

SANTA BARBARA COUNTY EDUCATION OFFICE

stylebook



A word about style

For the purposes of this guidebook, “style” signifies the use of spelling, punctuation, capitalization, hyphenation, and related matters in publications.

Why does style matter? Do readers notice when you capitalize “Superintendent,” write out “ten,” or use a comma before the word “and” in a series?

The honest answer is that some do and some don’t. Those who do notice such items will appreciate the attention to detail. But even those who can’t point out a particular comma or capital letter will receive subtle messages from our publications. A written piece that is consistent in its use of style projects crispness and professionalism that are important to the mission of this office.

There is only one major guiding principle to follow when it comes to style: **Be consistent.** A specific rule is not as important as consistent adherence to a style. Don’t use “insure” in one portion of your piece and “ensure” in another. It looks sloppy. Don’t capitalize Board in one place and use it lowercase in another. Once you’ve chosen a rule, apply it throughout the piece.

The rules outlined in this booklet are those used by the Public Information Office, and are intended as a resource for those who are interested. If you have any questions, please call the Public Information Office at extension 5282 or 5290. We have many more detailed stylebooks on file, and we are happy to share these resources.

—Wendy K. Shelton
Director of Communications

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Capitalization

It is a common mistake to overdo it with capitals. Some people find it difficult to use generic words like "office," "board," "director," and the like, without using a capital. There is no need to capitalize any common noun unless it is part of a proper name.

It works against the success of a publication to use capitals when they are not called for. Instead of flowing along with the text, the eye must pause and rise to take in a capital letter. We read by focusing on the shapes of words. The symbols that form capitals all have equal distances from top to bottom, unlike lowercase letters that have tall and long lines, such as the *ascender* of the letter 'l' or the *descender* of the letter 'p'.

Anything that makes a reader slow down increases the chances that the reader will simply stop reading.

IN FACT, USING ALL CAPITALS IN A LARGE BLOCK OF TYPE CAN BECOME VERY FATIGUING TO THE EYE AND SHOULD BE AVOIDED WHENEVER POSSIBLE. CAPS ARE SIMPLY HARDER TO READ.

IN ELECTRONIC MESSAGES (EMAIL), AN ALL-CAPS MESSAGE CAN BE CONSTRUED AS SHOUTING.

- **Do not capitalize generic nouns unless they are part of a proper name:**

The members of the board voted to...

The members of the Santa Barbara County Board of Education voted to ...

Our office policy dictates that...

Our County Education Office policy dictates that ...

She was referred to the director.

She was referred to Director Lee Santos.

The figures applied to the next fiscal year.

The figures applied to Fiscal Year '93-'94.

- **Capitalize a title if it precedes a name, but do not capitalize if it follows a name *in a sentence*, because it is considered a generic description rather than a title:**

County Superintendent William J. Cirone

William J. Cirone, county superintendent, said today that...

- **For headlines, avoid initial caps for every word. Instead, capitalize only the first word and proper nouns in the title (unless you are citing an existing title for a book, movie, play.) Check a local newspaper if you have trouble seeing this:**

Workshop slated for English teachers

not: *Workshop Slated for English Teachers*

- **When writing about academic subjects, only capitalize the names of languages:**

This semester he enrolled in math, English, science, Spanish, and social studies.

Abbreviations

It is preferable to avoid the “alphabet soup” look of abbreviations and acronyms.

There are some universally recognized abbreviations that are required in some circumstances and perfectly acceptable in others. Also note in the examples provided that abbreviation rules can change when they are associated with dates or numerals.

As a general rule, it is best to avoid abbreviations, especially in cases where the reader would not quickly recognize the initials.

- **Abbreviate common titles when used before a full name:**

Dr., Gov., Lt. Gov., Mr., Mrs., Rep., the Rev., Sen.

(Note: Do not use "Dr." before a name if the initials for a doctorate will *follow* the name, as in Joy Lin, Ph.D.)

- **Use a.m., p.m., and abbreviations for the names of months, only when accompanied by a specific time, or day of the month:**

On Sept. 24, at 7 a.m.

not: *Early this a.m. he asked if we could meet in Sept.*

- **Abbreviate avenue, boulevard and street in numbered addresses, but not when used alone:**

He lives on a tree-lined avenue.

He lives at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

- **When using an acronym, spell out the name in first reference, with the acronym in parentheses, then use the acronym alone in subsequent references:**

She said the Partners in Education (PIE) would succeed only if the PIE membership was willing...

- **Certain acronyms, such as PTA, (note: no periods) are so universally known that it is not necessary to spell them out. If you are in doubt about whether an abbreviation falls into this category, it is better to be safe and spell out the name in first reference.**
- **Abbreviations are often desirable in tables, charts, and technical writing.**

Numbers and symbols

The use of numbers and symbols can go a long way toward making your page or piece more “user-friendly” for readers; but strings of numbers can be difficult to comprehend. On the other hand, spelling out large numbers with words can confuse readers accustomed to seeing numerals.

Several symbols that accompany numbers—dashes, hyphens, decimal points—can enhance readability if used properly.

Superfluous symbols, such as the “.00” following dollar amounts, or the “:00” following times of day, convey no extra information, but require eye movement and add to eye fatigue.

There are common-sense exceptions to many of the rules regarding numbers. The guiding principle behind all the rules is to require as little effort as possible on the part of the reader.

- **Write out single-digit numbers (one through nine), and use numerals for all larger numbers (10 and over).**

Sometimes this rule leads to an awkward situation in a sentence that combines single-digit numbers with others; but consistent adherence to the rule will aid the reader:

He read three books this summer.

She kept five copies and mailed 23 out to the districts.

- **Spell out any number that begins a sentence. Better yet, rework the sentence so that this is not necessary:**

One hundred twenty-two people...

More than 120 people...

- **Spell out grade levels:**

The workshop was for teachers of fourth, fifth, and sixth grade.

(Note: No capital letters are used for grade levels.)

- **Omit unnecessary symbols, such as the .00 following a dollar amount or the :00 following a time of day:**

The meeting is slated for 4 p.m.

Registration is \$15.

- **Omit the “st,” “rd,” or “th” after numbers in a date:**

June 3, 1991

not: *June 3rd, 1991*

- **Spell out percent in sentences. Use the symbol (%) in charts or graphs.**

Punctuation

Used properly, punctuation can be the reader's best friend. It provides a symbolic roadmap through a maze of ideas, helping tell the reader when to pause, which words to put with which ideas, and generally how to organize the material at hand.

Used improperly, punctuation can be annoying or confusing.

With punctuation, consistency is critical; if there are circumstances that allow you to make choices, be sure to make the same choices throughout a given piece.

When in doubt, check a good usage dictionary or a knowledgeable colleague. Punctuation errors can sometimes be more glaring than spelling errors, and more annoying to the reader.

Commas

- Use commas sparingly.
- In a series, use a comma before the “and” that precedes the final element:

The three sections were green, blue, and red.

The three sections were green, blue and yellow, and red.

- In a series, use semicolons instead of commas if any item in the series requires commas:

The workshop will cover confident parenting; choosing child care in Santa Barbara, Ventura, and San Luis Obispo counties; and nutrition.

- Commas often come in couples. They are used to set off a parenthetical, descriptive, or explanatory phrase within a sentence:

The legislator, usually supportive of education, voted against the measure.

Mrs. Díaz, a school administrator from Ohio, was surprised by the vote.

Quotes

- When using quotations, the punctuation goes inside the quote marks:

*“There is power in partnership,” he said,
“so join us now!”*

- Avoid using “isolated” quotes around a single word. They are usually unnecessary. As a test, see if the sentence makes sense without them:

He considered it “odd.”

He considered it odd.

Put a comma before the “and” in...

Apostrophes

- Use an apostrophe to show that part of a word or numeral has been left out:

California schools were the envy of the nation in the '60s.

The figures apply to the '90-'91 budget.

- Use an apostrophe to show possession. Pay close attention to whether the word is singular or plural:

The board's statement...

The 1970's style of cutbacks...

The student's book; The students' books...

Next week's agenda; two-weeks' notice...

- Do not use an apostrophe following a year if the intention is to show a plural:

The 1980s were a time of...

not: *The 1980's were a time of...*

- Learn when to use **its** and **it's**:

***Its** is possessive: True to its philosophy, ...*

***It's** is a contraction for it is: It's well known that...*

Dashes and hyphens

- hyphen

– N-dash

— M-dash

The hyphen

- A hyphen is a short line that *connects* the words that flank it. For this reason, spaces should not be used before or after a hyphen:

Two-year plan; full-time employee

- Unlike multiple adjectives that precede a noun (*big, red balloon*) words that require a hyphen make no sense if one word is omitted.

In the example of “*two-year plan*,” it makes no sense to say a “*two plan*” or a “*year plan*.” Together, the words “*two*” and “*year*” form a unit that modifies the word that follows, so they must be hyphenated.

The N-dash

- Some computers can generate a symbol (usually option/hyphen) that is longer than a hyphen and slightly smaller than an M-dash; it is actually the width of a capital N. Called an N-dash, it is used exclusively to separate numbers.

The workshop will be held 7–9 p.m.

- If you have no access to an N-dash, you can make an exception to the hyphen spacing rule, and use a hyphen with spaces before and after it:

The workshop will be held 7 - 9 p.m.

- For the reader’s sake, it is usually best to avoid symbols all together when dealing with numbers. Use the word “to” instead:

The workshop will be held 7 to 9 p.m.

The M-dash

- A dash *separates* the items that flank it. The most common dash is a long line usually formed by two hyphens(--), but available on most computers as a single symbol (—). Used for emphasis, it is generally the width of a capital M, and is technically called an M-dash. Note that sentences with dashes could stand alone without the item interjected:

His speech—clearly a topic he believed with passion—was a big hit.

Word usage

Few items annoy readers more than seeing a word used incorrectly, in violation of a rule they learned and still remember.

These mistakes give the impression that the organization that produced the piece does not know as much about grammar or word usage as the reader does—not an enviable position for an educational institution.

Which rules do your readers know? You can see the problem is boundless.

This section is not intended to be all-inclusive. It covers those areas where errors are commonly made.

Once again, the guiding principle is consistency. Don't use "you" in one portion of your piece and "one" in another. Select a given word usage and adhere to it throughout the piece.

Subject - noun - pronoun agreement

- **Singular subjects take singular verbs and pronouns.**

This rule is frequently violated when the singular subject is a collective word that covers several items or individuals, like board, team, class, staff.

*The board **is** voting on **its** fee policy.*

*The class sent **its** letters to flood victims in Louisiana.*

*The team **is** slated to compete in May.*

Hint: For those who continue to have trouble thinking of a board or a class as an “it,” it sometimes helps to add the word “members” and make the subject plural:

*The board **members are** voting on **their** fee policy.*

*The class **members** sent **their** letters...*

*The team **members are** scheduled ...*

- **Avoid using “he” or “his” to replace “he and she” or “his and hers.” If the extra words cause awkwardness, try making the subject plural:**

*The student should return **his or her** form as quickly as possible to **his or her** teacher.
(Correct, but awkward.)*

*Students should return **their forms** as quickly as possible to **their teachers**.*

- **Everyone, everybody, and each are singular nouns and take singular verbs and pronouns:**

*Everyone **was** asked to bring **his or her** favorite book.*

*Each of the goals **was** met.*

County Education Office formats

In first reference to our office, it is best to use our complete title: Santa Barbara County Education Office.

In second reference, it is proper to use SBCEO. Avoid using the term "County Schools." (*Remember: Peabody, Foothill, Cabrillo, Crestview, etc., are county schools. We work at the County Education Office.*)

All publications generated by this office must have the office logo displayed prominently (*color and black-and-white versions are available from the graphic artist at ext. 5270*).



- In referring to the office, “office” alone is lowercase.
- The “Santa Barbara County Board of Education” is the proper full name of our board. In second reference, “the board,” or “the county board” should be lowercase.
- The Board Room is the proper name of a room, and is used with initial caps.
- It is important to standardize the “look” of materials we send to districts and to the public so that it is clear at a glance that the piece originates in our office. *Times* is the preferred typestyle to use for memos:

This typestyle, Times, is the font that should be used in correspondence with districts or the public. Note the “serifs” on each letter (the extra swirls coming down from the crossbar of the “T,” for example), and the thin and thick portions of each letter that make it a very legible type to read in big chunks of copy.

The rule listed above in boldface is a sans serif type—note that the “I” does not have any “swirls” at top or bottom to aid the reader. Sans typefaces are decorative and best used for headlines or short titles.

If you don’t have Times, you should select something that approximates it for memos and letters that go outside the office.

Computer and Internet terms

As is the case with most things these days, computer-related terminology is in a constant state of flux. The following guidelines are based on prevailing style, though other sources might differ. Once again, the important rule is to be consistent throughout a given document.

It is office style to use the following formats:

email – lowercase, no hyphen
Capitalize when beginning a sentence.

homepage – one word, lowercase

Internet – always capitalized

online – one word

URL (Uniform Resource Locator) – all caps

(Note: Try to fit all web addresses on a single line. If that's not possible, try to break them at a dot or slash and avoid line-end hyphens.)

website – one word, lowercase

More questions? We have several detailed stylebooks in the Public Information Office, and we are happy to help with specific questions. Give us a call at extension 5282 or 5290.



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