

Mailman School of Public Health

Editorial Style Guide

The Editorial Style Guide is intended to help all content creators communicate clearly and consistently the Mailman School of Public Health.

Our style is based on the Associated Press (AP) stylebook, which is accessible to Columbia University employees at http://bitly.com/CUMC_APStyle. More suggested reading on this topic: [The Yahoo! Style Guide: The Ultimate Sourcebook for Writing, Editing, and Creating Content for the Digital World](#), [The Economist Style Guide](#), and [National Geographic's Style Manual](#).

Our writing approach is to communicate messages in a simple and clear way. Our voice is conversational rather than institutional, and our tone aims to be vibrant, personal, and authentic. Though our content has to convey complex technical information, the editorial style should still be easy to understand—even for those who do not work in public health.

This is meant to be a living document. Please direct any questions, comments, and suggestions to Cindy del Rosario-Tapan in the Office of Communications at cdt2131@columbia.edu

Academic Degrees

- No periods in degrees
Correct: PhD, DrPH, MD, MPH, etc.
- When including the year that an alumnus graduated from the School, list the degree and the graduation year, separated from the degree by a space, and the two-digit graduation year preceded by an apostrophe, e.g., MPH '09. If adding field of study, insert a comma in between degree and year e.g, MPH in Epidemiology, '09
- If a non-Mailman degree needs to be included, it should be indicated in prose rather than using an acronym, when space allows
Correct: Mary Bassett, a 1979 graduate of Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons,
- When degrees are spelled out, they should be lower case
Correct: She holds a master's of public health in Sociomedical Sciences.

Acronyms

- Acronyms can be used, but the first instance of the center or program must include the full spelled-out name, e.g., The Center for Infection and Immunity (CII); subsequent uses may then use the acronym, e.g. Dr. Ian Lipkin of CII
- If using a scientific term, do not use parenthesis, e.g., Bishphenol-A, or BPA,

Addresses

- Spell out all words that denote direction as well as words such as "street," "avenue," and "boulevard." Do not use ordinals in street addresses. Use postal abbreviations without periods in body text.
Correct: Her address is 611 West 114 Street, New York, NY 10027.

Campus Institutions and Locals

- Always use "the Mailman School of Public Health," "Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health," "Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health," "the Mailman School," or "the School."
- Never use "MSPH" to refer to the Mailman School of Public Health
- When referring to Columbia, "University" is always capitalized
- The formal names of special events are capitalized, e.g., Alumni Day, Class Day, Commencement
- Capitalize *Northern* Manhattan, *Lower* Manhattan

Departments

- Upper case department names when using the formal name: the Department of Epidemiology
- Capitalize department name when using informal name aft

Email addresses

- Email addresses should always be spelled out. When breaking an email address is unavoidable, break between words without using spaces and break before the period so that the period leads on the next line.

Hyperlinks

- URLs should almost always be included as hyperlinks, not spelled out. If using `http://` break between words without using spaces, and break before the period so period leads on the next line.
 - When creating hyperlinks, use the source with the most reputable name, i.e., The New York Times and not The Buford Blog
 - Link first instances of faculty names to their faculty directory page, center or program names to their respective website
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Lectures, Conferences, Courses, etc.

- Place lecture titles in quotes:
 - Correct:** Professor Salim S. Abdool Karim, PhD, gave a talk titled "New Hope for HIV Prevention."
- Conferences, panels, speaker series, and symposiums should be placed in quotes and are capitalized only when used as formal titles and proper nouns. Do not capitalize such words as annual meeting.
 - Correct:** Smith attended a conference on genetics at the Mailman School.
 - Correct:** Smith attended the third annual "Granville H. Sewell" speaker series.
- Capitalize courses only when used as a proper noun. Do not use quotes.

Miscellaneous

- Capitalize Internet; make website, webcam, webcast and webmaster one lower case word *but* Web, Web page, Web feed
- Do not use the plural pronoun "they" in place of the singular "he" or "she." Try recasting the sentence instead.
- Always use "and" instead of "&"
- Healthcare is one word
- Use the two-letter postal codes, e.g., AL for Alabama, for state abbreviations

Numbers

- Spell out numbers one through ten, then use numerals for numbers over ten
- When a number is the first word of a sentence, always spell it out, even if it would normally be expressed in figures.
- When two or more numbers apply to the same category in a paragraph or a series of paragraphs, don't use figures for some and spell out others. Instead, use all figures:
 - Correct:** There are 25 graduate students in the environmental health sciences department, 9 in the biostatistics department, and 8 in the health policy and management department, making a total of 42 students in the three departments. ("Three" is spelled out because it does not belong to the same category.)
- Express all percentages as figures; spell out "percent" rather than using the percent sign.
 - Correct:** 3 percent; 130 percent
- For large sums of money, use figures with a dollar sign, and spell out million and billion, e.g., \$1.8 million

Photo Captions

- Do not use degrees and graduation years in photo captions, unless that information is not included within article
- Credit photographer using Photo by Alan Orling
- Only use periods if caption is a complete sentence

Publications

- Major media publications (books, films, CDs, songs, magazines, newspapers, TV shows, titles of plays, works of art) are set in italics
- Smaller works (journal articles, poems from a collection, short stories, song titles, thesis papers, and titles for lectures) are set in quotation marks.
- Editor in a publication reference is always listed after the publication, e.g.,
Professor Salim S. Abdool Karim, PhD, co-wrote the chapter "Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome" in the *Oxford Textbook of Public Health* (Roger Detels, Robert Beaglehole, Mary Ann Lansang, and Martin Gulliford, eds.)
- Between editor and publisher, use a semicolon, e.g.,
(Roger Detels, Robert Beaglehole, Mary Ann Lansang and Martin Gulliford, eds.; Oxford University Press
- When author is part of a list of co-authors, use et. al

Punctuation

- In lists, use a serial comma before an "and"
Correct: Research on cancer, asthma, and HIV/AIDS
- En dashes are used when writing a range, e.g., 3–5 treatments.
- Em dashes are used to separate content within a sentence and without a space, e.g., a pile of vegetables—topped by an eggplant—caught her eye. Do not use double dashes --
- Use a semicolon to separate two independent clauses that are not joined by a conjunction or to separate elements in a series that already contain commas
Correct: The participants in the first study were paid; those in the second were unpaid.
Correct: The color order was red, yellow, blue; blue, yellow, red; or yellow, red, blue.
- Use a hyphen when a compound modifier precedes a noun, e.g., a well-behaved Chihuahua, but *not* following verbs, e.g., The Chihuahua is well behaved
- Use periods with abbreviations such as U.S. and U.N.
- Surround Jr., Inc., Esq., with commas
- Hyphenate all elements of phone numbers

- Commas and periods always go inside double quotation marks. Exclamation points and question marks go inside double quotation marks when they are part of the material being quoted; they go outside when they have been added by the author.
- Do not use curly/"smart" quotes or bullet points, *Except* in magazine usage
- Only one space between sentences

Social Media

- Faculty titles may be abbreviated to Prof.
- "Student" or "Alumn/a" should precede names where applicable
- When faculty are quoted in reference to a study to which they contributed, include their role, e.g., "Prof. Pam Factor-Litvak, the lead investigator"
- Limit each tweet to three or fewer hashtags, and when possible use hashtags in place of buzzwords, e.g., #publichealth, #obesity, #vaping
- If beginning a tweet with a handle, put a period before the handle's name, e.g., .@ColumbiaMSPH Prof. Sandro Galea
- Include the Mailman School handle (@ColumbiaMSPH) in all tweets whenever space allows
- When using images include photo credit, e.g., Photo by Alan Orling

Time

- Use numbers followed by lower case a.m. or p.m. and only necessary digits, e.g., 8 p.m.
- Decades: Use 1990s or '90s

Titles

- Titles should be upper case if before name; lower case after names and set off by commas
 - **Correct:** Dr. Linda P. Fried, dean, or Dean Linda P. Fried, MD, MPH
- Professors with a formal named title should include the person's first name, middle initial (if he or she uses one) and last name, followed by his or her degrees, e.g., W. Ian Lipkin, MD, John Snow Professor of Epidemiology. All other titles are lower case, e.g., Ian Lipkin, professor of Neurology and Pathology met with the school dean. *But:* He introduced Professor Lipkin to Dean Fried.

If using *full formal title*: Sandro Galea, MD, DrPH, the Anna Cheskis Gelman and Murray Charles Gelman Professor and Chair of Epidemiology, spoke on the panel

Without full formal title: Professor Sandro Galea, MD, DrPH, spoke on the panel

- Where applicable, the first reference to a person should be, "Elizabeth Jones, PhD" and subsequently, she should be referred to as "Jones" *Except* Dean Fried should be called "Dean" in every instance
- Capitalize names of scholarships, professorships, foundations, etc.
- Capitalize all Cabinet-level titles in all instances
- When quoting someone, use "says," except when the statement clearly was made at a specific time in the past, e.g., In the television interview, Galea said...
- Use "chair" instead of "chairman" or "chairwoman"

Best Practice Guidelines

1. The fewer words the better. If you can cut three words down to two, do so. A lot of editing consists of going through the text (more than once) and deleting unnecessary words.
Bad: "Led analysis efforts of the collected data."
Better: "Led the data analysis."
2. Use the active voice whenever possible.
Bad: "An evaluation of the study protocol was performed by the researchers."
Better: "The researchers evaluated the study protocol."
3. Most adverbs are unnecessary. "Very" rarely adds anything to the meaning. A "very high hill" is usually a "high hill" and a "very strong membrane" a "strong membrane."
4. Many adjectives are also unnecessary. There is no need to refer to a "thorough investigation." The reader of a study should assume that any investigation was thorough. Ditto for "respected healthcare professionals."
5. Choose short, plain words over jargon. For example, "use" is almost always preferable to "employ" or "utilize." Be careful of commonly misused terms like "cohort," "lifecourse," and "intervention."
6. Do not use different words to mean the same thing, for the sake of making your writing more "interesting." It doesn't make it more interesting, merely less clear. If a researcher evaluated the efficacy of a drug, there is no reason to suddenly switch to "assess." A common error in many fields is to use model, theory, and hypothesis interchangeably. They are not the same thing.

7. A writer should have a logical reason for every aspect of a piece of writing—from the overall structure of the piece down to the order in which items are listed.

Take, for example, a list of cities: Barcelona, Fargo, Hong Kong, Amsterdam, New York, Tokyo, and Minneapolis. For a US-centric text, you might write Fargo, Minneapolis, New York, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Hong Kong, and Tokyo (US, Europe, and Asia, alphabetical within each group). Or, you could make the entire list alphabetical: Amsterdam, Barcelona, Fargo, Hong Kong, Minneapolis, New York, and Tokyo.

In writing a sequence, whether of paragraphs or items, it is also important to maintain the same level. A list of health issues would not include diet, sleep, exercise, and the best treatment for lice. A diner would not have a sign in its window saying, "We serve breakfast, lunch, and roasted chicken."

8. All language that does not refer specifically to males or females should be gender neutral. The old explanation that the term "man" refers to both men and women is no longer credible.

9. Beware of the "Misplaced Only."

Correct: The researchers published the paper only after many experiments.

Incorrect: The researchers only published the paper after many experiments.

10. Avoid redundancy.

Bad: "They used the same identical design study."

Better: "They used the same design study."

Bad: "The instrument components were connected together."

Better: "The instrument components were connected."

11. Use of the word "includes."

The word "includes" suggests that a list does not include all possible items, e.g., "famous scientists discussed in class included Albert Einstein and Richard Feynman" implies that the class discussed other scientists, as well.

Correct: "The other authors are ..."

Incorrect: "The other authors include ..."