

This is True Style Guide

Updated: 30 September 2020

He Kissed Her *Where*? Every story should have a *location*. Use newspaper style for the state. I always include a state, even for big cities like Los Angeles. See <https://thisistrue.com/sources> for correct abbreviations for states and Canadian provinces. Foreign cities must have at least a country (not just “Stockholm” but “Stockholm, Sweden.”) In Canada and Australia, include the province/state, appropriately abbreviated. I never use specific addresses unless it’s very pertinent to the story, which is rare. All significant people named in a story should also include their *age* (if available from the source).

Source Attributions: Newspapers are notoriously sloppy about where they are. “The Times”? Which one? The one in London, Shreveport, India, Northwest Indiana, Trenton, or...? So I use the city name *whether or not* it’s part of the newspaper’s formal name. Thus: not just (Los Angeles Times), but also (London Times). Why not “Times of London”? Consistency: if I’m going to add a city, I’m always doing it at the start. But because it’s tradition to put the city *after* TV station call letters, I do it that way too: (KTLA Los Angeles), *not* (Los Angeles KTLA).

The (source) tag at the end of each story should be spelled out properly. Thus, (San Francisco Chronicle), *not* (S.F. Chronicle). The contributor’s initials go here too, before the news source: (RC/Los Angeles Times). While newspaper names should be italicized when used in stories, they are *not* italicized in the source area. Story italics will generally be done by the editor.

Multi-Attributions: Stories should generally only have one source. Ideally, if you find an Associated Press or other wire service story, check (Google News is your friend!) for a newspaper in that area to see if they covered it too. Odds are, they have — and that’s where AP/whatever got it. The local story is almost always more detailed, so use it whenever possible. It’s totally fine (even encouraged) to use two sources, and both are cited: “(Reuters, Los Angeles Times)”. If two different newspaper stories run together in one *True* story came from the same source (I do that occasionally; you can often tell the multi-story stories because they say “A did B; meanwhile, X did Y.”), attribute *both* sources. If (and only if) the two “different” stories come from the same source, the way to attribute “both” sources is with a digit: “(Shreveport Times, 2)”, but that’s rare. These can be combined in the event of three (or more) sources: “(London Times, AFP, 2)”, but that should be *very* rare. **A one-topic story including an update from the same publication does not have the “2” — just (Washington Post).**

Period: For initials in names, I run them with no space: G.K. Chesterton. Washington D.C. (note there’s no comma after Washington).

Logical Punctuation: You may love it, you may hate it. But I use it. Unlike typical American punctuation, there are few hard and fast rules. The key is *logic*. If we quote, say, a sign, the sign did *not* say “No Trespassing.” since signs “never” have a period at the end — it really said “No Trespassing”. For a more full discussion see <https://thisistrue.com/commatose>. Terminal punctuation in quotes always goes inside the quotation marks: “I did not,” the officer said. “He testified, ‘I’m guilty.’” is not exactly an exception to that rule, it’s a way to avoid doubled-up quote marks, yet is still logical since the period applies to the entire quote, not just the quote within the quote.

Italics: Use them for movie and book titles, album titles (but not song titles: “Bloody Well Right” is on Supertramp’s *Crime of the Century*). Exception for book titles: Bible (with or without the “the” in front). Use italics for ship names: USS *Enterprise* (note the USS isn’t italicized). Use for newspaper and magazine names (except in the source area): “It was published in the *New York Times* on Thursday.” (Note “the” is neither capitalized nor italicized even though that’s actually part of their formal name in this case.)

Spell Cheque: Because a lot of the stories are foreign, you may see examples of non-American spelling. Please Americanize spellings in *story* text and in quoted *utterings* (replacing “colour” with “color”, for instance), but leave the spellings in quoted *written* material as it was released. Thus, if a statement is issued in writing, use “colour”; if it is given verbally by a Brit, it will be spelled as “color”. Screwy, eh?

Allrighty Then! The proper use is “OK”, not “ok” nor “O.K.” (and *certainly* not “okay”!) While we’re at it, the contraction of old is not “ole” (which I read as “o-lay”), but rather ol’ — “That’s what ol’ Doc Smith says.”

Currency Conversion: Sources use varying rules for reporting currency. Thus, *True* stories are all over the map — you’ll find foreign stories talking dollars, for instance. But be *sure* they’re talking US\$ (a lot of countries use “dollars” for their currency that are not US\$, such as Australia). If the story uses an indigenous currency, I also include the U.S. dollar equivalent. The correct style for it is: “police say he stole 286,000 pounds (US\$430,000).” See <https://www.x-rates.com/calculator> if you need fresh US\$ equivalents, and round it reasonably (thus, above, “US\$430,000” rather than “US\$430,083”).

References to Time: When possible, make *relative* references to time, but avoid “this week,” “last month,” etc., which makes the stories look stale when read later. But “the week before” is usually a perfectly valid way to show how long something has been. Avoid using specific dates (“January 20”) unless there is a very specific reason to do so.

Dash It: I put spaces around em-dashes: it just looks better, especially in print, and helps with paragraph wrapping. Exception: quoted attributions, where there is a space before but not after: “No more tears now; I will think upon revenge.” —Mary Queen of Scots. (There is an exception to the exception: headline attributions at the end of each week’s stories, which have spaces on both sides of the dash.) **Note** that word processors often will create an em-dash when you type *three* hyphens, and an **en**-dash when you type *two* hyphens. A “real” dash is an **em**-dash (—); the en-dash is shorter (–) and is used for number ranges (“shown on pages 33–50.”), and thus rarely used in *True*.

EDITORS: you’ll often see the less-used characters spelled out in HTML encoding in your copies, rather than the characters. So rather than an é you may see an é — sometimes right in the middle of a word (fiancée).

Irritable Colon: Even though some style guides like to capitalize the first word after a colon, I don’t follow that style unless what follows is a quoted complete sentence. Thus: like this. Or: “That’s the way it is,” said Walter Cronkite.

Cityscapes: Proper newspaper style is to use commas around states: “Los Angeles, Calif., is where it happened.” as it’s technically a parenthetical phrase. In proper names of buildings or groups, the state or country which is not part of the proper name is added in parentheses if the state has not already been established: “Los Angeles (Calif.) City Hall.” You can also move the state out of the name if that’s less awkward: “He was discovered to be an inmate in California’s San Quentin Prison.”

Dots the Way It Is: I do know that there is an ellipsis character in computers and for typesetting. I don’t use it. Why? Because it messes up when sent by email, and I don’t think it *looks* good, especially in print. I have thus always used three periods, and don’t let my word processor auto-“correct” that into a single character. Of course, when used at the end of a sentence you need a period, too — which means four individual points, not the ellipsis character plus a period. Either way, the periods are used without spaces between them, which often wrap improperly at the end of a line....

Two Thirds: It’s “10.2 percent,” not “10.2%” — but *certainly* not “10.2 per cent” as the Brits put it. For numbers with fractions, the style is “He was sentenced to 12-1/2 years,” rather than a ½ character entity, since those cannot be used for all fractions (good luck finding a single character to represent 11/32!).

Faster, Faster! I prefer “mph” over “MPH” or “m.p.h.” Clock times are 12-hour plus “a.m.” or “p.m.”, with the minutes included (and no space in there). Thus, 12:00 noon, rather than 12 noon, and 12:33 p.m.

Watch It, Junior: The preferred style is to use a period on generational abbreviations: “John Smith Jr. pleaded innocent.” Note I *don’t* put commas around “Jr.” or “Sr.”

Buildings: I use the spellings **storey** and **storeys** for the levels of buildings, *not* **story** or **stories**. Check a dictionary if you don’t know this spelling.

Unconvicted Criminals are *suspects* until they’re found guilty. A suspect is **alleged** to have committed a crime (though they are not suspected of committing an alleged crime! We’ll have no “alleged rapes” unless there is suspicion the victim is lying). Saying “Police are looking for Bob Smith, the murderer.” is an accusation, and thus defamation if they’re not found guilty later. So, “Police are looking for the suspect, Bob Smith.” or “The murderer escaped. Police say they are looking for Bob Smith, as they found his fingerprints at the scene.” It’s OK if you quote the police: “We’ll get that rotten murderer Bob Smith by the end of the week!” promised Police Chief Charlie Smith — Bob’s until-then-favorite cousin. In other words, using “police say” is fine because they are making the accusation, not us, but “Police say he allegedly robbed the bank” is redundant. If the person *has* been convicted (or pleaded guilty), then it’s absolutely fine to say “the murderer” or “Jones stole 54 blow-up dolls, and refused to say why.”

Fit to a T: I use T-shirt rather than t-shirt, and definitely not tee-shirt.

You Can’t Be Serial! Well, sure you can. In serial lists, use a comma (the “Oxford comma”) before the and: “He was charged with drunk driving, hit and run, and resisting arrest.”

Spelling Numbers: Spell out single-digit numbers, except for ages (always “a 6-year-old” rather than “a six-year-old” — *but* “The child was 6 years old” does *not* use hyphens in such a sense!) Also use digits for lengths of time, such as jail terms (“He was sentenced to 3-1/2 years in prison.”)

More Numbers: Measurement units should use common abbreviations, never use symbols: “She is 6 ft. 2 in. tall,” not 6’2”). “The room is 30 ft. by 15 ft.” or “The room is 30 by 15 ft.”

Words to Avoid: Sadly, in these days of overzealous spam filters, we must avoid a lot of words — especially words that have to do with sex. Naked and nude are definitely out (even if talking about the “naked eye” or hosiery colors), and so is porn and pornography. So is Viagra and most other spam-pimped drugs. When you have to get such concepts in, be creative in your wording, but NOT your spelling: trying to fool filters with constructions like “she was n-a-k-e-d”, “n@ked”, “na-ed”, or “pr0n” is too cutesy *and* triggers spam filters anyway. What’s “creative” wording? “Stepped out without any clothing” or “stripped completely” is fine, and “topless” seems to be OK with filters too.

Words Not to Avoid: My policy for curse words is to spell it out the way the source did it, but with a few exceptions — mainly to be less conservative. I don’t dash out “damn” or “crap” or “pissed” even if the source does. If “s---” is ambiguous, add the T at the end, assuming we know what the word really is (from a video, hold-up note, or whatever). If it’s *not* dashed out by the source, I’ll consider quoting verbatim on a case by case basis, defaulting to bleeping letters not to save readers’ innocence, but to avoid email filtering.

Pandemonium: I don’t capitalize “pandemic” even if referring to “the” pandemic. It’s OK to talk about the “coronavirus” in general, and the “novel coronavirus” is fine too, but note those refer to the virus itself, *not* the disease that results from infection, which is “Covid-19” or just plain “Covid” (especially on the second use), and *not* COVID-19. It’s also fine to use “SARS-CoV-2” (which is preferable to “severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2”, which is what that stands for).

Other Than the Above, *True* generally follows the Associated Press Stylebook.