Wikinews Style Guide

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1 Purpose

The vast majority of news sources rely upon a manual of style, a collection of agreed-upon guidelines for writing style. A style guide helps writers and editors by providing a standardised way of writing. Style guides help ensure consistency in such things as headlines, abbreviations, numbers, punctuation and courtesy titles. Style guides therefore are most helpful.

A news style is developed with emphasis on the efficient, and accurate, imparting of information about events; so, following our news style suggestions should have the additional benefit of helping you write effectively – if you are a newcomer to writing news.

The *Wikinews* style guide is aimed at producing understandable, and informative, articles readily understood by the majority of readers. Adherence is very strongly recommended, but not absolutely compulsory.

2 Status

The Wikinews style guide, like all style guides at working news organisations, is a work in progress and subject to change as new issues emerge and the language of news coverage evolves. Changes to the guide are not applied retroactively.

2.1 Conventions

Elements of punctuation and grammar are not addressed by exactly the same terms universally. There is no intention to be regionalist in this manual; however, in the interests of causing the least confusion, the following terms are used for clarity:

- **Period**: This American term is used to describe full-stops (the British/International term) wherever they might be used.

3 Basic news writing

3.1 Six tips on better writing

In his 1946 essay Politics and the English Language, author George Orwell devised six easy tips to make anyone a better writer. To paraphrase:

1. Never use the passive voice when you can use the active.

2. Shorter is better in sentences and paragraphs. If you can cut a word from a sentence, cut it.

3. Shorter is better in word choice. Never use a long word when a short one will do.

4. Do not confuse your reader with uncommon words. Never use foreign phrases, scientific jargon, or buzzwords if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

5. Never use clichéd metaphors, similes, or other figures of speech that you are used to seeing in print. **Be original.**

6. Be polite – even when you disagree. Break any of the above rules before writing anything deeply offensive or outrageous. Avoid personal attacks, do not exaggerate a situation, avoid sarcasm or hyperbole. Otherwise, you risk losing credibility in the eyes of readers.

3.2 Headlines

When naming your article, keep the following points in mind. (Most of them apply also to the body of the article, and are covered in greater detail further down this page.)

- Make them unique and specific — Due to the way the software of Wikinews works, each headline must be unique; choose specific details which describe this unique news event.

- Make them short — Headlines are as short as possible.

- Use verbs — A headline is at its essence a sentence without ending punctuation, and sentences have verbs.

- Use downstyle capitalisation — Downstyle capitalisation is the preferred style. Only the initial word and proper nouns are capitalized. In upstyle headlines, all nouns and most other words with more than four letters are capitalized. Downstyle: "Powell to lead U.S. delegation to Asian tsunami region" Upstyle: "Powell to Lead U.S. Delegation to Asian Tsunami Region".

- Write in a neutral point of view — headlines should not be biased in tone or word choice.

- Tell the most important and unique thing — Article titles should consist of a descriptive and enduring headline. As a series of stories on a topic develop, each headline should convey the most important and unique thing about the story at that time. For example, "Los Angeles bank robbed" is an unenduring headline because there will likely be another bank robbery in Los Angeles at some point. Instead, find the unique angle about the story you are writing and mention that: "Thieves commit largest bank robbery in Los Angeles history", or "Trio robs Los Angeles bank, escapes on motorcycles", or even "Trio commits largest bank robbery in Los Angeles history, flees on motorcycles".

- Use present tense — Headlines (article titles) should be written with verbs in present tense.

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- Use active voice — News is about events, and generally you should center on the doers, and what they are doing, in your sentence structure. Active voice is "Leader goes to shops" whereas passive voice, to be avoided, would be "Shops visited by leader". A quick check is try to word your sentences to avoid verbs ending in 'ing' and look for 'be verbs', e.g. 'are going to' can easily be converted to 'will' or simply 'to'. Rather than "More criminals are going to face execution in 2005", if we put "More criminals to face execution in 2005" or "More criminals face execution in 2005" a better sense of immediacy is conveyed.

- Try to attribute any action to someone — "Insurgents shoot U.S. troops in North Baghdad" is better than "U.S. troops shot in North Baghdad".

- Avoid jargon and meaningless acronyms — Avoid uncommon technical terms, and when referring to a country or organization, use its full name rather than acronym, unless the acronym is more common than the full name (ex: NASA, CIA, AIDS) or length is prohibitive.

- Use comma, not 'and' or '&' — Often the word 'and' may be substituted with a comma ','. Example: "Powell and Annan set international goals for aid" could be written: "Powell, Annan set international goals for aid."

3.3   Using the Date and Dateline templates

Articles must include at least the date as the first line of the article. This is most easily accomplished using the date template (if you were not present at the event you are reporting upon), so the first line of each article should include this code:

`{{date|Month DD, YYYY}}`

The template will add the article to the appropriate date category, and put the date on the first line in bold text. The date given on an article is should be of the day on which the article was published. The date on which the event happened is not the story's date.

In journalism, the location in the dateline may either refer to the location of where the article was filed from or where the event happened even if the writer was not physically present. Currently, the dateline template is only used when a Wikinewsie is actually present to "file" the story (generally as original reporting). The template generates text in the following manner:

`{{dateline|date=January 1, 2005|location=Mumbai, India}} Massive floods soaked...`

3.4   The first paragraph

The first paragraph (known as the intro or lede) should summarize the article in around 50 - 80 words, using one to three sentences.

Try to answer the questions of **who, what, where, when, why, and how**. Try to fit most of these into the first paragraph. This is known as the "five W's (and an H)", and is the first thing to learn about news writing.

- Don't feel stifled by this suggestion. Those experienced in reporting learn to determine which of those six questions are the most relevant to the story (and, more importantly, the reader).

- If you don't have the answer to one or two of them, skip it - but explain why you don't know later in your story. Don't make your first paragraph a boring list of facts - it's the first thing the reader sees, so make it interesting.

- Every fact or issue mentioned in the first paragraph should be later backed up or expanded in the main body of the article. This goes hand-in-hand with the very brief mention of facts in the first paragraph - you needn't explain everything fully in the intro, but what is mentioned should be fully explained before the reader finishes reading the article.

Do not feel compelled to finish the story completely yourself, but do try to avoid misleading or mystifying the reader. We can't help you write the story if we can't understand it.

3.5 Writing tone and structure

Write to be easily understood, to make reading easier.

Beyond the first paragraph, try to stick to the following tips:

- Use brief paragraphs - between 30 and 80 words is considered acceptable in newspaper writing.

  - Each paragraph should be only one or two sentences (three if you use very short sentences).
  - Each paragraph covers a single topic only.

- Concentrate on the new facts and their known or potential consequence - keep to bare minimum all background and plot details (aka exposition).

- Most important and newsworthy facts first, with least important and least immediate facts last - this is opposite to development order in typical narratives, and is termed inverted-pyramid style.

- Use plain English.

- Use punchy, active language to intone a sense of immediacy.

- Be balanced.

- Be clear, concise and unambiguous.

- Promote the human aspects of any story, using quotes etc.. This makes the story interesting to a wider range of people.

If you find your work is too wordy, try juggling word order, squeezing out unnecessary words. You may be surprised how many you can find! And it gets easier with practice. If not, don't worry, this is wiki and other users may help you out.

The reason for inverted-pyramid style is twofold: One reason is to help the reader, who is usually in a hurry when reading news. Putting the important and new aspects first helps since they may skip the story after only a couple of paragraphs.

The second reason is to help people who are editing your story later. If more and more is added to the story it may become too long for a single article. In wiki this is less of a factor, but we still like short punchy stories on Wikinews, not rambling essays.

3.6 Attribution

Every factual claim made needs to be attributed within the story text so the reader knows where it is coming from, except for anything which can be considered common knowledge. It is to be assumed that from the point where a given source is attributed, onwards, all facts mentioned emanate from that source, or are common knowledge, until another attribution is made or the end of a paragraph is reached.

Attribution is in addition to citation of references (see below), and attributions should be readable without interrupting the flow of the text.

Attributions usually happen at the end of a sentence; e.g., "'The car was at the top,' said Doyle. 'It fell over the cliff and burst into flames,' according to Miller. Doyle said there had been five people on board."

3.7 Verb tense

Articles should be written in the past tense or the present perfect. Headlines should be written in the present tense. Timelines also are written in the present tense.

3.8 Reporting on future events

Since we as writers are not in the business of predicting the future and are not psychic (arguably), it is best to stick to past or present perfect tense - especially since future events may change (or be cancelled). When writing about future or ongoing events, change tense as follows:

- *They will meet next Tuesday* - change to: *They are scheduled to meet next Tuesday* or *They said they would meet next Tuesday*

- *The event will continue through the end of August* - change to *The event is scheduled to continue through August* or *The event is supposed to continue through August.*

- *The show debuts in July 2012* or *The show will open in July 2012* - change to *The show's debut is scheduled for July 2012* or something similar.

- *The couple will celebrate their third anniversary next month* - change to *The couple plan to celebrate their third anniversary next month.*

4 Detailed style issues

4.1 Abbreviations

Abbreviations and contractions are handled differently by different dialects of English, and there is no set rule regarding them other than to be consistent throughout the article, and the original contributor's style choice is preferred. Acronyms and abbreviations should always be explained on or prior to first usage. For example, if a story relies on several points from the Associated Press then the first usage would be "Associated Press (AP)" and subsequent to that the abbreviation "AP" could be used.

4.2 Spelling

Spelling is an issue which often becomes contentious since there are multiple contradictory standards available, for example, British English, Australian English and American English. On Wikinews there is no specific policy other than to use a consistent spelling pattern throughout an article. Follow the spelling patterns of the subject of the article or that of the first author of the article to avoid issues.

4.3 Numbers

Generally, small whole numbers - 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 are spelled out in long form: zero, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine and ten. Where numbers are in the "teens" it is generally preferred that the number be spelled out, but above that, actual digits, like 42, should be used. Where you start moving into the very large territory and are citing numbers such as 10,000,000 you should use the more verbal form of "ten million". Common sense should be applied here along with consideration that our material is in print. Where you can use words as opposed to numbers you should, but not in cases where you would be writing "one hundred and forty-two" over 142. The preference for enunciated numbers is intended to apply to round figures where you might say something like "it's over nine thousand" in preference to "it's over 9,000". The use of words takes away any ambiguity and is more readable.

4.4 Sequential numbers

Numbers indicating sequence follow the primary guideline for other numbers. Spell out first through tenth, but use numerals beginning at 11th and continuing through 23rd to 251st and beyond. Again apply common sense for large round numbers such as 1,000th being written as thousandth.

   Note: *See how twenty-third is written "23rd" – not as "23d."*

4.5 Decimal fractions

Either a comma or a point is acceptable, e.g. 1,5 is the same as 1.5; however, in English the latter is the more common and readily understandable format. Exercise caution in choice of format to avoid 1.509 being mistaken for one thousand five hundred and nine.

4.6 Large numbers

The decimal can be used to spell out large fractional numbers such as one and one-half million to be "1.5 million" instead of "1,500,000" or "1 500 000". In UK and United States commas are used as thousand separators and points are used as decimal separators. In other regions (e.g. South Africa) a space is used as a thousands separator and the comma is used as the decimal separator. Either is appropriate, but use first the style used in the region written about, second the style of the original author. Avoid use of the Indian numbering system words lakh and crore; these are ambiguous and not understandable to a universal audience.

4.7 Currency codes

It is best to avoid regional lingo or specialized monetary or financial jargon that is not in common, everyday use among the international readers of Wikinews, such as "bucks", "kiwi" or "quid". Currency codes as listed in the ISO 4217 standard, are unique 3-letter codes that identify all internationally known currencies. While technically accurate, they may not be readily identifiable by most readers. For this reason, it may be best to spell out the name of the currency rather than relying upon the ISO currency code. This allows maximum understanding for the maximum number of readers. For example, almost everyone will understand what "1,000 Iraqi dinars" means as opposed to the ISO equivalent, "IQD 1,000." Either way, it is a good idea to wiki-link to the currency in question, to allow the reader quick access to information about the currency.

4.8 Currency symbols

There are a few currency symbols that are understood by most English-readers.

- $ - dollar

- £ - pound

- € - euro

- ¥ - yen

However, they are not always unique identifiers for a particular currency. Also, there are many other less well-known currency signs. To aid the reader, all monetary denominations not listed above should be spelled out ("130.50 Swedish krona") or prefixed with a currency code ("SEK130.50") instead of using a symbol.

For the euro and the yen, you may freely use the symbol, instead of using a code. But for the $ (dollar) and £ (pound), further clarification may be necessary. Please read below.

4.8.1 $ - Use of the dollar symbol

For dollars, only the "$" is used. Please do not use the cent symbol (¢).

- One dollar and twenty-five cents should be written as: "$1.25"

- Twenty-five cents should be written as: "$0.25" and not "25¢"

Since the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and many other countries all use dollars, it is important to label the type of dollar referenced. Pay particular attention to this because many newswires may report amounts in United States dollars, even if the local currency is different.

Sample dollar notation is as follows:

- Australia "A$1.25" or "AUD1.25"

- Canada "C$1.25" or "CAD1.25"

- New Zealand "NZ$1.25" or "NZD1.25"

- United States "US$1.25" or "USD1.25"

4.8.2 £ - Use of the pound symbol

There are a number of countries whose currency is the pound. Among those, only the pound sterling (GBP), the currency of the United Kingdom and Crown dependencies, is consistently associated with pound sign (£). Occasionally, it is used to refer to the Egyptian pound, but here LE or EGP are more common. Therefore, amounts in pound sterling, can be referred to using only the "£" symbol.

If you cannot find this symbol on your keyboard, you may either use the HTML code: £ or the words "pound" or "pounds" instead of the symbol. However, you should be able to find the character in the character insert box below the edit box.

- One pound, twenty-five is written as: £1.25 or GBP1.25

- Twenty-five pence is written as: £0.25 or GBP0.25, do not use the notation "p"

Therefore, there is no need to further distinguish the pound sterling (GBP) from other forms of currency. It is assumed that when "pound" or the pound sign (£) are used, the amounts are in GBP unless otherwise noted. Keep in mind that "₤" is considered an obsolete version of "£".

4.8.3   € - Use of the euro symbol

The euro is the common currency for a number of European countries. To denote euro, only the euro sign (€), EUR, or the word "euro" is needed. Do not use the cent symbol. If you cannot find the euro symbol on your keyboard, you may either use the HTML code: `€` or the word "euro" after the number figure instead of the symbol. You should also be able to find "€" in the character insert box below the edit box. Note, the plural of "euro" is officially "euro"; while the pluralization "euros" is commonly found, it is inaccurate.

- Two euro and twenty-five cent is written as: €2.25 or EUR2.25

- Twenty-five euro cent is written as: €0.25 or EUR0.25; avoid reference to euro cent.

4.9   Date and time

When referencing when something happened or when something is scheduled to happen, use the following formats:

4.9.1   Days

If something happened or is happening on the day you are writing your article, state it is happening today. This gives the story immediacy. If it happened the day before, say yesterday. If something will happen the next day, say tomorrow. For example:

- Tropical Storm Gonu headed toward Iran today, after lashing Oman yesterday with high winds and torrential rains. The storm is expected to continue losing strength by tomorrow.

Beyond yesterday, today and tomorrow, state the name of the day of the week, if it's within seven days. Beyond seven days, state the actual date. For example, if you're writing a story that is filed on a Friday (in this case June 8, 2007), it goes like this:

- Space Shuttle Atlantis lifted off from Kennedy Space Center today, and will orbit the earth tomorrow before arriving at the International Space Station on Sunday. Atlantis is scheduled to return to Kennedy Space Center on June 19.

4.9.2 Months

Months are to be spelled out unless grouped with a specific numerical date:

- Jan. for January
- Feb. for February
- Mar. for March
- Apr. for April
- May (no abbreviation)
- June (no abbreviation)
- July (no abbreviation)
- Aug. for August
- Sept. for September
- Oct. for October
- Nov. for November
- Dec. for December