

## With The Associated Press Stylebook, Style Is Everything

By Ellen Blum Barish (MSJ84)

Of the many tools Medill students learn to use for life as a journalist, “The Associated Press Stylebook” is likely to be the most important — and most infuriating.

Newcomers are often bewildered by the book’s archaic organizational titles. They can be confounded by “composition titles” rather than “book or TV titles”; daunted by “dimensions” rather than “numbers”; frazzled by fractions and weights and measures; and perplexed by why “pope” is *not* capitalized but Popsicle is.

And yet no other style manual is updated as often as AP — a necessary process to reflect a changing world at a glance.

Where else can you find a compilation of news-making events collected since the 1950s from Sputnik to SARS?

With so many details and expectations packed into it, it’s no wonder that a student’s relationship with this bible of newsprint journalism can look a lot like a hate/love relationship.

“Using the stylebook takes discipline and some getting used to,” said Richard Roth, senior associate dean and professor, who teaches Associated Press style to incoming freshmen. “I ask students to think of it as a sweeping history lesson, a fast way to learn about Legionnaires’ Disease or ICBMs (intercontinental ballistic missiles).”

First published as a 62-page stylebook (spelled with two words in 1953) for editors whose job was to format and conform the all-capitalized stories coming in on the AP news wires, the stylebook quickly

became *the* guide.

Over the last 53 years, the stylebook’s mission has been to “provide forms for a *uniform* presentation of the printed word, and to standardize usages that included guidelines on capitalization, abbreviation, punctuation, numerals and spelling,” said Norm Goldstein, Associated Press editor since 1963, who became editor of the stylebook in the mid-1980s.

The idea: To keep nothing from distracting the reader from finishing a story that may very well have taken 10 hours or even 10 months to report and write in all kinds of political or environmental climates.

“Most of the other stylebooks are based on AP style but have local customization,” Goldstein observed, citing U.S. News & World Report and the St. Petersburg Times. Courtesy titles, for example, are used in The New York Times but not in AP style. AP also uses periods and abbreviations for FBI and courtesy title such as Mr. and Mrs.

How does AP style put everyone

### AP Style Points

- used to be a style book and is now a stylebook
- organized by category until 1977, when it was reorganized alphabetically
- prints between 40,000–50,000 copies (spiral-bound version)
- 2 million copies sold
- spiral-bound edition is updated every year
- trade edition is updated every other year in May
- online stylebook is constantly updated, whenever warranted
- 2004 edition published by Basic Books (previously published by Addison-Wesley and Perseus)

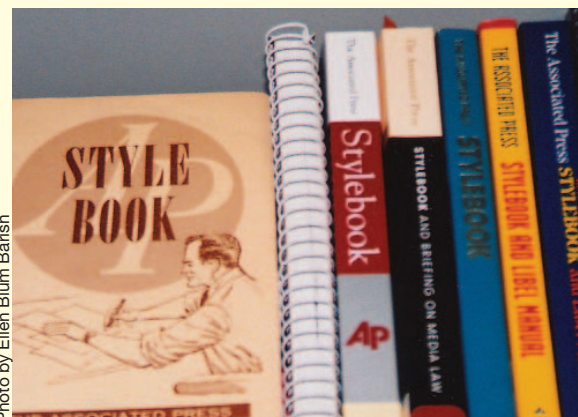


Photo by Ellen Blum Barish

on the same page when it comes to editing style?

Before changes are made to AP style thousands of AP wire member editors across the country must agree to a process Goldstein called “an exercise in consensus building by researching manuals, dictionaries and other publications.” Goldstein said he fields squabbles, suggestions and complaints from lay readers as well as professional editors. As point man, or “funnel” as he puts it, he answers each one.

Out of these, new entries are decided and listed in the opening pages under “What’s New?”

Among the new words added in 2006, the most recently published version, are *Doctors Without Borders*; *Fatah*; *Game Boy*; and *Lycra*.

But these changes barely compare with the ones Goldstein saw during the 1970s, beginning with the women’s movement.

“We went through the whole book again and again to balance the ‘he’ and ‘she’ pronouns and gender in style examples,” he said.

Goldstein and the AP editors went through the same process to search for the most common usage for terms such as African-American as well as American Indian, gay and lesbian.

Being editor of one of the most-used references in newspaper journalism is a job Goldstein likes a whole lot. To those of us who rely on him and the guide, he’s known as “Mr. AP.”

“On a few occasions,” wrote copy chief Erika Ehmsen (MSJ97), “I’ve picked up the phone and called the AP’s main bureau in New York, asking to be transferred to the style desk. On one of these fact-finding missions, stylebook editor and grammar guru Norman Goldstein himself answered. My question, for a sidewalk-cafe metaphor, was how to punctuate that famous Parisian avenue. Not having the answer at his fingertips, Norm took down my e-mail address and promised to contact me. Within 20 minutes, I had this response in my inbox:

*AP spells it Champs-Elysees.*

*The AP*

“I had to laugh. Yes, instead of his name, Norm had signed it ‘The AP.’ But if you’re talking about the stylebook, I guess you could say he’s it.”

Goldstein said he signs e-mails this way because he wants editors to understand that his responses are not individual decisions but company-wide policy.

But, in an editorial panic moment, he is still the “go to” guy.

This well-thumbed reference is the one most likely to be packed, shelved and consulted after a student leaves campus, and a leaning toward hate may tip to love. “The dense, numerically organized listings in University of Chicago Style make me miss the comparative ease of the AP Stylebook, where short, specific entries are listed alphabetically,” offered Ehmsen whose office requires it. “So I sometimes cheat on Chicago with AP.”

A reference book so relied on that owners are reluctant to give it up is a publishing dream for most editors, but not for the AP Stylebook. If the edition sitting on your bookshelf is pre-2004, get with it. Splurge! Stay in style and get yourself a 2006 version. **M**