wrestled for control of the suspect's gun," depending on which you want to say.

Also, make sure a pronoun and its antecedent match in number. For example, in the sentence, "The team played their best," the pronoun "their" and its antecedent, "team," don't match in number. "Team" is singular (even though it is made up of several individuals) and "their" is plural. There are two easy ways to correct the sentence: 1. "The team played its best." 2. "The team's members played their best."

Another common error involves using the pronoun “which” to refer to some thing or condition implied by a bunch of words instead of named by a single word or described clearly with a phrase. For example, consider the sentence: “The officer did not shine his flashlight into the car’s back seat, which was a mistake.” The pronoun “which” doesn’t refer to any one word or phrase in the sentence. Instead, it refers to the officer’s failure to shine his flashlight into the car’s back seat. The meaning is clear enough, and, at least technically, there is no grammar mistake. But the phrasing lacks precision. Better phrasing would be: “The officer did not shine his flashlight into the car’s back seat. The decision proved to be a mistake,” or “The officer did not shine his flashlight into the car’s back seat. His failure to do so proved to be a mistake.”

Appositive phrase.

An appositive phrase is a phrase that comes after a noun and describes the noun. Like this: "John Smith, mayor of Cityburg for 12 years, is retiring."

The phrase "mayor of Cityburg for 12 years" is an appositive and must be set off by commas. See also titles.

Note that appositive phrases should be avoided in broadcast writing. Instead of writing "John Smith, mayor of Cityburg, said today that ...," write, "Cityburg Mayor John Smith said today that ..."

Attribution:

Attribution is a phrase indicating the source of some piece of information. The source can be a person, but it also can be something inanimate like a document.

In print newswriting, attribution, if included in a lead, should be placed toward the end of the lead. It should never be used as the lead's first verb. The first verb should focus instead on the most important "what" of the story. Usually, that's not the fact that something was said. For example, in the lead, "Mayor John Smith announced Friday that Murfreesboro's crime rate dropped 20 percent last year," the first verb, announced, suggests that the single most important aspect of the story is that Smith announced something. But he's the mayor - he announces stuff all the time. A better first verb would focus the lead on what he announced: "Murfreesboro's crime rate dropped 20 percent last year, Mayor John Smith announced Friday."

Here are some common ways to phrase attribution in a way that works well at the end of a lead:

· Strangulation caused the death of a man whose body divers recovered from a local lake earlier this week, investigators said this morning.

· Strangulation caused the death of a man whose body divers recovered from a local lake earlier this week, the case's lead investigator said this morning.

· Strangulation caused the death of a man whose body divers recovered from a local lake earlier this week, Rutherford County Sheriff John Smith said this morning.

· Strangulation caused the death of a man whose body divers recovered from a local lake earlier this week, investigators announced this morning. Or: "… the case's lead investigator announced this morning." Or: "… Rutherford County Sheriff John Smith announced this morning." (But only if the information truly was "announced," as in during a press conference, or formally during some kind of gathering."

· Strangulation caused the death of a man whose body divers recovered from a local lake earlier this week, according to a Rutherford County coroner's report released this morning. ("according to" is a good phrase to use when referring to a document, like a coroner's report, that can't actually speak.)

Attribution: The "George Washington" scenario.

I sometimes tell students – tongue in cheek, of course – that they are welcome to use attribution as a first verb the next time George Washington calls a press conference at his Mount Vernon home to announce that the "cherry tree" story is a myth and that he's tired of hearing people

repeat it. In that (highly unlikely) scenario, the fact that George Washington said something, despite having died more than 200 years ago, would be, without a doubt, the most newsworthy aspect of the story – far more newsworthy than the content of whatever message he had come back from the dead to deliver. It would, therefore, be perfectly OK to use attribution as the lead's first verb:

"American history icon George Washington said in an astounding appearance today at the Mount Vernon, Va., home in which he died in 1799 that he is tired of hearing the fictitious story about his chopping down a cherry tree as a boy and then confessing the deed to his father."

However, most of the politicians, government officials, experts and other public figures about whom journalists routinely write stories are announcing things all the time. Because they announce things so often, there is nothing newsworthy about the fact that they have, once again, announced something. If anything is newsworthy at all about the announcement, it would be the content of the announcement.

The broadcast writing exception. Incidentally, the exact opposite is true for a broadcast lead . Broadcast leads routinely use an attribution word as the first verb. The idea is that when people are listening to - as opposed to reading - a story, they need a little time to tune in. So a broadcast lead about the crime rate drop will read, "Mayor John Smith announced Friday that Murfreesboro's crime rate dropped 20 percent last year."

A direct quote and its attribution must be separated by a comma. Like this: "I have vetoed the bill," the president said. The president said, "I have vetoed the bill."

Attribution that appears within a quote can be punctuated in a number of ways. Some examples:

"I have vetoed the bill," the president said, "even though I know my decision will be unpopular."

"I have vetoed the bill," the president said. "I know my decision will be unpopular."

A paraphrase and its attribution usually need to be separated by a comma, but not always. Some examples:

He will veto the bill, the president said.
The president has vetoed the bill, according to a statement released Friday.
But: The president said he will veto the bill.

What should be attributed? Attribute assertions that represent judgments or opinions. Don't attribute known facts. For example, "The rose is red." But "The rose is beautiful, he said." See objectivity.

Backing into the lead.

You "back into" the lead of a print news story when you put the newsiest information at the end of the lead instead of at the beginning. It's usually the result of putting one or more of the lead's other elements -- the "when," "where," "why" or attribution, for example -- in front of the "what." For example, "Police Chief Joe Smith said Tuesday that a door left unlocked at the city's jail on Main Street allowed three prisoners to escape." Clearly, the escape is the newsiest piece of information in the lead. Many readers will miss it, though, because it has been stuck at the end of the lead. A better version would be: "Two prisoners escaped from the city's jail Tuesday after someone left a door unlocked, according to Police Chief Joe Smith." Choosing a first verb that captures the main "what" of the story will usually help you avoid this problem.

Blind lead:

Write a blind lead when the person in the lead is not well known to the people who will be reading the story. If John Smith is a nobody and was injured in a car wreck, for example, don't write, "John Smith of 119 Oak St. in Murfreesboro suffered injuries in a two-car wreck on Main Street Friday afternoon" for your lead. Write "A Murfreesboro man suffered injuries in a two-car wreck on Main Street Friday afternoon" and save the man's name and address for later in the story. If the person in the lead is well-known among readers, though, go ahead and put the name in the lead: "Murfreesboro Mayor John Smith suffered injuries in a two-car wreck on Main Street Friday afternoon."

The "blind lead" technique applies to attribution as well. Attributing the essence of some announcement to "Deputy Mayoral Assistant Joe Smith" in a lead wastes a lot of words. Readers are unlikely to recognize the name of obscure bureaucrats. All you really need to do is attribute to "a deputy mayoral assistant" or, even simpler, "a mayoral spokesman," then give the assistant's name later in the story.

Brevity:

In general, media writing values brevity: short words, short sentences, short paragraphs, short stories. Why? Media compete for people's time. The more time media take to use, the less likely people are to use media. In short, people get bored or tired when reading long sentences, grafs and stories.

Buried lead:

When a news story fails to present the most newsworthy information at its very beginning, the story's lead is said to have been "buried." The metaphor alludes to the idea that the most important information has been "buried" somewhere down in the story beneath several sentences or paragraphs of less important information.

Capitalization:

Generally, restrict capitalization to:

- Formal titles used directly in front of someone's name. For example: "According to Mayor Joe Smith, the city needs to develop a traffic plan." But note the lack of capitalization in "According to the mayor, the city needs to develop a traffic plan" and in "According to Joe Smith, mayor, the city needs to develop a traffic plan.
- Proper nouns, such as:
- The name or names of an organization: "The City Council awarded the contract to Jones Brothers Contracting Services. Jason Smith, a spokesman for Jones Brothers, said the company is pleased to have won the contract and will begin the work next week. (Note that generic references like "the company" are not capitalized.)
- Names of people.
- Names of buildings: "The meeting will be held in Peck Hall."
- Names of months.
- Names of languages: "He is learning French," or "The inscription was in Latin."
- Note that while proper nouns like "English," "French," "Latin" and other languages can be academic subjects, most academic subjects, like biology, chemistry, journalism, philosophy, and so forth are not capitalized.
- First word of a sentence.
- Directions. Note that compass points like north, south, east and west are not capitalized unless you're using the word to refer to a geographic region Like this: I think the West is beautiful. I grew up in the South. The North won the Civil War. He attended a prestigious Northeastern college. But: The robbers fled west on Main Street. The blaze destroyed the east side of the warehouse.

Cents:

According to AP style, spell out "cents" and lowercase, using numerals for amounts less than a dollar. For example, 5 cents, or 12 cents. Use "$" and decimels to indicate amounts larger than a dollar: $1.05, for example, or $2.25.

City Council:

AP Style says to capitalize "council" in either of two situations:

- The word is part of the formal name of a specific city council . The Murfreesboro City Council, for instance.
- The word is used in reference to a specific city council. The Murfreesboro City Council approved the measure last night, and observers expect the Council to take a lot of heat for its decision.

Lowercase the word in other usages. For example: "All across the country, city councils are wrestling with the issue.

Claim:

Use the verb "claim" only when there's some fairly obvious reason to doubt that what is being claimed is true. For example: "The suspect claimed he was innocent even though police had found his fingerprints on the burglarized safe."

Clauses/phrases:

The difference between the two is this: A clause has both a subject and a verb. A phrase doesn't. For example, "The dog has short ears" is a clause. But "The dog with the short ears" is a phrase.

Comma:

Figuring out how to use commas properly is tricky. There's a whole section on commas in the "Punctuation" section in the back of your AP Stylebook. I recommend you study it. Here are some of the more common comma issues:

- Comma after an introductory phrase or clause: Place a comma between any introductory phrase or clause and the rest of the sentence. For example: "Because the power was out, I lit a candle." The comma separates the introductory phrase, "Because the power was out" from the rest of the sentence, "I lit a candle." Also, a single word can form an "introductory phrase," as in "Next, I started a fire in the fireplace." In this example, the comma separates "Next" from the rest of the sentence.

- Comma before conjunction: Put a comma before a conjunction (and, but, or, nor, for, yet) that joins two independent clauses. An independent clause is a clause that has both a subject and a verb and can make sense if it stands alone. Otherwise, omit the comma. For example: "I (subject) phoned (verb) the police chief, and (conjunction) Jane (subject) went (verb) to interview the mayor." But "I (subject) phoned (verb) the police chief and (conjunction) went (verb. But its subject, "I," is on the other side of the conjunction) to see the mayor."
- Comma between equal adjectives: Use commas to separate a series of adjectives equal in rank. Here's a hint: If you can replace the commas with the word "and" without altering the meaning of what's being said, then the commas are appropriate. For example, "A thoughtful, precise manner" is the same as "A thoughtful *and* precise manner." Omit the comma in front of the last adjective before a noun if the adjective outranks its predecessor because the adjective is part of a noun phrase. For example, "A cheap fur coat." No comma is needed after "cheap," because "fur," although an adjective, goes with "coat" to form the noun phrase "fur coat." You wouldn't say, "A cheap *and* fur coat," would you?
- Comma in a series: In news writing, omit the comma before the conjunction in a series of things. Like this: "I'd like eggs, toast and bacon," not "I'd like eggs, toast, and bacon."
- Comma with a nonessential clause: A nonessential clause is a clause that, if omitted from the sentence, will not alter the meaning of the sentence. Such clauses must be set off by commas. For example, in the sentence, "Reporters, who do not read the stylebook, should not criticize their editors," the clause "who do not read the stylebook" is presented as a nonessential clause. Accordingly, it means the sentence is asserting that all reporters fail to read the stylebook. Omitting the commas, as in "Reporters who do not read the stylebook should not criticize their editors" presents the clause "who do not read the stylebook" as an essential clause that limits the sentence's admonition about criticizing editors to those particular reporters who don't read the stylebook. The reporters who do read the stylebook, the sentence suggests, can criticize all they like.
- Comma with a nonessential phrase: A nonessential phrase is a phrase that, if omitted from the sentence, would not alter the sentence's meaning. Such phrases must be set off by a comma. For example, "Indian corn, or maize, was harvested." The phrase "or maize" is supplemental information. It tells the reader about an alternative term for corn. Removing the phrase would not alter the meaning of the sentence "Indian corn was harvested." If the phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence, don't use a comma. Also, the sentence, "The two ate dinner with their daughter Julie" suggests the two have more than one daughter and that on this occasion they dined with the daughter named Julie. But "The two ate dinner with their daughter, Julie" suggests the two have only one daughter. "Julie" becomes a nonessential phrase that must be set off with a comma.
- Comma with attribution: Use a comma to introduce attribution. For example: The getaway car was blue, the witness said. Also: The getaway car was blue, according to the witness. The getaway car was blue, the witness told the prosecutor. And: "The getaway car was blue," the witness said.

Comma splice:

A comma splice occurs when a writer erroneously uses a mere comma to join or "splice" two complete sentences. A complete sentence has a subject and a verb and can make sense when read all by itself. For example, "Fire destroyed the house" is a complete sentence. So is "The family escaped unharmed." Now, suppose you wanted to put these two complete sentences together to form a single sentence. You must not do so by merely sticking a comma between them, as in "Fire destroyed the house, the family escaped unharmed." You would have created a comma splice. Instead, join the two complete sentences in one of the following ways:

- Use a semicolon. For example, "Fire destroyed the house; the family escaped unharmed." Not a good option for leads, because semicolons tend to interrupt a lead's flow.
- Use a comma and a conjunction like "and," "but," "or," "nor," "for," or "yet." For example: "Fire destroyed the house, and the family escaped unharmed."
- Use a semicolon and a conjunctive adverb like "however" or "therefore." For example: "Fire destroyed the house; however, the family escaped unharmed." Again, this is not a good option for leads, because the semicolon tends to interrupt the lead's flow. Note that it's incorrect to join the two sentences with a comma and a conjunctive adverb, as in, "Fire destroyed the house, however the family escaped unharmed."
- See also: run-on sentence

Compose, comprise, constitute:

Follow these guidelines:

Compose means to create or put together. You compose a song, for instance, or a committee can be composed of seven members.

Comprise means to contain, include all, or embrace. Use itn only in the active voice with a direct object: The committee comprises seven members.

Constitute can mean "to make up" and is the best choice when neither compose or comprise seems appropriate. The five votes constituted a majority on the nine-member committee.

Courtesy titles:

AP Style says you generally should avoid using "Mr.," "Mrs." or "Ms." in front of someone's name. On second reference, simply refer to someone by his or her last name only. Use courtesy

titles, however, when there's a need to distinguish between a husband and a wife who have the same last name. For example: "John and Jane Doe run a restaurant down on the corner of Main Street. Mrs. Doe works the register and takes orders from customers. Mr. Doe mans the kitchen." See the reason for using the courtesy titles? Without them, you wouldn't know which Doe did what. Note, by the way, that the New York Times ignores this rule in its news columns. Everyone in the NY Times is "Mr" "Mrs." or "Ms." this or that on second reference. When you work for the New York Times, you can ignore the rule, too. Until then, though, follow AP Style.

Currently:

Think hard before using this word. It's usually unnecessary in present progressive tense constructions like "is currently saying" or "are currently doing." If you "are saying," then you "are currently saying." The idea of "currently" is included in the verb tense's meaning, so the word "currently" is unnecessary. About the only time you need "currently" is when you need to emphasize a contract between how things are right now and how they used to be or will be. For example:

She would like to win a Grammy some day, but she's currently simply enjoying her music.

He was an accounting major but currently is pursuing a computer science degree.

Dangling / misplaced modifier:

Dangling or misplaced modifiers occur when the connection between a phrase and what it's supposed to be describing is vague or nonexistent. The classic example is the old Groucho Marx joke, "One morning I shot an elephant in my pajamas. How he got in my pajamas, I'll never know." It's difficult, at first, to determine whether the statement means that Marx was wearing pajamas at the time he shot the elephant, whether the elephant was wearing Marx's pajamas when Marx shot the elephant, or whether the elephant and Marx were somehow both in the pajamas at the time of the shooting. The confusion arises because the placement – or misplacement, really – of the phrase "in my pajamas" leaves the phrase "dangling" between doing the job of modifying "shot" or modifying "elephant." The joke's punch line clarifies the confusion by pointing toward the latter two interpretations, both of which are pretty funny to picture.

Not all dangling modifiers make you laugh, though. Many just make you scratch your head and wonder what the author is trying to say. For example, in the sentence "The truck was following the car with a trailer," it's impossible to tell whether the car or the truck was pulling the trailer. "The truck was towing a trailer and following the car" would be clearer, as would "The truck was following the car, which was towing a trailer." The correct phrasing would depend on which one most accurately described the actual situation.

So, unless you’re doing a Groucho Marx routine, avoid dangling or misplaced modifiers.

Dates:

Use figures, not words, and don't include "st," "nd," "rd" and the like. In other words, Sept. 1, not Sept. 1st. or Sept. first. Also:

If you're talking about a date within seven days of the article's publication date, use the day of the week rather than the calendar date. So, if a story is going to run on May 10, and May 10 is a Tuesday, then something happening on May 12 should be reported as happening on "Thursday," not on "May 12." And something that happened on May 9 should be reported as having happened on "Monday," not on "May 9."

Omit the year if the date is within 12 months of the date on which the article will be published. In other words, "Sept. 1" standing alone means "the next Sept. 1 coming up."

Abbreviate the name of the month under some circumstances. See months for details.

Deities

Capitalizes the names of deities in monotheistic religions, such as God, Allah, Jesus Chrst, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, etc. Also capitalize the names of pagan and mythological gods or goddesses, such as Neptune, Thor, etc. Lowercase “gods” when referring to the gods of polytheistic religions. Also lowercase pronouns that refer to deities: Jesus Christ in his (not “His”) glory.

Demonstrative adjectives:

Letting demonstrative adjectives -- words like "this" or "that" -- stand alone can reduce a sentence's clarity and lead to confusion. These words need something to refer to. "This *book*," or "that *chair*," for example, not merely "this" or "that."

Dimensions:

Always use figures. For example: The 6-foot-8-inch player. The play is 6 feet 8 inches tall.

Direct address:

A term that means speaking directly to readers with first- or second-person pronouns like "I," "we," or "you." Direct address is inappropriate for newspaper writing, but OK, and even encouraged, in broadcast writing. Some details:

- Newspaper writing: Using direct address outside of direct quotes attributed to others distracts the reader by drawing his or her attention to you, the author, and away from the story you are telling. It's also kind of hard to use an "I," "we," or "you" without inserting your personal opinions -- something you should never do in a print news story. See the "objectivity" entry. Opinion columnists often use direct address pronouns, but reporters writing news stories shouldn't.
- Broadcast writing: Direct address is more acceptable in broadcast writing - particularly in the lead of a story. Something like "Your property tax bill is about to jump 10 percent" wouldn't fly as a lead with most newspaper editors, but a broadcast news director would love it.

Dollars:

In newspaper writing, use a dollar sign ($) instead of the word "dollars," and a numeral. Like this: "My grandfather earned $40 a week," or even "My grandfather earned $4 a week." Use the word "dollar" only in casual references: "He gave the boy a dollar for shoveling the snowy sidewalk," or "I wish I had a dollar for every promise you've broken." In broadcast writing, use the word "dollar" or "dollars" instead of the "$" symbol. And always avoid the inherently redundant, “He spent $40 dollars.” See also numerals.

Elements (of a lead):

The "elements" of a straight-news lead are the "who," "what," "where," "when," "why" and "how" of the story. Every straight news lead should include, at minimum, the "what," "when" and "where." The "who" and "why and how" should be included, too, if they represent newsworthy aspects of the story. See leads.

Fewer/less:

Use "fewer" when you're talking about things that can be counted individually: fewer buckets of water, for example. Use "less" when you're talking about something that can't really be subdivided: less water, for example. You can count buckets, but you can't count water.

First person:

Avoid making a "guest appearance" in your own story through unattributed first-person pronouns like "I," "me," "we," or "our." For example:

City officials broke ground Monday on a redevelopment of First Avenue between 12th and 15th streets.

I was there watching as our mayor proudly plunged a shovel into the soft dirt and told me that beauty and functionality were about to return to that blighted section of town. We all applauded the mayor's comments.

Where it is necessary to use pronouns, use third-person pronouns like he, she, it, him, her, they, who, whom, whoever, whomever. These words help convey objectivity to your readers. Some reporters go so far as to refer to themselves in the third person. You'll read things like, "The house appeared deserted from the outside. But when a reporter knocked on the door, a little girl was spotted at a second-floor window." What the reporter means, here, is that he or she was "the reporter" who knocked on the door and also was the unnamed person who "spotted" the little girl.

I'm personally not crazy about such verbal gymnastics. But I think they're preferable to using first person pronouns.

First verb (of a lead):

Writing a good lead depends greatly on choosing a good first verb. The first verb should:

- Be active voice, not passive voice.
- Sum up the most important "what" of the story.
    - Note that the most important "what" is almost never the fact that someone announced or said something.
    - The most important "what" will always be what the person announced or said.
    - For example, instead of writing, "Mayor Jane Smith announced today that city workers will receive a pay raise," write, "City workers will receive a pay raise, Mayor Jane Smith announced today." In the first lead, "announced" is the first verb. But in the second lead, "will receive" is the first verb. See how the second lead more quickly conveys what the story is about?
- Appear within the first seven (or so) words of the lead. (This rule forces you to get to the news quickly and save the lesser important "when," "where" and "how and why" elements for later in the lead.).

Fractions:

Spell out fractions and use a hyphen: one-fourth, two-thirds, three-thirds, etc.

Fund raising, fund-raising, fund-raiser.

According to AP Style, the following usages are correct:

- Fund raising is difficult.
- They planned a fund-raising campaign.
- A fund-raiser was hired.

Gerund:

A gerund is a verbal that ends in -ing and acts as a noun. Standing, sitting, reaching, talking, writing, listening and saying are all gerunds.

If a noun or pronoun precedes a gerund, the noun or pronoun must be made possessive. For example: "I didn't approve of John's sending you that letter." "John" is a noun, and because it comes in front of the gerund "sending," "John" has to be possessive. Also, "I didn't approve of his sending you that letter." "His" is a pronoun and must be possessive because it precedes the gerund "sending."

Graf (paragraph):

Paragraphs in news writing should be very short by usual standards -- two or three sentences long at most. Often, a graf is a single sentence. Short grafs make the story look shorter and, therefore, easier to read.

Headline:

A headline is a sentence or phrase that appears above a print news story. It's usually set in type larger than the type of the story, and it's job is to call attention to the story and to give readers a quick idea of what the story is about.

Headlines use odd phrasing that is aimed mainly at saving space and that is not appropriate for leads or any other part of a news story.

Beginning media writers often write a headline when asked to write a lead. It is critical that you learn to avoid that problem. Here's an example and discussion of the difference between the two:

Headline:

Five-car crash leaves two hurt after driver disobeys red light

Lead:
Two people suffered injuries in a five-car pileup Monday morning triggered by a driver who ran a red light at the intersection of Broad Street and Memorial Boulevard in Murfreesboro.

Note the key differences between the two:

- The most obvious difference is the headline's larger size and different typeface.
- The lead uses the same size and style of type as the rest of the story.
- The headline omits the "articles" (words like "a," "an" and "the") that ordinarily would precede "Five-car," "driver" and "red light."
- The lead includes all of the articles you would normally expect to hear in daily conversational English: a five-car pileup, a driver, a red light, and the intersection.
- The headline uses present-tense verbs to express past actions. The "leaving" and the "disobeying" actions took place in the past, but the headline uses the present-tense "leaves" instead of the past-tense "left," and the present-tense "disobeys" instead of the past-tense "disobeyed."
- The lead uses past-tense verbs (suffered, ran) because the actions these verbs describe are in the past by the time the audience reads the story.

Headlines use other phrasing oddities, sometimes called "headlinespeak." For example, when a headline needs to convey a future action, it typically will use an infinitive rather than a future-tense verb. For example, "to investigate" rather than "will investigate" in this headline:

Five-car crash leaves two hurt police to investigate cause

Headlines also sometimes use commas instead of conjunctions like "and" and "or." For example, consider this headline:

Five-car crash leaves

mother, child injured

In broadcast news, headlines take the form of "teasers" read either at the beginning of the newscast, just before or after a commercial break during the newscast, or during breaks between other programming prior to the newscast. You've heard them, I'm sure. They sound like this: "Police arrest a suspect in last night's double homicide. We'll have the story at 10," or "Up next, police arrest a suspect in last night's double homicide."

Highway designations:

Use these forms:

- For highways identified by number: U.S. Highway 1, U.S. Route 1, U.S. 1, state Route 34, Route 34, Interstate Highway 495, Interstate 495.
- Use "I-495" on second reference only
- When a letter is appended to a number, capitalize it, but don't use a hyphen: "Route 1A."
- See also: Addresses.

Hole (in a story):

If an editor tells you there's a "hole" in your story, the editor means that an important piece of information is missing. For example, you might have forgotten to include the "when" or the "where," or perhaps your story leaves some obvious question unanswered.

Hopefully:

Use "hopefully" as an adverb, not as an adjective. "The hungry dog gazed hopefully at the boy's sandwich." The adjective form is "hopeful," as in "The hopeful dog gazed at the boy's sandwich." The most common misuse of "hopefully" is in sentences such as "Hopefully, we will finish up on Monday" when the intended meaning is "We hope to finish Monday," not "We will finish Monday with hope in our hearts."

Identifying information.

Names - even strange ones - can be the same for more than one person. So it's a good idea to give a few additional facts about each person you name in your story, especially people who are not well known. For example, suppose "John Smith" died in a car accident you're writing about.

To avoid traumatizing everyone who knows any of the three dozen "John Smiths" in the local phone book, give some particulars about the John Smith in question:

"John Smith, 38, of Kingston, Tenn., died in the accident."

or

"19-year-old John Smith, a freshman biology major from Kingston, Tenn., died in the accident."

If/Whether:

These two words are not interchangeable. Some guidelines:

Use "if" only to express a conditional relationship: "*If* it rains tomorrow, the game will be canceled."

Use "whether" to express uncertainty between two or more possibilities: "I don't know *whether* it's going to rain or snow tomorrow."

Note that the phrase "whether or nor" is redundant. Simply use "whether."

Impact:

Avoid using "impact" as a verb. Don't, for example, say that the slowing economy impacted the state's sales tax collections. Say instead that the slowing economy affected or had an impact on the state's sales tax collections.

In order to:

Inherently wordy. Use only "to." In other words, don't write, "The president flew to Europe in order to conduct the negotiations personally." Instead, write, "The president flew to Europe to conduct the negotiations personally."

Intransitive/transitive verbs:

"Transitive" verbs are verbs that can have a direct object. For example, in the sentence "The player hit the ball," the noun "ball" is the direct object of the verb "hit," because the ball is the thing that the player hit. "Intransitive" verbs can't have direct objects. For example, in the sentence "The player complained," the verb "complained" couldn't sensibly have a direct object. One complains, and one can even complain bitterly, but one can't complain a thing the way one

can hit a ball. Also, the same verb can be transitive in one usage and intransitive in another. For example, in the sentence, "The player left his hat," the verb "left" is transitive, because "left" has a direct object: hat. The hat is the thing the player left. But in the sentence, "The player left," there is no direct object. The player didn't leave anything or anyone. The player simply left. In that case, the verb "left" is intransitive.

Inverted pyramid format.

A classic way of organizing information in a newspaper-style story, inverted pyramid format involves presenting information in descending order of newsworthiness. Thus, the story's lead presents the most newsworthy information, the second paragraph presents the next-most-newsworthy information, and so forth. An editor should be able to shorten an inverted pyramid format story quickly by simply eliminating paragraphs from the bottom of the story up.

Irony / ironic.

"Irony" is a fairly complicated literary concept, and beginning writers tend to label as "ironic" events and situations that really aren't. Part of the temptation lies in the fact that the word "ironically" can be used as transition. Some of the common, and valid, uses of the term "irony" include describing:

- Tragic or dramatic irony, as perceived by an onlooker or audience. For example, part of the appeal of James Cameron's movie Titanic is the bittersweet experience of watching Rose (Kate Winslet) and Jack (Leonardo DiCaprio) fall in love while knowing - as these two characters do not - that the Titanic, and their love, is doomed.
- Socratic irony. For example, a teacher, who, in truth, knows better, feigns ignorance to help a student see an error. "So, George Washington served the United States as a general during World War II, which the United States entered in 1941. How could it be, then, that the Washington Monument, which was erected on the National Mall in Washington's honor, was completed in 1884?"
- Situational irony. A broad category of ironic situations that all involve some kind of striking, and often funny, incongruence between the outcome one expects and the outcome that actually occurs. For example, a firehouse's catching fire and burning to the ground would be ironic. It would be even more ironic if the fire had started because a firefighter, distracted by being late to teach a household fire safety course, had absentmindedly left a skillet of bacon frying on the firehouse stove.

Its, it's:

Beginning writers often confuse the words "its" and "it's." Here's the difference between the two:

- "Its" is the possessive of the pronoun "it." For example: "The dog wagged its tail."
- "It's" is a contraction of the words "it is." For example: "It's a small, brown dog."

Lay/lie:

Two frequently confused words, each with multiple meanings. The trouble usually happens when you are trying to describe something or someone resting on, or being placed on, a surface of some sort. In that context, here is what each word means:

“To lay” means “to place something onto,” as in, “I’m going to lay the book on the table.”

- The past tense is “laid,” as in “I laid the book on the table.”
- The present tense is “lay” or “lays,” as in, “I lay the book on the table,” or “He lays the book on the table.”
- The future tense is also “lay,” as in, “I will lay the book on the table.”
- The past participle is “laid,” as in, “I have laid the book on the table.”
- The gerund form is “laying,” as in, “He is laying the book on the table.”

Meanwhile, “lie” means to recline or rest upon, as in, “The book is going to lie on the table.” In other words, “lie” is what the book will do on the table *after* you “lay” the book on the table. To cover the same points above, in the same order:

- The past tense is “lay,” as in “The book lay on the table for more than an hour before I picked it up again.”
- The present tense is “lie” or “lies,” as in, “The book lies on the table while he makes lunch,” or “The books lie on the table while he makes lunch.”
- The future tense is also “lie,” as in, “The book will lie on the table after I put it there.”
- The past participle is “lain,” as in, “The book has lain on the table for nearly a week.”
- The gerund form is “lying,” as in, “The book is lying on the table right now.”

As perhaps you can see, most of the trouble arises from the fact that “lay” is the present tense of the word that means “to place,” but it’s the past tense of the word that means “to recline.”

Lead:

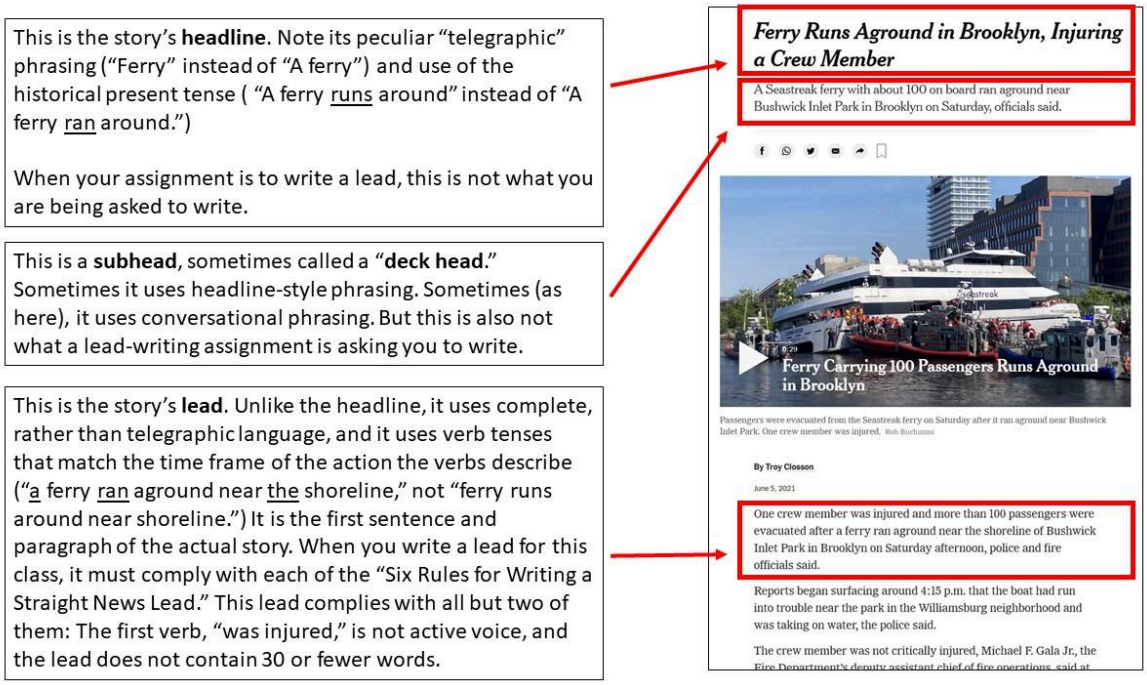
A lead (pronounced "LEED") is the first sentence of a news story. It should be a single paragraph consisting of a single sentence of 30 or fewer words. It also should sum up the most important "what" of the story as well as the "when" and "where" of the story. It should include the "who" of the story if there is one and should sum up the "why and how" of the story if there's room. The lead's first verb is critical. It should be active voice, should appear within the lead's

first seven words, and should take readers straight to the main "what" of the story. Any attribution ("said," "according to," etc.) should appear at the end of the lead, as in "..., John Smith said Monday." or "..., according to the report." See also first verb.

Note: Beginning media writers often confuse a a lead with a headline. Avoid that trap.

Avoid using a quote in a lead. Generally, a quote merely clutters up a lead. If you want a lead to include somethong someone said, it's better to paraphrase.

The Straight News Lead Rules entry presents a more detailed discussion. Also, see this illustration, using an actual NYTimes article:



Led / Lead.

Students sometimes confuse these two words - or actually three words, because the meaning of "lead" depends on the word's context. A breakdown:

"Led" is the past tense of the verb, "to lead." For example, "The lieutenant led his platoon into battle."

"Lead" is the spelling both of the present tense form of the verb "to lead" (pronounced "leed") and of the noun "lead" (pronounced "led") referring to the heavy, soft, bluish-white element that bullets are made of. Thus: "Brave lieutenants lead their platoons into battle as generals pace nervously in the command center," or "Brave lieutenants led their platoons into battle during the assault last year," or "The brave lieutenant and his platoon charged into a hail of lead."

Libel:

Libel is a published statement or representation that wrongly injures a person's reputation. Basic defenses against a libel suit include verifying that information is true before publishing it or at least making a reasonable effort to verify its truth. It's also harder for public officials and public figures to sue successfully for libel than it is for private individuals, and you generally won't get in libel trouble for accurately reporting information that came from an official source, like a police report or court testimony. See "Writers and the Law" in the Stovall text for a more in-depth discussion.

Majority:

Figuring out whether this word takes a singular or a plural verb can be tricky. Here are the guidelines in AP style:

"Majority" requires a singular verb when used alone: "The majority has made its decision."

When used before an "of" construction, "majority" requires either a singular or a plural verb, depending on the sense of the sentence. For example:

A majority of two votes is not adequate to control the committee.

A majority of the houses on the block were destroyed.

Millions, billions:

Use a figure, followed by the word "million" or "billion." Like this: 4 million, 16 billion.

Months:

Abbreviate months that appear with a specific date, but only if the month's name has more than five letters in it. For example: My birthday is in June. My birthday is June 12. But: My birthday is in September. My birthday is Sept. 12.

Also, don't use 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, etc. in dates. Use 1, 2, 3, etc.

Most:

Beware of using "most" when you mean merely "a lot" or "many." The word "most" means 51 percent or more. If you write "most," make sure you have solid evidence that such a majority exists.

Names:

In newswriting, you generally give both a person's first and last names the first time you mention him or her. After that, you use only the person's last name. Like this: "Another witness, John Smith, said he spotted two men running from the scene. Smith, who was driving by at the time, said he saw ..." Also, Always double check the spelling of a person's name. For most people, getting their name in the newspaper is a big deal, and they can get pretty uptight if you goof up the spelling. And here's a practical hint: People who write exercises for beginning journalism classes often slip in oddly spelled names to see whether you're paying attention.

Needs and appeals:

Advertisements are written to appeal to fundamental human needs. There are many such needs, but Stovall describes six key ones:

- Food and drink
- Shelter, security and comfort
- Sex, intimacy and social contact
- Independence, privacy, self-fulfillment and power
- Stimulation
- Acquisition

News values/Newsworthiness:

The news values help journalists determine how newsworthy a piece of information is. The more news values a piece of information demonstrates, the more newsworthy it is. The News Values Handout presents a more thorough discussion. The news values are:

Impact -- how many people does the event affect?
Timeliness -- how recently did the event occur?

Prominence -- how well-known are the people involved in the event?

Proximity -- how close, geographically speaking, did the event take place, or how local are the people involved?

Conflict -- does the event involve some kind of disagreement or fight?

Weirdness -- how unusual is the event?

Currency -- is the event related to some topic people are talking about or interested in?

Numerals:

The general rule is: Spell out one through nine, and use figures for 10 or more. Exceptions to the rule abound. For instance:

Always use figures for dimensions, ages, years, percentages and dates, except when such figures begin a sentence (see below).

Also, spell out numbers that begin a sentence (unless the number is a year, like 1998.)

Also, remember that the "spell out one through nine" rule applies to ordinal numbers, too. In other words, you should spell out first through ninth, and use figures for 10th or more.

See "numerals" in AP Style for details.

In broadcast writing, spell out one through twelve and use figures for 13 to 999. For numbers above 999, spell out "hundred," "thousand," million," "billion" and so forth, and use a hyphen to combine these terms with numerals: one thousand (for 1,000), 15-hundred (for 1,500), 18-thousand (for 18,000), 10-million (for 10,000,000), etc. See also: dollars.

Objectivity:

"Objective" means "based on independently verifiable fact." You can objectively say, for example, that a rose is red, mainly because anyone else who looks at the rose would also conclude that the rose is red. Anyone who looked at the rose and saw some other color would be considered color blind at best. If you say, though, that the rose is pretty, you're no longer being objective about the matter, because what's pretty to one person may not be pretty to someone else. To a rose lover, a rose is pretty. To an orchid lover, a rose is plain. Similarly, it may seem entirely appropriate to characterize, say, someone's death as "unfortunate" or even "tragic." But suppose that, unknown to you, the person who died was, well, a real jerk. All the people the person cheated, stole from, abused, humiliated, exploited, and so on probably don't see his death as unfortunate or tragic. So it's really best simply to describe what happened and let readers make their own value judgments.

News stories do, of course, include opinionated statements quite often. But they are nearly always the opinions of someone other than the journalist. A journalist may write, for example, that, "Lawmakers have a moral duty to ensure that every child can see a doctor when he or she

is sick, Sen. John Smith, sponsor of a bill to guarantee health care coverage for all children in the state, said." But it's Sen. Smith's opinion, not the journalist's opinion.

Let unattributed opinions or value judgments find their way into your copy, and your editor likely will angrily order you to stop “editorializing,” a reference to the newsroom tradition of sticking to facts when writing news stories and expressing opinions and value judgments only in editorials, opinion columns and other specialized forms of content.

Finally, it's important to realize that although journalists try to be as objective as possible, no journalist can be completely objective. The very act of defining a set of events as "newsworthy" and boiling those events down into a news story involves making all kinds of non-objective decisions based on value judgments and personal perspectives. But journalists try to be objective where possible by emphasizing independently verifiable facts and avoiding overt, unattributed statements of opinions or judgments. Overt statements of opinion usually are reserved for editorials or opinion columns that are run exclusively on a special page or pages inside the paper.

Only:

Be careful where you place this powerful modifier. It will tend to modify the word or phrase that comes immediately after it, so be sure the word or phrase that comes after it is the one you want it to modify. For example, the sentence "She only skimmed the thicker reports" means "She only skimmed the thicker reports; she didn't read them thoroughly." It does not mean "She skimmed the thicker reports instead of skimming all of the reports, regardless of their thickness." To say that, you would have to write, “She skimmed only the thicker reports.”

To get an idea how much power “only” has to change what you say, consider this sentence:

“She told him she loved him.”

Now, place “only” at various places in the sentence and note how it fundamentally changes the sentence’s meaning. For example, “She told him that only she loved him” is quite a bit different from, “She only told him she loved him,” which is substantially different from, “She told him that she loved only him,” and so on.

Organizations:

Generally, capitalize and spell out the names of organizations the first time you mention them in a story. After that, you can abbreviate the name. For example: "Inspectors from the Federal Aviation Administration are investigating the crash. So far, no leads have turned up, an FAA spokesman said Friday."

Some the abbreviated names of some organizations -- the FBI and the CIA, for example -- are so widely recognized that it's not necessary to spell them out. For guidance, look up the listings for individual organizations in your AP Stylebook.

Also, avoid using a whole lot of abbreviations. Too many CIAs, FBIs, NAACPs, AARPs and the like make your writing look like alphabet soup.

Also, don't put an organization's initials in parentheses immediately after the organizations's name. It's better to give the full name of the organization on first reference, then use a one- or two-word "tag" to refer to the organization on second reference. Like this: "The Student Government Association will consider the measure during its monthly meeting Thursday night. Several members of the association have expressed support for the measure." See how "association" becomes a second-reference "tag" for "Student Government Association"? Once you establish a tag, use it consistently throughout the story. In other words, use "association" to refer to "Student Government Association" throughout the rest of the story, and don't use "association" to refer to anything else in the story. Your reader will thank you.

Over/More than:

Use "over" for spatial relationships, like "a bridge led over the river." Use "more than" for amounts, like "The company earned more than $2 billion last year."

Paraphrase: Paraphrasing is simply saying what someone else said, but in your own words instead of in their words. Suppose, for example, the police chief says, "This city's officers are some of the most well-prepared officers in the country. They're trained better than most officers. We also equip them better than most officers." It's not that great of a quote. You could write a paraphrase that said what he said, only better: The police chief called the city's officers some of the best-trained, best-equipped officers in the country.

Parallel structure:

Parallel structure helps a reader see the relationships between ideas in a sentence by framing the ideas in similar grammatical structures. Here's an example: "The bank robber burst through the door, pulled a handgun and ordered everyone onto the floor." All three verbs, "burst," "pulled" and "ordered" are related -- they're all things that the robber did. The fact that they're all in past tense emphasizes the fact that they're related. The sentence also flows smoothly. Here's another example: " Bursting through the door, pulling a handgun and ordering everyone onto the floor, the bank robber threw a sack at a teller and demanded that she fill it with cash." Here, the verbals "bursting," "pulling" and "ordering" all are related because they happened before the sentence's main actions: "threw" and demanded." Other words besides verbs and verbals can be put in parallel, too. Here's an example of several prepositional phrases put in parallel: "The vehicle plunged over the guardrail, down the embankment and into the river." Pairs of words like

"both/and" and "not only/but also" can enhance parallel structure: "He was both tired and hungry." "She rescued not only the cat but also the dog."

Partial quote:

Avoid using a partial quote. A partial quote is a quote that picks up in mid-sentence. Like this:

The detective said the two suspects "make Bonnie and Clyde look like a traveling circus. These guys are elusive, calculating and, above all, deadly."

It's far more elegent to set up a quote by preceding it with a graf that indicates who is about to speak and generally what he or she is about to say, then present the quote as a complete sentence in a separate graf. See Quotes for details and an example.

Parentheticals:

Avoid using them. Parentheticals are little words inserted - usually in brackets or parentheses - to help clarify the quote's meaning. For example:

Smith said, "He (the mayor) will need to review the ordinance thoroughly before signing it. But the mayor and the City Council have agreed in principle to what the ordinance says."

Such parentheticals interrupt the flow of the writing and, when put into print, look ugly and distracting, especially if there are a lot of them. It's better to introduce or "set up" the quote in a way that makes the parenthetical unnecessary. For example, a simple paraphrase will often work:

Smith said the mayor will need to review the ordinance before signing it.
"But the mayor and the City Council have agreed in principle to what the ordinance says," Smith said.

Passive voice/Active voice:

Avoid passive voice verb structure in news writing, especially in your lead's first verb. Passive voice is a subject-verb structure in which the subject is having (or has had or will have) something done to it. For example: "The house was destroyed by fire." "House" is the subject, and it had something done to it. It "was destroyed." The opposite of passive voice is active voice. Active voice is a subject-verb structure in which the subject is doing (or has done or will

do) something. For example: "Fire destroyed the house." "Fire" is the subject, and it did something. It destroyed the house. By implication, active-voice verbs must be action verbs.

Often, switching a sentence from passive voice to active voice means figuring out what your subject can do and making it do that. If you have a subject than can't do anything, use a different subject. For example, suppose you want to switch the passive-voice sentence, "The house was destroyed by fire" to active voice. You have two choices:

1. Pick a different verb - one that can make the subject (house) do something: "The house went up in smoke." Or "The house burned to the ground."

2. Pick a different subject *and* verb. An example of this solution is presented above: "Fire destroyed the house."

Students sometimes confuse "voice" with "tense." A verb's tense conveys the time frame of the action the verb expresses. The most common tenses are past, present, and future. It's important to see that a verb's voice does not depend on its tense. For example, the verb in each of these sentences ("to throw") is active voice:

> The boy threw the ball (past tense).
> The boy throws the ball (present tense)
> The boy will throw the ball (future tense).

In each sentence, the verb is active voice because the verb's subject (boy) did, does, or will do something. The boy threw / throws / will throw.

Meanwhile, the verb in each of these sentences (to be) is passive voice:

> The ball was thrown by the boy (past tense)
> The ball is thrown by the boy (present tense)
> The ball will be thrown by the boy (future tense).

In each of these sentences, the verb is passive voice because the verb's subject did nothing. Intead, the subject had something done to it by someone or something else. The ball was / is / will be thrown ... by the boy.

There's more. Don't get the idea that a verb is always passive if its structure includes some form of "to be."

For example, "Susan is scheduling an appointment with her adviser" is active voice, but "Susan is scheduled to meet with her adviser" is passive voice. Here's why:

In the sentence "Susan is scheduling an appointment with her adviser," the subject, "Susan," is acting. She is scheduling. You may recognize this structure as present progressive tense. See the Verb Tenses handout for a refresher.

But in the sentence "Susan is scheduled to meet with her adviser," the subject, "Susan," is being acted upon. She is scheduled. Some unnamed force or person has scheduled her to meet with her adviser.

The single, best way to identify passive voice is to find the subject and ask yourself whether subject is the source of the action (active voice) or the object of the action (passive voice).

Percent:

Generally, AP Style says to use a figure followed by the word "percent." Like this: 1 percent, 16 percent. Don't use the "%" symbol. Spell out the percentage if it begins a sentence: "Twenty-eight percent of the department's budget had been spent on travel to conventions across the nation."

Percent change:

Percent change describes the change in a figure per 100 units of the figure's original amount. You calculate it by subtracting the new figure from the original figure, then dividing the result by the original figure. In short: (new number – old number) / old number.

For example, if you have $100 in your checking account and spend $20, your $80 balance will represent a 20 percent decline, because (80 – 100) / 100 = -.20, or -20 percent. The expression means that you spent $20 per $100 of your original balance. Similarly, if you have $200 in your checking account and spend $20, your new balance, $180, will represent a 10 percent decline, because (180-200) / 200 = -.10, or -10 percent.

Percent changes can be positive, too, of course. If you have $200 and earn an additional $20, your new balance, $220, will represent a (220 – 200) / 200 = .10, or a 10 percent increase.

Do not confuse a percent change with a percentage point change. The two expressions are not interchangeable. For example, suppose the local university's student body goes from 66 percent white last year to 64 percent white this year. The university's white population will have declined by 66 percent – 64 percent = 2 percentage points, but not by 2 percent. The percent change would be (.64 - .66) / .66 = -.03, or a 3 percent decline.

Possessives:

Your AP Stylebook includes an excellent discussion of how to handle every possible possessive situation. Here are a few of the more commonly encountered ones, though:

To form the possessive of a singular common noun not ending in "s," add an apostrophe and an "s." Like this: "The course's syllabus."

To form the possessive of a singular common noun ending in "s," add an apostrophe and an "s." Like this: "The class's professor."

To form the possessive of a singular proper noun ending in "s," add an apostrophe only. Like this: "Moses' law," or "Jesus' parables."

To form the possessive of a plural common noun ending in "s," add an apostrophe. Like this: "The boys' toys."

Use the possessive form of a noun that precedes a gerund or gerund phrase. A gerund is simply a verb that has "-ing" on the end: walking, talking, cooking, writing, etc. Example: "A last-minute compromise prevented the workers' walking off the job."

Avoid the mistake of confusing the possessive form of a noun with the plural form of a noun. Correct: I see a boy's coat. I see two boys. Not correct: I see a boys coat. I see two boy's.

Predicate adjective:

An adjective that comes after some form of the verb “to be” and describes the verb’s subject. For example: The neighbors are loud. The car was old. The book is interesting. Tomorrow’s weather will be sunny.

Predicate nominative:

A noun that comes after some form of the verb “to be” and renames the verb’s subject. For example: That man is my grandfather. The murder weapon was a pistol. The last girl in line will be Janet.

Prefixes:

Look up specific prefixes in you AP Stylebook. Generally, use a hyphen only if:

The prefix ends with the same vowel that begins the word (For example: pre-exist, re-examine. Cooperate and coordinate are exceptions to this rule)

The word that follows the prefix is capitalized. (For example, anti-American.)

The word has two prefixes. (For example, sub-subparagraph).

Press conferences:

Resist the urge to tell readers that something happened or was announced "at a press conference" unless there's something extraordinary about the press conference itself. For example, in the lead, "Disaster aid has arrived, and more is on the way, the governor announced Monday at a press conference amid the rubble of Clarksville's tornado-ravaged city square," the setting of the press conference helps illustrate a key point of the article: Serious storm damage has occurred, and the governor is on the scene. The setting would be equally important in a lead like, "Disaster aid has arrived, and more is on the way, the governor announced Monday at a press conference in Hawaii, where he flew Sunday afternoon on vacation as tornadoes were ravaging Clarksville." This lead points out that the governor took off for sun and fun in Hawaii while a crisis was unfolding back home. Most press conferences are far more routine, occurring in venues like rooms in the capitol or executive residence that are designated for press conferences or in hotel ballrooms rented for the occasion.

Pronoun case:

There are two groups, or "cases," of pronouns: objective case and nominative case. You must decide which case to use by figuring out what job the pronoun will be doing in the sentence. Some guidelines:

Nominative case

- The nominative case pronouns are: I, you, he, she, it, we, you (meaning "you all") and they.
- Use a nominative case pronoun if:
- The pronoun will be the subject of the sentence, as in "I am going home now."
- The pronoun will be a predicate nominative, as in "It was we who discovered the mistake. (A predicate nominative is a noun that comes after a non-action verb and renames the subject. We, for example, renames It, the subject of the sentence. The verb, was, is a nonaction verb.)

Objective case

- The objective case pronouns are: me, you, him, her, it, us, you (meaning "you all") and them. Note that the pronouns "you," "it," and "you (meaning "you all")" have identical nominative and objective case forms.
- Use an objective case pronoun if:

- The pronoun will be the direct object of a verb, as in "My father gave me this toolbox." (You wouldn't say, "My father gave I this tookbox," because I is a nominative case pronoun.)
- The pronoun will be the direct object of a preposition, as in "The car swerved around him. (You wouldn't say, "The car swerved around he," because "he" is a nominative case pronoun. A preposition, by the way, is any word like "around," "over," "to," "from," "at," etc. that shows some kind of connection between two other words. The best definition of a preposition I've ever heard is "anywhere a mouse can go."

Quotes:

Be selective about what you choose to present as a direct quote. Nine times out of 10, you can use a paraphrase to do a better job than the source did of saying what the source said.

When you use a direct quote, it's important to use a quote that forms a complete sentence. In other words, don't use a partial quote.

Avoid using a quote in a lead. Most of the time, a quote unduly clutters up a lead. If you want a lead to include something someone said, it's usually better to paraphrase.

Always set up a quote by preceding it with a paragraph that:

Indicates who is about to talk

Gives a general paraphrase of what he or she is about to say

Then present the quote in its own paragraph. Here's an example (also note the punctuation):

Detective Jason Smith said the suspects, both wanted in five states on charges of murder, kidnapping and robbery, should be considered armed and dangerous.

"These two guys make Bonnie and Clyde look like a traveling circus," Smith said. "These guys are elusive, calculating and, above all, deadly."

Police described the pair as traveling in a stolen, dark blue Ford Explorer with Maryland license plates. A reward of $50,000 has been offered for information leading to their arrests.

Note how the first graf indicates who's about to speak (Detective Jason Smith) and gives an idea of what he's about to say (the suspects should be considered armed and dangerous). The second graf presents the quote. The "Smith said" is optional. It's pretty clear that Smith is talking. This format helps the reader keep track of who is saying what in a story. One of the most confusing things you can do in mass media writing is present two quotes, back to back, from two separate sources without indicating that the speaker has changed. Editors call that “tombstoning” quotes. It looks like this:

“My client is innocent of these charges,” defense attorney Jim Smith said. “He’s a dangerous criminal who should never see the outside of a prison cell again in his lifetime,” prosecutor Jane Brown countered.

Kind of confusing, eh? It sounds at first like the guy's lawyer is saying the defendant is innocent, then, in the very next breath, describing the guy as a dangerous criminal who should stay in prison for life. Only when you finally get to "prosecutor Jan Brown countered" do you realize that the speaker changed midway through the paragraph.

The story then continues with a new paragraph.
Also note the correct punctuation for quotes:

Smith said, "The festival is for everyone."
"The festival is for everyone," Smith said.
"The festival," Smith said, "is for everyone."
"The festival is for everyone," Smith said. "Children are especially welcome."

Redundancy:

A word is redundant if it adds no meaning to the sentence or phrase it is part of. For example, the word "completely" is redundant in the phrase "completely destroyed." Things can't be "partly destroyed." The word "destroyed" is absolute. Similarly, there's no point in writing "3 p.m. in the afternoon." Use either "3 p.m." or "3 in the afternoon. Other redundancies are more subtle: "joined together," for example, or "collapsed down." Things can't join in any way besides together, and things can't collapse in any way but down.

Round-up lead.

A "round-up lead" is a lead that attempts to present two or more unrelated aspects of a story with more or less equal emphasis. They're most commonly found atop stories about meetings. Suppose, for example, a city council decided, during a single meeting, to raise taxes on sales of beer, wine and tobacco, fire the police chief for his part in a prisoner abuse scandal at the city jail, and release a report disclosing unsafe levels of E. coli bacteria and mercury in the city's drinking water. All three are pretty newsworthy items, and a reporter would be tempted to write a lead saying something like, "City Council raised taxes, revealed that city water is unsafe, and fired the police chief during last night's meeting at City Hall." As with many round-up leads, though, this one tries to cover so many topics that it gives too little information about any one topic. Worse, readers can erroneously assume that all the events in the lead are causally related - for example, that the Council raised taxes to pay for correcting a drinking water problem that the police chief is somehow responsible for causing.

Usually, it's better to emphasize one topic in the lead, then mention the remaining topics in the story's next paragraph. For example:

"The city's drinking water contains unsafe levels of bacteria and mercury, the City Council revealed during last night's meeting at City Hall.

Council members also fired Police Chief Arthur Donegan for his role in a recent prisoner abuse scandal at the City Jail and voted to raise taxes on beer, wine and tobacco sold within the city limits."

In practice, most edtiors probably would go a step further and publish three stories, one devoted to each topic.

Run-on sentence:

A run-on sentence is a sentence consisting of two or more independent clauses with no appropriate connections between them. For example, "The driver lost control of the car the vehicle smashed into the guard rail." is a run-on sentence, because two independent clauses, "The driver lost control of the car" and "The vehicle smashed into the guard rail" have been run together with no connecting punctuation or words. The easiest way to fix a run-on sentence is to make each independent clause a separate sentence. "The driver lost control of the car. The vehicle smashed into the guard rail." It's also possible to fix a run-on sentence by using the techniques described under "comma splice."

Said:

Use this neutral verb for most attribution jobs. Other words like "stated," "admitted" "asserted," etc. carry connotations that may be inaccurate. "Stated," for instance, suggests that whatever was said was said under some kind of duress. "Admitted" suggests the speaker had been trying to conceal what was said. "Claimed" suggests that what the person is claiming is untrue.

Also use "said" to qualify statements made about what someone thinks or believes. For example, writing that "The convicted rapist is sorry for his crimes" may or may not be accurate. It's more accurate to say "The convicted rapist said he is sorry for his crimes."

Also remember that the word "that" usually is unnecessary after "said." Use "that" after "said" only if some other word -- a time element, for example -- comes between "said" and the description of what was said. For example: "The president's aide said Friday that the bill is as good as dead."

Semicolon:

Semicolons have two main uses:

Joining two independent clauses, as in "Billy opened the chips; I poured the soda." The two clauses are independent because each has a subject and a verb (Billy/opened, I/poured).

Separating items in a series of things if the things involve commas. For example, "His favorite breakfast foods include ham, eggs and toast; pancakes, syrup and sausage; and bagels, cream cheese and juice."

Generally avoid using semicolons in leads, especially if you're doing so to join two independent clauses, as in "Fire destroyed a Murfreesboro home yesterday; investigators suspect arson." The structure puts two complete thoughts on equal footing in the lead, leaving readers to wonder which is more important. It's better to make one idea clearly dominant: "A Murfreesboro home burned to the ground yesterday in what investigators think may be a case of arson." or "An arsonist may have set the blaze that destroyed a Murfreesboro home yesterday, according to investigators."

Take care to use proper punctuation when joining clauses with words like "however," "furthermore," and so forth: "The storekeeper closed the window; however, he forgot to lock it."

Second reference:

Second reference is any reference to an individual or organization that occurs after the initial reference to that person or organization in a news story.

Where references to individuals are concerned, media writers typically use the person's complete name the first time the name is mentioned in the story, then use only the person's last name on second reference. For example, a news story about "Joe Smith" will call him "Joe Smith" the first time he is referred to in the story but simply "Smith" in all subsequent references. Note that courtesy titles like "Mr. Smith" or "Miss Smith" or "Mrs. Smith" are not used.

Where references to organizations are concerned, it's customary to spell out the organization's full name on first reference, then use either an abbreviation or, better, a "tag" on second reference. See alphabet soup for details.

Sentence fragment:

A sentence fragment is a phrase that is presented as a sentence but lacks a subject and/or a verb.

For example: "The firefighter crawled through the smoke-filled, inky black room. Groping for the missing boy." The phrase "groping for the missing boy" is capitalized and punctuated as if it were a sentence. But it has no subject and no verb. The idea it conveys would fit better if expressed as part of the preceding sentence: "Groping for the missing boy, the firefighter crawled through the smoke-filled, inky black room."

Writers sometimes use sentence fragments for dramatic effect. For example: "The firefighter crawled through the smoke-filled, inky black room. Exhausted, disoriented , terrified, but determined." The latter phrase is a fragment used for dramatic effect. Avoid using fragments this way unless you're sure doing so is appropriate. And do so only occasionally.

Since/because:

Use "since" for time relationships, as in "I haven't seen you since last year." Use "because" for cause-and-effect relationships, like "Because my car broke down, I had to catch a bus." Don't make the common mistake of using "since" to mean "because," as in "Since my car broke down, I had to catch a bus."

Spelling:

Media writers take spelling pretty seriously. At the very least, run the spelling checker routine available in whatever application you're using to compose your assignments. If you're unsure of a word's spelling, look the word up in a dictionary. Nothing will discredit your writing quicker than crummy spelling. A technical note: The online form you use to submit your work has no spell-checking capabilities. So you might consider typing your work in a good word processor like Microsoft Word or Corel Wordperfect, spell checking your assignment there, and then pasting the text into the form's window for submission. If you don't know how to do that, stop by my office sometime, and I'll show you.

State names:

The latest version of the AP Stylebook calls for all state names to be spelled out in body copy, whether they appear alone or in conjunction with the name of a city. State names should be abbreviated only in datelines and when used in short-form listings of party affiliations (like “Sen. Jane Doe, R-Va., called for …,” which indicates that Jane Doe is a Republican U.S. Senator representing the state of Virginia.) Even in those cases, though, eight are never abbreviated: Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas and Utah. So, if Doe is a Republican senator from Utah, rather than Virginia, the excerpt would read, “Sen. Jane Doe, R-Utah, called for …”

Straight news lead rules:

Following these six rules will help you write a clear, concise, interesting straight news lead – and get an “A” on your writing assignment. For details, see the “Six Rules for Writing Straight News Leads” handout in the assignment schedule, or watch this YouTube video.

· Rule #1: A straight news lead should be a single paragraph consisting of a single sentence, should contain no more than 30 words, and should summarize, at minimum, the most newsworthy "what," "where" and "when" of the story.

· Rule #2: The lead's first verb should express the main "what" of the story and should be placed among the lead's first seven words.

· Rule #3: The lead's first verb -- the same one that expresses the main "what" of the story -- should be active voice, not passive voice.

· Rule #4: If there's a "who" involved in the story, the lead should give some indication of who the "who" is. But see the “Blind lead” entry (above) for advice on how much of an indication the situation warrants.

· Rule #5: The lead should summarize the "why" and "how" of the story, but only if there's room.

· Rule #6: If what's in the lead needs to be attributed, place the attribution at the end of the lead

Subjunctive mood:

As if they weren't confusing enough, verbs can be "moody." The sentence you just read uses the "subjunctive mood" to tell you something important to understanding the sentence's meaning. Consider the difference between these two versions of the sentence:

As if they aren't confusing enough, verbs can be "moody."

As if they weren't confusing enough, verbs can be "moody."

As far as simple subject-verb agreement rules go, both sentences are correct. The subject, "they," is plural, so the verb must be plural, too. Both "aren't" (a contraction of "are not") and "weren't" (a contraction of "were not") are plural. "Aren't" is merely present tense, and "weren't" is merely past tense. So as long as the time frames conveyed are accurate, all's well, right?

If only it were so easy.

See? there it is again. And this time, the subject-verb agreement is screwy. "It" is singular, so it needs a singular verb. But "were" is a plural verb. We usually use it with plural subjects. For example: John and Jane were in class. They were in class. We were in class. The students

were in class. Etc. And yet, "If only it (singular) were (plural) so easy" is proper grammar. How can this be?

This sort of seemingly haphazard messing around with subjects and verbs happens whenever the meaning of a sentence calls for expressing wishes, commands, emotion, possibility, judgment, opinion, necessity, or statements that are contrary to fact at present.

Consider the meanings of the two examples cited so far:

As if they weren't confusing enough ... (But, of course, verbs are confusing enough already. We don't need them to be any more confusing.) The subjunctive mood signals that the statement is contrary to fact.

If only it were that easy ... (But, of course, it isn't that easy, even though we would like it to be.) The subjunctive mood signals a wish for something other than the way things really are.

The subjunctive mood is complicated, and its use varies from language to language. Wikipedia.org's entry on the subjunctive mood is worth a read if you want more information.

Suffered/sustained:

In newspaper parlance, buildings, cars and other inanimate objects "sustain damage." People or animals "suffer injuries."

SVO lead:

Short for a "Subject-Verb-Object" lead. As the name implies, such leads present the subject first, followed by an action verb and, if available, the action verb's direct object. For example: "Police (subject) arrested (action verb) two suspects (direct object) this morning in connection with last week's double homicide." Note that SVO structure requires an action verb. For example, "Two suspects (subject) were (non-action, "to be" verb) arrested (predicate adjective) by police this morning in connection with last week's double homicide" is not an SVO lead.

See the “Six Rules for Writing Straight News Leads” handout for details. Using SVO structure will help you write your leads in active voice.

Tenses:

Verb tenses are essential tools for conveying what happened when. The most commonly used tenses are past tense (I walked), present tense (I walk), and future tense (I will walk.) But there are many more, and mastering each is critical to writing clearly.

Let's start with the easy verb tenses, the ones you probably already know: past, present and future.

Past tense let's you indicate that something happened sometime in the past.

> Jones talked.
> Means that sometime before right now, Jones said something.

Present tense let's you indicate that something is happening right now.

> Jones talks.
> Means that Jones is talking right now.

Future tense let's you indicate that something will happen sometime in the future.

> Jones will talk.
> Means that sometime after right now, Jones will say something.

The "perfect tenses" are especially useful for indicating the order of two or more events completed in the same time period -- either past, present or future. They involve pairing the verb's "participle" with one or more "helping verbs." The “participle” is simply the verb plus an “-ing” or a “d,” “ed,” “t,” “en,” or “n,” depending on the specific tense you need and the word you’re using. Check a dictionary if you’re not sure.

Past perfect tense lets you show that each of several actions was completed in the past while indicating the order in which those actions were completed. For example:

> Smith had pleaded guilty and had gone to jail, so police ignored the new evidence.
> See how the verb tense suggests the order in which these events occurred?
> First, Smith pleaded guilty and went to jail. These actions took place in the past.
> Then, police ignored the new evidence. This action also took place in the past, but it happened in a more recent time frame than the pleading guilty and going to jail.
> To form this tense, place "had" before the participle of each verb that represents an action completed in the earlier time frame.

Present perfect tense lets you indicate that an action has just been completed and that additional action is about to occur. For example:

The students have read chapters one through nine of the book. (Notice how the verb tense "have read" suggests there are additional chapters yet to be read).

The driver has driven 10 miles. (Again, notice how the verb tense suggests the driver has more driving to do).

To form this tense, add "has" or "have" to the verb's participle.

Future perfect tense lets you show that two actions will be completed in the future and that one will be completed before the other.

By the time this course ends, you will have learned to write well.

Sometime in the future, the course will end.

You also will learn to write well sometime in the future, and the learning will take place before the course ends.

To form this tense, put "will have" before the participle of the action or actions that will be completed first.

The "progressive tenses" are useful for showing that an action was, is or will be ongoing during a period in the past, present or future.

Past progressive tense lets you show that an action began in the past, continued for a time, and then ended sometime prior to the present.

Jones was lying the whole time he was on the stand.

Jones was on the stand during some period in the past.

During that period, he lied continuously.

People were jumping from the burning building.

At some point in the past, people started jumping from the burning building.

The jumping went on for a while.

Then the jumping ended sometime prior to the present.

To form this tense, add "-ing" to the present tense of the verb and put either "was" or "were" in front of it.

Present progressive tense lets you show that an action is ongoing, that it began sometime in the past but that it is continuing right now and will continue into the future.

The FBI is investigating the case.

Visitors are flocking to the new museum.

I am hoping for a good grade.

Notice how the verb tense indicates that the investigating, flocking and hoping are all going on right now.

Each of the actions began at some undefined point in the past and have been going on uninterrupted since then.

To form this tense, add "-ing" to the present tense of the verb, then put "am," "is" or "are" in front of it.

Future progressive tense lets you show that an action will start at some point in the future and will continue indefinitely.

Astronauts will be conducting several experiments during the flight.
Sometime in the future, the experiments will begin.
The experiments will continue into the future.
To form this tense, add "-ing" to the present tense and precede it with "will be."

The "perfect progressive tenses" let you show the order of two or more events, some ongoing and some not, that take place either in the past, the present or the future.

Past perfect progressive tense lets you show that two actions took place in the past, one an ongoing action and the other a one-time action, and that the ongoing action preceded the one-time action.

Police had been tracking him for years and finally caught him.
The tracking went on for some time in the past.
The catching was a one-time action that also occurred in the past.
Furthermore, the tracking preceded the catching.
Jones, who had been running, arrived out of breath.
The running went on for some time in the past.
The arriving was a one-time action that also occurred in the past.
Furthermore, the running preceded the arriving.
To form this tense, add "-ing" to the present tense and precede it with "had been."

Present perfect progressive tense lets you show that an action began sometime in the past, continued uninterrupted up to the present, but probably won't continue into the future.

I have been telling you all along that you need to brush up on your grammar.
She has been trying to get a quote from the mayor all morning.
Both the telling and the trying began sometime in the past.
Both actions continued up to the present, but have now halted.
To form this tense, add "-ing" to the present tense of the verb and place "have been" or "has been" in front of it.

Future perfect progressive tense lets you show that two actions will take place in the future, one an ongoing action and one a one-time action, and that the ongoing action will precede the one-time action.

By the time crews plug the hole, the tanker will have been leaking oil for weeks.

The leaking is an ongoing action that will take place in the future.

Sometime after the leaking begins, crews will plug the hole.

To form this tense, add "-ing" to the resent tense verb expressing the ongoing action, then precede it will "will have been."

That:

The word "that" can cause trouble in at least two ways:

First, generally, omit "that" after any tense of the verb "to say." For example, "The president said he had signed the bill." Keep "that," however, if a time element appears directly after any tense of the verb "to say." For example, "The president said Monday that he had signed the bill." Also keep "that" if it is followed by a subordinate clause beginning with a conjunction like after, although, because, before, in addition to, until, and while. For example: "The president said that until he gets Congress' support for his Social Security package, he will refuse to sign the highway bill."

Second, know when to use "that" and when to use "which." Both words can be used to introduces a clause or phrase. For example:

Police found two cars in the suspect's garage. They searched the car **that** *matched the description of the car seen leaving the scene of the crime*.

Police found two cars in the suspect's garage. They searched the red one, **which** *matched the description of the car seen leaving the scene of the crime*.

Notice how the italicized phrases, although identical, serve different purposes. Knowing whether to use "that" or "which" depends on figuring out which kind of purpose the phrase or clause is serving.

In the first example, the phrase is specifying which car the police searched. Without it, you would have no way of knowing which of the two cars police had searched. That property makes the phrase "restrictive" or "essential," and such phrases are introduced by "that."

In the second example, the phrase is providing extra information about the car. Without it, you still would know which car the police had searched. They searched the red one. The phrase simply clues you in to the fact that the red car matched the description of a car seen leaving the crime scene. Such "nonessential" or "nonrestrictive" phrases are introduced by "which." Notice also that "which" usually must be preceded by a comma in such usages.

The/A:

Putting "the" in front of a noun in a news story usually signals that you have alluded to that noun somewhere earlier in the story, or that readers are already familiar - perhaps from earlier stories - with whatever the "the" is referring to. If neither is the case, readers will be confused. Consider this example of a poorly written lead and second graf:

One person died Friday afternoon in a single-car accident on Main Street.

The boy, 6-year-old Brenden Smith, was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident. His parents, Jim and Jane Smith, both of Murfreesboro, are listed in critical condition at Middle Tennessee Medical Center.

Your reaction upon reading the two grafs was probably something like, "Boy? What boy are we talking about, here? There's been no mention of a boy." That's precisely the problem. Consider how adding an allusion to the boy earlier in the story helps things out:

A boy died Friday afternoon in a single-car accident on Main Street.

The boy, 6-year-old Brenden Smith, was pronounced dead at the scene of the accident. His parents, Jim and Jane Smith, both of Murfreesboro, are listed in critical condition at Middle Tennessee Medical Center.

Similarly, using "the" in front of a noun or noun phrase in a news story can imply that the noun or noun phrase has been talked about in previous stories and should be well known to the reader. If such is not the case, the reader will be confused. Consider this lead:

The expansion of City Hall has hit an expensive snag, the project's contractor said Monday.

The above lead suggests that the reader already should know about "the expansion." If this is the first-ever story about the expansion, the reader had no way of knowing about it.

Titles:

Capitalize formal titles that appear directly before someone's name. If a title comes after someone's name, lowercase it and set it off with commas. Like this: "Police Chief John Frazier said ...," but "John Frazier, police chief, said ..." If the title stands alone, apart from someone's name, lowercase it: "The police chief said ..."

Don't capitalize titles that are job descriptions. "Director of Agriculture John Smith" is a formal title, but "farmer John Smith" is a job description. The difference between job descriptions and formal titles can get fuzzy at times. See your AP Stylebook for guidance.

Remember to omit titles on second reference. Police Chief John Smith is "Chief John Smith" on first reference, but he's simply "Smith" on all subsequent references.

There are basically three ways to handle titles that appear with a person's name:

Put the title directly before the name and capitalize it. Use no commas. For example: "Middle Tennessee State University President James Walker."

Put the title before the name, add a possessive if necessary, lowercase the title, and set the person's name off with commas. For example: "Middle Tennessee State University's president, James Walker." Or “A local university president, James Walker.”

Put the title after the name, lowercase the title, and set the title off with commas. For example: "James Walker, Middle Tennessee State University president." (Note that "Middle Tennessee State University" remains capitalized no matter what because it's a proper noun.)

If a title appears without a person's name, lowercase the title.

Most military titles are capitalized and abbreviated (Pvt., Sgt., Maj., Capt., Maj., etc.) if they appear directly before someone's name. Otherwise, they're spelled out and lowercased. See "Military titles" in the stylebook for a complete list.

Time:

Use figures with no ":00" for on-the-hour times. For example: 10 a.m., 11 p.m., 5 a.m., 5 p.m. You also can use 5 o'clock in the afternoon, 10 o'clock in the morning, etc. Express minutes past an hour by using a colon. For example: 10:01 a.m., 10:59 p.m., 5:15 p.m., etc. Some other tips:

Avoid redundancies like "5 p.m. in the afternoon" or "5 a.m. in the morning." Use "5 p.m." or "5 in the afternoon" instead.

Note that AP style prefers “a.m.” and “p.m.” over “am” and “pm.” So, don’t forget to include the periods.

Express 12 p.m. using the more-readily-understood "noon" and 12 a.m. as the more-readily-understood "midnight." Many people mistakenly think 12 a.m. means noon and 12 p.m. means midnight. They assume "a.m." indicates daytime and "p.m." indicates night time. See also: a.m./p.m.

If a time begins a sentence, spell out the numbers involved: “Four-thirty a.m. came too early for the recruits on that first full day of boot camp.”

Time element:

To convey when some event happened, or will happen, compare the event’s date to the date on which your story will be published. If the event’s date is within seven days of your story’s publication date, use only the day of the week as the event’s date. Do not use “yesterday,” “today,” “tomorrow,” or phrases like, “last Friday” or “this coming Tuesday.”

For example, suppose you’re writing a story that will be published on a Wednesday, and the story is about the start of a former local sheriff’s trial on charges of embezzlement:

If the trial began on Wednesday of the previous week, you would use whatever the calendar date was for Wednesday of last week, like, “The former sheriff’s trial began May 10.” Note that you would omit the year, leaving readers to assume you mean “May 10 of the current year.” You would include the year only if you’re talking about May 10 of some other year.

If the trial began more recently, like yesterday, you would write, “The former sheriff’s trial began Tuesday,” meaning the most recent Tuesday.

If the trial began on the same Wednesday the story will be published, you would write, “The former sheriff’s trial began Wednesday.”

If the trial will begin on the same Wednesday the story will be published, but after the story’s publication time, you would write, “The former sheriff’s trial will begin Wednesday.” The future tense “will begin” conveys that you’re talking about some later time on the current day.

If the trial will begin some day before “next Wednesday,” like the next day, you would write, “The former sheriff’s trial will begin Thursday.”

If the trial will begin “next Wednesday” or some day after that, like, a week from tomorrow, you would give the calendar date, as in, “The former sheriff’s trial will begin May 25.” Again, you would omit the year unless you’re talking about some year other than the current one.

Toward:

Note that there's no "s" on the end.

Transition:

Transition links each paragraph of a news story to the preceding paragraph and provides the momentum necessary to keep the reader reading. Transition also helps link sentences within a paragraph. Some types of transition include:

1. Time sequence:

After screeching through the turn from Main Street onto Broad, the speeding car barreled through a red light at the Old Fort Parkway intersection.

Hitting speeds of up to 80 mph, the car then careened up Broad Street, finally smashing into a utility pole near Thompson Lane.

2. Repeating a sentence structure:

Johnson said she has tried and tried to call attention to the problem.
She has written 25 letters to various government officials.
She has made countless phone calls.
She has even taken time off work to stake out the mayor's office.

3. Using contrast and/or comparison:

Officials insist the campus has plenty of parking spaces.

However, cars could be seen Monday parked in grassy medians, in front of fire hydrants, on sidewalks and even, in one case, right in the middle of the street.

4. Using geographic sequence:

A spacious lobby greets visitors to the new library.

Across the lobby, stairs lead to an airy reading room and computer center on the second floor.

From here, visitors can take any of four elevators to the stacks on the building's six other floors.

5. Using pronouns and demonstrative adjectives:

"This ordinance absolutely must pass," the mayor declared.
He threatened to resign in protest if it didn't.
That ultimatum irked the council members, who promptly decided to call his bluff.

6. Using conjunctive adverbs:

Developers are applying for a permit to build a landfill on the site.
Meanwhile, environmentalists are organizing opposition to the plan.

(Other conjunctive adverbs: accordingly, consequently, moreover, therefore, however, etc. Be aware that many conjunctive adverbs imply a particular relationship between the thoughs they link. "Therefore," for example, suggests that the second idea is a result or outcome of the first idea. Use these words only when their connotations are accurate.)

7. Using numbers:

Getting healthy involves some basic principles, the trainer said.
First, cut the fat out of your diet. Hamburgers, pizza and bacon are OK, but only as occasional treats, he said.
Second, exercise. As little as 30 minutes a day can make a big difference, he said.

8. Echoing words or grafs from the preceding graf

The accident left 41-year-old Jane Smith battling for her life in the Middle Tennessee Medical Center's intensive care unit.
Smith, a mother of three, suffered head injuries, a crushed leg and a broken back, a hospital nursing supervisor said.

Very:

A word to be avoided. Convey degrees instead by choosing the correct word. Someone who is very angry, for example, is incensed or furious.

Vote tabulations:

Use this form: "The Council voted 5-2 against the proposal."

Weapons:

See the "Weapons" entry in your AP stylebook for details, but here are some highlights:

You can use "gun" to refer to any firearm.

Caliber is a measure of the diameter of the inside of a gun barrel. It is the measure used for all firearms except most shotguns (see gauge). Omit the word "caliber" when the measurement is in metric units. Some examples: a 22-caliber rifle, a 9 mm pistol.

Gauge is the preferred measure for most shotguns.

Some common types of firearms include:

A pistol, which is a handgun that does not hold its ammunition in a revolving cylinder. Pistols may be single shot (you have to reload after each shot), semi-automatic (the pistol fires a shot each time you pull the trigger. The force of the discharge ejects the spent cartridge and cocks the pistol for the next shot), or automatic (when you squeeze the trigger, the pistol keeps firing shot after shot until you let up on the trigger. As with a semi-automatic, the force of each discharge loads and cocks the weapon for the next shot. In the United States, automatic firearms are illegal to possess without a special license.)

A revolver is a handgun that holds its ammunition in a revolving cylinder. The form: a .45-caliber revolver.

A rifle, which is a firearm that you aim and fire from your shoulder using both hands and that has a rifled bore. A rifled bore is scored with lines that twist slightly. These lines make the bullet spin as it leaves the barrel. The spinning makes the bullet fly straighter.

A shotgun, like a rifle, is a firearm that you aim and fire from the shoulder using both hands. The difference is that a shotgun has a smooth bore and fires a charge of pellets that scatter upon leaving the barrel. Most shotgun sizes are measured in gauges: a 12-gauge shotgun. A sawed-off shotgun is a shotgun that has had its barrel shortened to an illegal length. The shorter the barrel, the more widely the pellets scatter upon leaving the barrel, and the more easily concealed the weapon is.

Who/That:

Use "who" to refer to people, as in "He's the one who wrote the report" or "They're the ones who wrote the report." Also use "who" to refer to animals that have a name: "Lassie was a dog who starred in a 1950s TV show." Use "that" to refer both to objects and to animals that don't have specific names. For example, "Here's the report that I wrote," and "There's the dog that I was telling you about."

Wordiness:

Say what you need to say in as few words as possible. For example, don't write, "The man proceeded to leave the building." Instead, write "The man left the building."