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American Copy Editors Society

Revising the AP Stylebook:

Q&A with editor David Minthorn

By [Sue Burzynski Bullard](#) | 11:30 a.m. Nov. 4, 2010



Want to weigh in on revisions to the AP Stylebook for 2011? Now is the time to do it. The editors have a [form](#) on the website, www.apstylebook.com, asking for suggestions for new entries and terms to be defined. Suggestions will be taken until Nov. 15, so if you've always wanted to weigh in AP style, the time to act is now.

David Minthorn, the deputy standards editor of the Associated Press, answered questions in an e-mail interview about how the AP Stylebook comes together. Minthorn has been a correspondent or editor with the Associated Press for more than 40 years. He has worked on style issues at the news cooperative since 2000. Minthorn is one of three editors of the AP Stylebook and answers questions on the Ask the Editor website.

Q: Why is style important? And is it less important as more readers move to the Web?

A: Standardized style provides a framework of proper word usage, punctuation, spellings, definitions and story formats for accurate and credible journalism. By using a standard style, journalists don't have to agonize over basics such as how to present the news. The answers are at hand in an authoritative reference known as a stylebook. For The Associated Press, standard style applies to all forms of newsgathering and distribution. The guidance holds across all platforms, including news on the Web, where our standard style is equally important.

Q: How do you decide to change a style entry (like the 2010 change from Web site to website)? What's the process?

A: The AP Stylebook editors – Deputy Managing Editor Sally Jacobsen, Editor at Large Darrell Christian and I – discuss style and usage issues throughout the year and consult with other senior AP editors on potential new entries or amendments of existing entries. We accepted the one-word spelling of website this spring after several years of discussions. Stylebook users, including persistent voices in the AP staff, argued that the popular spelling, website, has overtaken the original term, Web site, which derives from World Wide Web. It was noted that the stylebook's main dictionary reference – Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition – adopted website as its preference. So we became convinced that the time had come to formalize the one-word spelling in the 2010 edition of the AP Stylebook.

Q: What about new entries? What criteria do you use to decide to add something like “unfriend” to the stylebook or “Great Recession?” Who comes up with the new ones?

A: The term “unfriend” was a logical entry in 2010 stylebook's new Social Media Guidelines section, which includes about 50 terms and Instant Message abbreviations ranging from aggregator to LOL to YouTube. Great Recession was added with the advice of AP's business and economics specialists because it is widely used in government, commerce and academia to describe the longest and deepest recession since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The floor is always open to proposals for new terms, tweaks of existing entries or deletions of outdated entries. However, we don't make changes lightly. There has to be an evolution in the language or a clear need for adding or amending terms. Suggestions come from the AP staff, members of the AP news cooperative, journalism teachers and students, public relations professionals and the public. On some issues we seek input from the style specialists of other news organizations.

Q: What are the most common questions about style that you get? Have the kinds of questions changed much over the years? And how often do you get questions?

A: Spelling questions, including compounds and hyphenated words, are among the most frequent questions posed at Ask the Editor, the online stylebook's help site, which I run. A lot of questions concern composition titles, personal titles, capitalization and numerals. Quite a few involve writing-phrasing advice. On average I answer about 35-40 style questions a week at the blog. There's a certain amount of repetition, so I refer some questioners to the site archive for answers. Fresh topics of wide relevance are likely to get prompt attention. I'm not aware of any startling new trends in the types of questions.

Q: How much does feedback matter? I understand you held off on a change in state names and abbreviations because of the response you got to the idea? Tell me how that worked? Will you go back at it (changing state name style) at some point?

A: Feedback is always a consideration for the AP Stylebook editors. We have to accommodate needs of the AP and be aware of our members' views in making stylebook changes. On the proposal to replace state abbreviations in datelines with full spellings, the reaction was a mixture of negative and neutral-to-positive comments from the membership. A number of newspapers

said they would have trouble fitting fully spelled state datelines into narrow columns and they would have to stick with abbreviations. Other members said it wasn't a big deal and they could accommodate the change. At the same time, technical issues emerged as AP looked at modifying computer networks to accommodate the longer datelines. As a result, AP decided to postpone the change to take another look. The logic of the proposal remains unchanged. U.S. state abbreviations aren't widely known internationally. As AP's filing patterns evolve – including direct-filing of U.S. stories with state datelines to overseas subscribers – the idea will be revisited for feasibility. No new date yet.

Q: How many editors make stylebook decisions? And has your recent promotion (to deputy standards editor in 2010) changed your role with the stylebook?

A: The three AP Stylebook editors have the primary responsibility for style decisions. We also consult with other senior AP editors on major changes. We have been working as a style team for three years – the 2010 edition is the third we've handled. Our first joint effort was an A to Z update of the 2008 edition, which required months of deliberations, putting every entry under the microscope for the dozens of changes. The 2009 and 2010 editions have fewer changes but both versions involved a lot of discussions, winnowing, refining and final selections. Regarding my job, style guidance is very much a part of my duties at the AP Standards Center. This includes reminding staffers about changes and encouraging compliance.

Q: How should students learn AP style? And do they really need to know it all or just how to use the book?

A: The way to become knowledgeable about AP style is by reading into the alphabetical entries and practicing the advice in daily journalism. We provide some guidance and instruction online. Go to <http://www.apstylebook.com> ... in the left side, click on Ask the Editor FAQ for my compendium of some basic style points. The 2009 and 2010 stylebooks have a Quick Reference Guide of important terms and page numbers for guidance, a refinement I suggested for highlights. Students should also read into the specialty sections on business, sports, social media, media law, etc. By becoming familiar with the contents, students will know where to look for answers and cross-references. The public site of Ask the Editor – with a week's worth of Q-and-A on style – can also be helpful to students.

Q: Copy editors are often passionate about style. Do you see that passion in the kinds of requests for changes/updates you get?

A: People can get emotional about word usage, writing and grammar. They care about proper English, and generally appreciate having a forum to air their suggestions or complaints. One recent example: A member editor strongly objected to the use of "busted" as a modifier, as in "busted well" used in an AP story about the Gulf oil spill. While we agreed that it's informal and slangy, Webster's sanctions the adjective form. So we expressed sympathy with the viewpoint but said we wouldn't be very successful making it a stylebook exception to the dictionary. Such exceptions take a lot of policing.

Q: What's been the most controversial change you've made in AP Style?

A: Although the change to “website” was widely hailed by AP Stylebook readers, there was considerable criticism of our decision to stick with “the Web” (capped) and “Web page” (two words), just like Webster’s. Perhaps surprisingly, we’ve gotten some criticism at the AP Stylebook Twitter account from “traditionalists” who were disappointed by the change to “website.” The discussion goes on ...

Q: Although broadcast and print styles differ somewhat, do you see them melding more since both are now producing material online?

A: The merger of AP broadcast and printed styles is already far along. The guidance is the same on the essential points.

Sue Burzynski Bullard, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, is on the ACES Executive Committee. Before joining academia in 2007, she spent 30 years as a reporter and editor at a variety of newspapers including 21 years at The Detroit News. E-mail her at sbullard@copydesk.org or follow [@suebb](https://twitter.com/suebb) on Twitter.

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