



ASA Style Guide

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This guide is a reference tool that contains suggestions for writing clearly and effectively. Refer to this guide to identify the manner of expression preferred by the American Subcontractors Association Inc. In general, ASA's preferred manner of expression is set forth in the current edition of the *Associated Press Stylebook*. The reason for this choice is simple: The *Associated Press Stylebook* is widely available and used in the community of professional writers.

ASA staff may borrow a copy of the current *Associated Press Stylebook* from ASA's communications department.

The *ASA Style Guide* expands on the *Associated Press Stylebook* to focus on problems editors and writers commonly encounter when writing for readers who have a construction industry background. This guide attempts to provide consistent solutions to these problems, and to reinforce important points from the *Associated Press Stylebook*. The topics covered herein fall into a multitude of categories: spelling, diction, grammar, legal questions and others. Defer to ASA's style guide wherever there may be an inconsistency with the *Associated Press Stylebook*.

This is a working document. Space has been provided in the right-hand margin of the *ASA Style Guide* for you to note questions or comments.

Diction: Choosing the Right Word

assure vs. ensure vs. insure - To assure is to pledge a guarantee. To ensure is to guarantee. To insure is to guarantee replacement or monetary compensation according to a policy.

because vs. due to - Use “because” to indicate a causal relationship. Use “due to” to indicate a circumstance of credit or owing.

bill vs. law vs. legislation - A “bill” is a legislative proposal that has been introduced but that has not been enacted into law. In the vernacular, “legislation” is the equivalent of a “bill.” A “law” is a bill that has achieved final approval to be part of a legal code.

capital vs. capitol vs. Capitol Hill - A capital is the city where the seat of power is located. A capitol is a building which serves as the seat of government. Use “U.S. Capitol” to refer to the building in Washington, D.C. “Capitol Hill” is the area encompassing the U.S. Capitol and the offices of the House, the Senate, the Library of Congress, and the Supreme Court. Many states also refer to the areas around their capitol buildings as “Capitol Hill.”

currently vs. presently - “Presently” is an adverb that means “in a short time.” It is not synonymous with “currently,” “now” or “at present.”

e.g. vs. i.e. - The expression “e.g.” means “for example.” The expression “i.e.” means “that is.” These expressions must be set off with commas when used in sentences.

enactment vs. passage - “Passage” of a bill means the approval of the bill by a body of legislators so that it may be enacted. “Enactment” means final approval of a bill, usually by the chief executive, to be part of a legal code.

enter into a contract - Use this expression in lieu of “enter in a contract.”

indemnification vs. indemnity - Indemnity is a concept or a state of being, e.g., “indemnity laws.” Indemnification refers to the act of indemnifying, e.g., “Too much indemnification can be bad for business.”

it’s vs. its – It’s is the contraction of “it is.” Its is possessive, as in: “Look at that building. Its walls are crumbling.”

like vs. such as - “Like” indicates similarity. “Such as” introduces an example or series of examples.

news release vs. press release - “Press release” is archaic, referring to the print media. Use the more inclusive “news release” instead.

private work vs. public work vs. public works - Private work is construction funded by private entities. Public work is construction funded by public entities. Public works are the class of construction projects whose main intended users are the public at large, e.g., utilities, highways, bridges, dams.

specialty trade contractor vs. subcontractor – These terms are usually interchangeable. However, in some situations, it is important to differentiate between them, such as when discussing contractual relationships. A subcontractor is a company hired under contract by another company that itself is working under contract. A specialty trade contractor is a company that is hired under contract to perform work in a specialty trade such as woodworking, glazing or roofing. A specialty trade contractor is not necessarily a subcontractor, and a subcontractor is not necessarily a specialty trade contractor.

sub vs. subcontractor - “Sub,” as the colloquial term for “subcontractor,” should not be used in formal writing.

use vs. utilize - “Utilize” is an obsolete term; do not use it. Use “use” or “employ” instead.

Web page vs. Web site - A Web site is a collection of related Web pages. A Web page is one HTML page rendered in a Web browser.

Grammar: Putting Language Together

Commas. Commas are used for clarification and separation. If a comma does not perform either of these functions, it is superfluous. For a simple series in which a final comma does not aid understanding, omit the comma. To connect two simple sentences where a comma would not aid understanding, omit the comma.

Wrong. Take me through the building, and show me the problem.

Right. Take me through the building and show me the problem.

Wrong. We needed cement, gravel, and sand.

Right. We needed cement, gravel and sand.

Wrong. The project involves pouring concrete and remediation.

Right. The project involves pouring concrete, and remediation.

In addition, when referring to a specific day, set the year off by commas before and after. For example:

Wrong. I'm sure that the meeting took place on June 30, 1985 because I was there.

Right. I'm sure that the meeting took place on June 30, 1985, because I was there.

When referring to a month and year only, do not set the year off from the month with a comma, e.g., January 1995.

Conjunctions and splicing. Two independent clauses may be joined by a conjunction, dash or semicolon. Without a conjunction, dash or semicolon, two independent clauses are not properly joined. A comma should not be used to join two independent clauses. This error is known as “splicing” the sentences together.

Wrong. We need a new backhoe, this one is broken.

Right. We need a new backhoe because this one is broken.

Right. We need a new backhoe — this one is broken.

Right. We need a new backhoe; this one is broken.

Dangling modifiers. Sometimes the urge to simplify writing can be taken too far and result in mistakes. For example, one phrase

commonly encountered in writing for construction industry readers is “the general or subcontractor,” which is meant as shorthand for “the general contractor or subcontractor.” The former phrase is incorrect, for there is no term, “contractor,” for the term “general” to modify. Since the reference is missing in such phrases, the modifiers are said to be “dangling.”

Dangling participles. In an attempt to economize words, writers commonly use participial phrases such as “having left the job site” or “knowing that the truck wasn’t ready” within a sentence to modify the subject. For example:

Right. Knowing that the truck wasn’t ready, Sarah decided to ask for a ride.

This method allows the writer to express two ideas in one sentence with relatively few words, instead of having to write two sentences or use more words. However, participial phrases often are incorrectly placed within sentences. While the writers' intentions might be good, the results are sloppy.

Wrong. Knowing that the truck isn’t ready, the truck needs to be fixed.

The error is the implication that the truck does the “knowing” since that’s what “knowing” modifies, which is obviously absurd. In this example, the intended subject doing the “knowing” is simply absent. Because the reference is missing in such phrases, the participles are known as “dangling participles.”

Duration. When referring to a span of time, use a preposition between the two times if the first time is introduced by a preposition. (Think of time as a direction.) If the first time is not introduced by a preposition, do not introduce the second with a preposition.

Wrong. I will be in Bermuda from June 5-10.

Right. I will be in Bermuda from June 5 to June 10.

Wrong. I will be in Bermuda June 5 to June 10.

Right. I will be in Bermuda June 5-10.

He, she and it. “He,” “she,” “him” and “her” refer to individual persons and entities with specific gender identities. “It” never refers to a person but is used to refer to virtually any single genderless entity. “They” and “their” refer to plurals of anyone or anything. If the sentence sounds awkward to the ear, re-write it.

Wrong. When the customer has not finished shopping by closing time, ask him to hurry up.

Right. When the customer has not finished shopping by closing time, ask him or her to hurry up.

Noun-pronoun agreement. In formal writing, pronouns and their antecedents (i.e., the nouns they represent) must agree in number.

Wrong. The company is right to advertise their strengths.

Right. The company is right to advertise its strengths.

Wrong. Flood waters continue to rise, showing how it can pose a danger long after the storm.

Right. Flood waters continue to rise, showing how they can pose a danger long after the storm.

Parallel sentence structure. When introducing a series of like terms or phrases in the same sentence, each element should be introduced in syntactically the same manner. For example, if one element starts with a noun, the others should start with nouns too. This method is not only simpler and more elegant — it also helps you to avoid grammatical errors.

Wrong. Terence brought a hardhat, a toolbox, and brought his lunch.

Right. Terence brought a hardhat, a toolbox and his lunch.

Wrong. I was trying to teach everyone about safety, pick up some tips, and to save some money.

Right. I was trying to teach everyone about safety, to pick up some tips, and to save some money.

Passive voice. The active voice is generally preferred over the passive voice. The passive voice makes the object of the verb's action the subject of the sentence. For example, "I was being hit by the ball" puts in the passive voice the sentence, "The ball was hitting me." Use the passive voice only when you need to do so for clarification or emphasis. For example, "It was I, not James, who was being hit by the ball."

Wrong. The legislator was called by ASA staff regarding the language in the bill.

Right. ASA staff called the legislator regarding the language in the bill.

Wrong. The law was determined by the court to be an infringement on constitutionally protected rights.

Right. The court determined that the law was an infringement on constitutionally protected rights.

Quotation marks. The quotation mark sets a phrase off from the rest of the sentence to indicate special meaning. Usually, the quotation mark is used once to introduce and once to indicate completion of the title of a speech or workshop or short document, or of passages that are spoken or cited from another text. Do not use quotation marks around book titles or titles of legislation.

Use a comma followed by a quotation mark to introduce one phrase or sentence. Use a colon instead of a comma to introduce several sentences that are within the same quotation marks.

Normally, the opening quotation mark is preceded by a comma or colon followed by one space. The main exception to this method is reference to an essential phrase. An essential phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence. If you take the phrase out, the sentence either makes no sense or its meaning is changed.

Wrong. My favorite speech is, “I am a Berliner,” by John F. Kennedy.

Right. My favorite speech is “I am a Berliner” by John F. Kennedy.

Note that no closing comma is required for the essential phrase.

The final punctuation of a sentence that ends with a quotation is placed, with very few exceptions, inside the closing quotation mark.

Wrong. The foreman unequivocally stated, “The plans are defective”.

Right. The foreman unequivocally stated, "The plans are defective.”

Three notable exceptions to this rule are Web site addresses, citations of contract language, and citations of language taken from legislation. The final punctuation of the sentence may be placed outside of the closing quotation mark to avoid the implication that the punctuation exists in the Web site address or contract or legislation. The reason for the exceptions is simple. In these contexts, the punctuation perceived by the reader can change the Web site address or the meaning of the contract or legislation.

When quoted material from a single source runs between paragraphs, the closing quotation mark should be omitted except on the last sentence of quoted material.

Subject-verb agreement. Pay close attention to the agreement of the verb and the subject. In American English, as opposed to British English, very few subjects are singular in form that take plural verb forms.

Wrong. The board of directors are contemplating a policy change.

Right. The board of directors is contemplating a policy change.

When the subject contains singular and plural nouns, the verb should agree with the noun closest to it. If the sentence sounds awkward, re-write it.

Wrong. Samuel and the horses is in the field.

Right. Samuel and the horses are in the field.

Right. Samuel is in the field and the horses are in the field.

Verb tenses. Pay close attention to verb tenses. For example, it is incorrect to report that a bill “will” make changes unless enactment is a foregone conclusion.

Spelling, Abbreviations and Acronyms

Use acronyms sparingly to avoid “alphabet soup.” Spell out the full name of the entity on first reference and include the acronym in parentheses after the first reference. In ASA and FASA periodicals regularly distributed to ASA members and chapters, the acronyms ASA and FASA may be used without spelling out the first reference. Use the acronym without parentheses thereafter in the text. Most acronyms do not use periods.

An abbreviated term needs to be spelled out before using the abbreviation, with very few exceptions. Most abbreviations use periods.

the AAA - Acronym for the American Arbitration Association. Retain the “the.”

AC - Abbreviation of “Associate Constructor,” a professional designation of the American Institute of Constructors Constructor Certification Commission. Do not use periods.

ADR - Abbreviation of “alternative dispute resolution.” Do not use periods.

AGC - Acronym for “Associated General Contractors,” as in AGC of America or AGC of the Carolinas.

AGC/ASA/ASC Tripartite Meeting

ASA - Acronym for the American Subcontractors Association Inc. Never use “ASA National.” For example: “ASA supports legislation prohibiting bid shopping on federal projects.” Never use “the ASA” except when the term “ASA” is used as a modifier. For example: “The ASA headquarters building is located at 1004 Duke Street.”

ASA allied association

ASA auxiliary

the ASA Business Forum & Convention 20xx

ASA chapter - Do not capitalize “chapter” except when it is used as part of the chapter’s formal name. When referring to chapters, use only their official names. These can be found in the ASA database.

the ASA Leadership Forum 20xx

ASA-PAC - Acronym for the ASA-Political Action Committee.

ASAtoday

ASAdvantage

attorney fees - not attorney's fees.

bid listing - Hyphenate only when used as an adjective.

bid shopping - Hyphenate only when used as an adjective.

BPI - Abbreviation meaning "business practices interchange." Not identical to the NBPI. Do not use periods.

the Construction Industry Legislative Institute 20xx

constructor

The Contractor's Compass

the Contractors' Knowledge Network

the Contractors' Knowledge Depot

the Contractors' Knowledge Quest

the Cornerstone Club

the Corps - vernacular for the Army Corps of Engineers. Spell out Army Corps of Engineers on first reference.

CPC - Abbreviation of Certified Professional Constructor, a professional designation of the American Institute of Constructors Constructor Certification Commission. Do not use periods.

design-bid-build - Not "design/bid/build."

design-build - Not "design/build."

DoD - Acronym for the U.S. Department of Defense.

DOT - Acronym for “department of transportation.” Use “U.S. DOT” for the first reference to the federal agency. Use state names for state/local agencies, e.g., “Maryland DOT.”

DRB - Abbreviation of “dispute review board.”

E.D. - Abbreviation of “executive director.”

Executive Directors’ Council

e-mail - In formal writing, the hyphen is required.

FASA - Acronym for the Foundation of the American Subcontractors Association Inc.

Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR)

Never “Federal Acquisition Regulations” or “FARs.”

Gov. - Abbreviation of “governor” before a proper name. Use on first reference only as part of a formal title.

GSA - Acronym for the U.S. General Services Administration.

hold harmless - Hyphenate only when this term is used as an adjective.

job site - The physical location at which construction is performed. The adjective is “jobsite.”

log in - “Log in” is a verb. “Login” is an adjective, e.g., “a login window.”

material supplier - Not “materials supplier.”

mechanic’s lien

mechanic’s liens

members-only section

NBPI - Acronym for the National Business Practices Interchange.

nonmember

nonprofit

Officers' Council

online - Not "on line" or "on-line."

on-site - An adjective meaning "at the job site."

OSHA - Acronym for the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

punch list - An enumeration of tasks to be performed as a condition of final payment. The adjective is "punchlist."

Rep. - Abbreviation of "representative" before a proper name. Use on first reference only as part of a formal title.

RFI - Request for information. No need to spell this term out.

RFP - Request for proposal. No need to spell this term out.

Sen. - Abbreviation of "senator" before a proper name. Use on first reference only as part of a formal title.

SLDF - Acronym for the Subcontractors Legal Defense Fund.

STRAP - Acronym for Subcontractors Transfer of Risk Action Plan

SubLocate

Watt - Use an upper-case "W" when abbreviating for the unit of energy

Web site - The "w" is always capitalized.

work-hours - Not "man-hours."

workers' compensation

Writing for Periodicals: Conventions To Follow

Administration. Always put this term in lower case when referring to a presidential administration.

Attribution. All writing that is taken from another text or spoken by a person should be clearly attributed to that text or person, with one exception. Text passages of more than two or three lines may raise copyright concerns. [See the copyright entry in the legal section of the *Associated Press Stylebook*.] Material provided through news releases is part of the public domain and its authorship need not be credited.

Bill numbers. Abbreviate terms according to applicable custom when citing a bill by number. Periods usually are required in the abbreviated form. For example, with federal legislation, write “The House of Representatives is not likely to act on H.R. 1 this year” and “Several members of the Senate are concerned about provisions in S. 100.”

Committees and task forces. Capitalize “committee” or “task force” only when used as part of a formal committee or task force name.

Company department names. Company department names should be written in the lower case.

Company names. When mentioning a company or company branch in a story, provide the city and state. Do not put a comma before corporate suffixes such as “Inc.,” “Co.” or “Corp.”

Contracts. Cite the whole document name in quotation marks, followed by the document number and version in parentheses, where applicable.

Dashes. Put one space before and one space after a dash, except when the dash is used to indicate items in a list.

Decades. Do not use an apostrophe when indicating decades by numerals, e.g., 1980s, the 80s.

Ellipsis. Put one space before and one space after an ellipsis (...).

Emphasis. For aesthetic reasons, italicize words to give them emphasis rather than underlining them.

Federal. Do not capitalize this term when referring to agencies or activities relating to the United States, e.g., “I believe that federal laws on procurement need to be reformed.”

Footnote style. Put all footnote references at the end of the story. Include, in order: the author’s/editor’s last name, followed by a comma and space; the author’s/editor’s first name, followed by a comma and space; article, chapter or paper title (in quotations marks with the comma inside), followed by a space; book or magazine title (in italics), followed by a space; publisher, volume and issue number, and year of publication (all together in parentheses, separated by commas), followed by a comma and space; and the page number(s). For example: Smith, Jane, “Indemnity and the Subcontractor,” *The Contractor’s Compass* (Naylor Publications, Vol. 2, No. 3, 2003), p. 15.

Foreign phrases. Italicize foreign phrases that are spelled out.

Headlines. Do not use the ‘all caps’ style in headlines. In general, capitalize the initial letters of all significant words and any other words that are over three letters long. Capitalize the initial letter of ‘to’ when it is part of the verb, e.g., ‘Soldiers Urged To Report to Duty.’ Do not stack headlines more than three lines.

Indentation. For aesthetic reasons, do not indent the first paragraph of a story.

Legal case names. Italicize names of legal cases. Indicate the court of jurisdiction and include case numbers.

Legislature. Capitalize when referring to a specific state legislature. Put in the lower case otherwise.

Member of Congress. Do not capitalize “member” except at the beginning of a sentence. After the first reference to the member, it is acceptable to refer to him or her by his or her last name only.

Months. When referring to a specific day, abbreviate Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov. and Dec. For example, say, “Jan. 4, 1996,” not “January 4, 1996.”

Numbers. Spell out numbers below 10 and any number that starts a sentence. Use numerals otherwise. Always use numerals for percentages. Spell out “percent” in formal, non-technical writing rather than using the percentage symbol (%).

Party affiliation. When referring to elected officials, include party affiliation (if any) followed by state, joined by a hyphen. For state and local officials, include district numbers after the state. Use unmodified numerals for district numbers. Use state name abbreviations to indicate the state, and “D,” “I” and “R” for “Democrat,” “Independent,” and “Republican,” respectively. Other parties will be decided on a case-by-case basis. Offset the party and state (and district number, if applicable) with commas, not parentheses.

Wrong. Council Chair Smith (I-VA-7th) said that the funding was not sufficient.

Right. Council Chair Smith, I-Va.-7, said that the funding was not sufficient.

Quotes from ASA members. All quotes from ASA members should be approved by the quoted members in advance of publication.

States. Do not capitalize “state” when used as an adjective referring to one of the United States. For example, say: “We asked for clarification from state agencies.” Do not capitalize “state” when it is used as part of a state name, e.g., “New York state.” Abbreviate states according to the *AP Stylebook* entry for state names. The following state names are never abbreviated: Alaska, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa, Maine, Ohio, Texas and Utah.

Suffixes. Do not add a comma before a suffix such as “Jr.” or “Sr.”

Telephone numbers. Use parentheses for area codes in formal writing. The exceptions are 800 and 888 numbers, which should start with 1 and for which hyphens should be used to join the number strings, e.g., 1-888-374-3133.

Titles. In general, job titles are written in the lower case. The exception is when the title appears directly before a proper name, in which case the title should be written upper-case. For example: “ASA Director of Marketing Jane Doe asked for the prospect list” but “Jane Doe, ASA’s marketing director, asked for the prospect list.”

Italicize book, magazine and other periodical titles but do not use quotation marks. For example: “I very much enjoyed reading *Fundamentals of Fair Subcontracts*.” Do not capitalize the word

“magazine” unless it is part of the magazine title. For example:
“*Time* magazine’s lead story was a hit.”

United States. Abbreviate with periods when used as an adjective; spell out otherwise.

Web site addresses and line breaks. For Web site addresses that run over a line, make the line break before the forward slash or period and start with the forward slash or period on the next line. Use the form “www.asaonline.com” when referring to a Web site; the “<http://>” protocol is assumed. When using another protocol, make it explicit, as in “<ftp://asaonline.com>”.

Legal

Copyright. See the discussion of copyright in the current *Associated Press Stylebook*, available from the communications department.

Libel and Slander. Be aware of how your words could impact the reputation of others. See the discussion of libel in the current *Associated Press Stylebook*, available from the communications department.

Trademarks. Identify all trademarks with trademark symbols. The Web site of the International Trademark Association (www.inta.org) is a useful reference.

Other Writing Suggestions

- Write in a concise and hard-hitting style. Pay special attention to sentence length. Shorter, focused sentences generally have greater impact than long, rambling ones.
- Double-check the spelling of proper names, both of individuals and of organizations.
- Use quotes to help personalize the story.
- Do use computer programs to check for spelling and grammatical errors.
- Do not rely on computer programs to catch spelling or grammatical errors. They will not catch them all.
- When writing, keep in mind ASA's mission: "ASA is comprised of professional constructors, suppliers and service providers representing the construction industry through advocacy, leadership, education and networking." All writing should reflect ASA's central role in representing the construction industry.
- When mentioning a court ruling, legislation or other item of significance for the first time, explain the reasons why it is important.
- Begin with the most important information and end with the details of lesser importance. Some readers simply scan the first portion of articles.
- Focus on actions and results, and minimize references to process in the absence of results. For example, describe an issue that a chapter is addressing rather than just the fact that the chapter held a meeting where the issue was discussed.
- Remember that facts are *reported*, whereas judgments belong in *editorials* or are *attributed*.
- Give readers the sense of a personal stake in an article whenever possible.