

City of Boulder Style Guide with tips for better writing

This is a compilation of Associated Press (AP) writing style, combined with style exceptions adopted by the City of Boulder. Please follow these rules for all internal or external city correspondence, memos, and other written communication.

Updated by Randall K. Roberts, April 2013

Contents

Word usage		
Abbreviations	_____	3
Acronyms	_____	3
Tricky words	_____	2
Numbers		
Addresses	_____	4
Dates/Times	_____	4
Numerals, figures, percent	_____	5
Phone numbers	_____	5
Symbols	_____	5
Titles/Departments		
Council	_____	6
Names and titles	_____	7
Departments	_____	7
Offices	_____	7
Web terms	_____	8
Writing tips		
General writing tips	_____	8
News releases	_____	9
Responses to the public	_____	10
Punctuation Guide	_____	10

Words

The word “city”:

- **Use an upper case C for “City of Boulder”** because the name was originally incorporated as such. The “City of” has long been dropped as part of Boulder’s proper name. (Please note: the rule used to be lowercase c but this was changed in August 2009.)
- **When using “city” elsewhere in a sentence**, it should always be lower case (unless it’s the first word of the sentence). Right: *“The City of Boulder will conduct a meeting on the city’s prairie dog policy.”*

Tricky Words:

- **Nonprofit** is one word (no hyphen).
- **Use Pros and Cons** rather than PROS and CONS or pros and cons.
- **Affect** means to have an effect on; influence; produce a change in. Example: *“Bright light affects the eyes.”* Affect is a verb.
- **Effect** means anything brought about by a cause or agent; result. The power or ability to bring about results. Example: *“A law of little effect.”* Effect is a noun.
- **Criterion and criteria:** *Criterion* is singular. *Criteria* is plural.
- **The words section, subsection and chapter** should be in lower case (unless they are at the beginning of a sentence.)
- **More than** is correct when making an approximate numeral statement. Correct: *“There were more than 3,000 people.”*
- **Over is a spatial description.** Correct: *“The plane flew over the city.”*
Wrong: *“There were over 3,000 people.”*
- **That and which:** Use that for essential clauses without a comma and which for nonessential clauses with a comma. Basically, if you can drop the clause from the sentence and it doesn’t change the meaning of the sentence (just loses some detail), then you have yourself a nonessential clause and it should have a comma in front of the word “which.” Otherwise, use that - no comma.
Example: *The city manager makes decisions everyday that are very important.* (essential clause, no comma) *The city manager works in his office, which is upstairs in the Municipal Building.* (nonessential clause, with a comma).

- **However:**
- Using 'however' as a conjunctive adverb: 'However' can be used to join two simple sentences to make a compound sentence. 'However' indicates that the relationship between the two independent clauses is one of contrast or opposition. Example: *"The engineers claimed that the bridge was safe; however, they were still not prepared to risk crossing."*
- Use a semi-colon (;) *before* and a comma (,) *after* 'however' when you are using it to write a compound sentence.
- Using 'however' to begin a sentence: If 'however' is used to begin a sentence, it must be followed by a comma, and what appears *after* the comma must be a complete sentence. Example: *"However, there was no need to repeat the data entry."*
- Using 'however' as an aside: 'However' can be used to interrupt a sentence. Use a comma (,) *before* and a comma (,) *after* 'however' when you use it in this way. Example: *"It is, however, extremely difficult to identify all the relevant variables."*

Acronyms:

- **Spell out on first reference** then use acronyms in following references: Right: *"The Regional Transportation District (RTD) will work with the Denver Regional Council of Governments (DRCOG) to design guidelines for the project. RTD is preparing an outline for DRCOG."*

Abbreviations:

- **"Number"**- Use the abbreviation "No." when referring to ordinance numbers or a place in a contest, rather than #. Example: Ordinance No. 1119
- **"For example"**- Use the abbreviation *e.g.* when needed. Use periods as shown.
- **"That is"**- Use the abbreviation *i.e.* when needed. Use periods as shown.
- **"Et cetera"**- Use the abbreviation *etc.*
- **Months: Use abbreviations for months when accompanied by a year or an entire date as appropriate.** Wrong: *December 30.* Right: *Dec. 30.* (Month abbreviations are as follows: *Jan., Feb., March, April, May, June, July, Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., and Dec.*)
- **Never abbreviate days of the week.**
- **Abbreviate Ave., Blvd., St. only with a street address/number.**

Numbers

Dates/Times:

- **Don't use a comma after the time.** Right: *"The meeting is at 10 a.m. on Monday, March 3."* Wrong: *"The meeting is at 10 a.m., Monday, March 3."*
- **Do use a comma after the day and after the date.** Right: *"The meeting is at 10 a.m. on Monday, March 3, at the East Boulder Community Center, 5660 Sioux Drive."*
- **Don't use "th" following a date.** Right: *"We are leaving on March 18."* Wrong: *March 18th.*
- **Don't include unnecessary colon and zeros in time entries.** Right: *6 p.m.* Wrong: *6:00 p.m.*
- **Do lower case a.m. and p.m.,** with periods, and with a space before and after. Right: *"...from 10 a.m. to 9:30 p.m."*
- **Use a.m. or p.m. once when timeframes are the same.** Right: *1 to 4 p.m.* Wrong: *1 p.m. to 4 p.m.*
- **Use figures for time except for noon and midnight.**
- **Don't capitalize noon,** except in display type (posters, etc.)
- **Do abbreviate months when used with a specific date.** Wrong: *December 30.* Right: *Dec. 30.* (Month abbreviations are as follows: *Jan., Feb., March, April, May, June, July, Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., and Dec.*)
- **Do not abbreviate months when using alone or with a year alone.** Right: *"Fundraising dollars will be counted in November 2007."* Wrong: *"Fundraising dollars will be counted in Nov. 2007."*
- **Don't abbreviate days of the week.**
- **Use an s without an apostrophe to indicate spans of decades or centuries.** Example: *the 1990s.*

Addresses:

- **Do abbreviate Ave., Blvd., St. only with a street address/number.** Wrong: *"They live at 1424 15th Avenue."* Right: *"They live at 1424 15th Ave."*

- **Don't abbreviate Ave., Blvd., St. when not with a street address/number.**
Wrong: *"They live on Arapahoe Ave."* Right: *"They live on Arapahoe Avenue."*
- **Don't abbreviate Alley, Drive, Road, Terrace, Circle or Court.**
- **Don't use upper case on streets or avenues when more than one is included.**
Wrong: *"The project is between Pine and Spruce Streets and Fifth and Sixth Avenues."* Right: *"The project is between Pine and Spruce streets and Fifth and Sixth avenues."*
- **Spell out and capitalize First through Ninth when used as street names.**
- **Use figures with two letters for 10th and above.** Right: *7 Fifth Ave. or 100 21st St.*

Numerals, figures:

- **Spell out references to dimensions.** Wrong: *10 s.f. or 10 sq. ft. or 10'*
Right: *10 square feet.*
- **Do use numerals for numbers 10 and above, spell out numbers under 10:** *two, three, nine, etc.* Do use a comma for numbers greater than 999: *1,222, 6,770*, including references to money: *\$10,000*
- **For ages and grades, always use figures.** Use hyphens for ages expressed as adjectives before a noun or as substitutes for a noun. Example: *A 5-year-old boy. The boy is 5 years old. He is in 1st grade.*
- **Use figures with percent and spell out "percent."** Right: *1 percent.* Wrong: *1% or one percent.* (The % symbol is acceptable in charts.)
- **Do not use .00 following references to dollars.** Wrong: *"Prices run from \$15.00 to \$49.95."* Right: *"Prices run from \$15 to \$49.95."*
- **Spell out a numeral at the beginning of a sentence.** If necessary, recast the sentence. There is one exception - a numeral that identifies a calendar year.
Wrong: *993 freshmen entered the college last year.*
Right: *Last year 993 freshmen entered the college.*
Right: *1976 was a very good year.*
- **Use the abbreviation "No." for number** when referring to ordinance numbers, rather than #.

Phone Numbers:

- Don't use () around the area code.
- Do use hyphens between numbers, not periods.
- Use "ext." for extensions.
- Use a comma to separate the main number from the extension.
Right: 303-441-1234, ext. 2.

Symbols:

- Do spell out *percent*; don't use the symbol %. Use figures with percent. Right: 1 percent. Wrong: 1% or one percent.
- Don't use the ampersand (&) symbol for the word "and," except when it is used by a business as part of its corporate name.
- Spell out "section" and "paragraph" in the text of law review pieces and other documents, except when referring to a provision in the U.S. Code, federal regulation or a local code section. In the text of footnotes or in citations the symbols should be used. [section (§) paragraph (¶)]. There should be a space between the symbol and the number.

Titles/Departments

Council:

- Council member should be two words.
- Councilman or Councilwoman is one word.
- Capitalize "Council Member" when it is before a name, but not after a name or when it stands alone. Right: "The community agrees with Council Member Jones on the issue." OR "The community agrees with Joe Jones, council member." OR "The community agrees with all of the council members."
- "City Council" should always be capitalized when it is part of a proper name or if the reference is to a specific council but the context does not require the city name. Example: "The Boulder City Council will meet on Tuesday. The City Council will make a decision on the issue."
- "Council" by itself should be lowercase. Right: "The council will take up the issue at Tuesday's meeting." Wrong: "The Council will take up the issue at Tuesday's meeting."
- "Board" and "council" are singular: use "it."

Titles:

- **Capitalize titles before a person's name, but not after his/her name or when the title stands alone.** Right: *"City Manager Susie Que will sign the contract."* OR *"Susie Que, city manager, will sign the contract."*
- **Composition Titles:**
Capitalize the principle words, including prepositions and conjunctions of four or more letters and put quotation marks around the composition titles. Words of fewer than four letters should be capitalized if it is the first or last word in a title. This applies to book titles, computer game titles, movie titles, opera titles, play titles, poem titles, album and song titles, radio and television program titles, and titles of lectures, speeches and works of art. Exceptions include the Bible and books that are primary catalogs of reference material.
Wrong: *"As part of the Celebration of Cesar Chavez, the Boulder Public Library is showing the short documentary film Valley of Tears narrated by Martin Sheen."*
Right: *"As part of the Celebration of Cesar Chavez, the Boulder Public Library is showing the short documentary film "Valley of Tears" narrated by Martin Sheen."*

Departments:

- **Capitalize formal names of departments.** Example: Human Services Department.
- **Use the phrase "the department" on second reference.**
- **Lowercase department in plural uses,** but capitalize the proper name element. Example: *the departments of Human Resources and Public Works.*
- **Lowercase department whenever it stands alone.**
- **Do not abbreviate department in any usage.**
- **Do not use and ampersand in the formal name of a department.** Wrong: *Community Planning & Sustainability.* Right: *Community Planning and Sustainability.*

Offices:

- **Capitalize "office" when it is part of a formal name.** Example: *City Manager's Office.*
- **Lowercase all other uses.**

Web

Web/email/Internet:

- o **The word "website" is one word, lowercase.** Use a capital "W" when referring to the "Web."
- o **"Internet" should be capitalized.**
- o **"Email" is one word** and does not need to be capitalized.
- o **Avoid underlined copy** (this may be confused as a Web link). Do underline email addresses and Web site addresses.
- o **If an Internet address falls at the end of a sentence, use a period.** Do not put a space between the Internet address and the period.

Writing

Writing steps:

- o **Step 1: Know your point**
Before you take the plunge and start typing, figure out what you want to communicate. Defining your purpose may be simple - you're writing a memo to council on a project that needs their approval. Or, you're sending an e-mail to employees to get a new project launched. Once you realize your objective, and simplify it in your own mind, you're well on your way to finding the right words to express it to other people. It's best to put the main point at the beginning and then get into the background information.
- o **Step 2: Plot it out**
When you're thinking about what to write, it can be incredibly helpful to make an outline. You don't have to make it formal; sometimes jotting down a couple of notes is all it takes. The benefit of creating an outline is that it forces you to organize your thoughts and zero in on your main points. Outlining is also an excellent way to make longer assignments more manageable. When working with an outline you can easily break the project into pieces while staying organized.
- o **Step 3: Identify your audience**
The tone and style of your writing greatly depends on whom you are addressing. Determine the audience before you begin writing.
The city's rule of thumb is that all written materials should be written at about an eighth-grade level so that all members of our community have the opportunity to understand the material, regardless of age, education or other circumstance. Keep your writing simple, succinct and straightforward.

- o **Step 4: Let it flow**
Even if you don't know the precise words you want to use, there's something to be said for simply starting to write. Once you've completed your outline, you have a basic idea of what you want included, then it's just a matter of getting started. You may not write the strongest piece possible on the first attempt, but actually seeing words on the page is much more encouraging than staring at a blinking cursor.
- o **Step 5: Draft and redraft**
Even if you believe that you've written something worthy of a Pulitzer Prize on your first attempt, you are not finished. Resist the urge to turn your written work out into the world before proofreading and editing it. Make sure that everything you wrote not only makes sense, but also addresses your audience, covers all of the topics you wanted to include and flows well.
Taking this step gives you the opportunity to spot typos, misspellings, missing punctuation and all the other things that your high school English teacher warned you about. Some people find it helpful to read their work out loud or have someone else read it for them as a way to complete the editing process. Whatever works best for you is a personal choice, but it is imperative that you include this step if you want your writing to be the best it can be.

Specific Writing Tips:

- o **Avoid use of all upper case**, except as a display type (two or three words, with plenty of space around them).
- o **Avoid capitalizing words that may seem proper in our city world**, but are not formal proper nouns. Wrong: *General Fund* Right: *general fund*
- o **Try to avoid using the words some, about, many, recently, several, etc.** Be specific, or delete inexact words.

News Release Tips:

- o **Try to keep releases one page**, when possible.
- o **Use an action oriented headline:** "*City hosts community forum*" not "*Community forum at city hall.*"
- o **Do not capitalize every word in the header/title.**
- o **Do not use all UPPER CASE for the header/title.**
- o **Do not sound like an advertisement.**

- o **First sentence should have it all:** event, time, day, date, location, address.
- o When writing a release, begin with the event because that is the most important information to the reader. Then follow with the sequence of time, day, date and location, including street address, in that order.
Example: *The annual spring dance will be held at 1 p.m. on Saturday, March 8, at Boulder High School, 1604 Arapahoe Ave.*
Note: Do not use the year in the date sequence.

Responding in writing to a request:

- o **Before you begin to respond to a request or question,** carefully read the communication or listen to the person. Ask yourself, ***“What is the question?”***
- o **At the beginning of your response,** restate the question before you begin answering. This establishes what you are talking about and lets a person know that he/she was heard and understood. If not, you can count on the person to let you know what you need to talk about.
- o **Put yourself in the person’s position.** Think how he or she might feel. The individual would not have taken the time to contact the city if he or she didn’t feel there was a legitimate, immediate concern. If this were you, wouldn’t you want an answer that is prompt, to-the-point and reasonable – something that makes sense?
- o **Write your answer. Briefer is better.** Focus only on the question and don’t provide additional information, unless asked. Take your time. Always spell check your reply. If you are emailing a response, don’t send it until the next day, if time allows. Reread it the next morning before you send it. If the topic is particularly controversial, have a colleague or a communications staff member review before you send it.

Punctuation Guide

Quotation Marks:

- o **Put commas and periods within closing quotation marks,** except when a parenthetical reference follows the quotation. Put colons and semicolons outside closing quotation marks.
- o **Put a dash, question mark, or exclamation point within closing quotation marks** when the punctuation applies to the quotation itself and outside when it applies to the whole sentence. Example: *Smith asked, “When is the meeting?”*
OR Does the city manager always say, “Have a great day”?

- **Use a comma to introduce a quotation after a standard dialogue tag**, a brief introductory phrase, or a dependent clause. Example: *According to the city manager, “Everyone did a great job.”*
- **Attribution:** When attributing a quote to someone, the attribution always goes after the direct quote. Example: *“The City of Boulder is the best city in the west,” said City Manager Susie Que.*

Colons (:) and semi-colons (;):

- **Use a colon at the end of a sentence to introduce a list.** Capitalize the first word after a colon only if it is a proper noun or the start of a complete sentence. Colons are followed by semi-colons and then a period in a list. Example: *The council will consider the following items:
city parks;
recycling; and
small cars.*
Note the word “and” before the last bullet point.
- **Use a semi-colon to indicate a greater separation of thought and information than a comma can convey.** Use semicolons to separate elements of a series when the items in the series are long or when individual segments contain material that also must be set off by commas. Example: *He is survived by a son, John Smith, of Chicago; three daughters, Jane Smith, of Wichita, Kan., Mary Smith, of Denver, and Susan, of Boston; and a sister, Martha, of Omaha, Neb.*

Commas:

- **Use commas to separate elements in a series**, but do not put a comma before the conjunction (and; or) in a simple series. Wrong: *“The flag is red, white, and blue.”* Right: *“The flag is red, white and blue.”*
- **Use a comma before the concluding conjunction in a series if an integral element of the series requires a conjunction.** Example: *“The City Manager’s Office, Human Resources, and Parks and Recreation will meet.”*
- **Use a comma before the concluding conjunction in a complex series of phrases.** Example: *“The main points to remember are whether the athletes are skillful enough to compete, whether they have the stamina to endure the training, and whether they have the proper mental attitude.”*

Hyphens:

- **Hyphens are joiners.** Use them to avoid ambiguity or to form a single idea from two or more words.
- **Use them only when not using them causes confusion.** Example: *The city manager will speak to small-businessmen. (They're not small men, they're small-businessmen)*
- **When a compound modifier** – two or more words that express a single concept – precedes a noun use hyphens to link all the words in the compound except the adverb *very* and all adverbs that end in *-ly*.
Examples: *a first-quarter touchdown; a bluish-green dress; a full-time job.*
- **Many combinations that are hyphenated before a noun are not hyphenated when they occur after a noun.** Example: *The team scored in the first quarter. The dress, a bluish green, was very nice on her. She works full time.*
- **When large numbers must be spelled out,** use a hyphen to connect a word ending in *-y* to another word. Example: *twenty-one, fifty-five.*
- **Use two hyphens when needed as in the following example.** Example: *He received a 10- to 20-year sentence in prison.*