Webster's Standard American Style Manual

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Webster's
Standard American
Style Manual

A Merriam-Webster®

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Preface

Webster's Standard American Style Manual is designed to be a practical guide to the conventions of the English language in its written form. Writers and editors generally use the word *style* to refer to these conventions, which include such day-to-day matters as punctuating sentences, capitalizing names and terms, using italics or underlining, spelling compound words and the plural and possessive forms of words, and deciding when to use abbreviations and numerals. The term *style* is also used to describe the conventions that writers and editors follow in carrying out more specialized tasks, such as copyediting mathematical and scientific copy, writing bibliographies and footnotes, and designing tables and indexes.

This book offers information and advice across this entire range of topics as well as on a selection of other editing- and publishing-related topics. For each topic, the manual offers concise and comprehensive descriptions of the rules and conventions that writers and editors have developed for themselves to help them prepare copy that is clear, consistent, and attractive. Where the rules and conventions have exceptions, variations, and fine points that readers need to know of, these are also presented.

The manual is divided into 13 chapters, each of which discusses in detail one aspect of style or a style-related topic. Each chapter is introduced by its own table of contents, listing all of the major sections in the chapter and the number of the page on which each section begins. Directional cross-references are placed throughout the text to guide the reader from one subject to a related subject. Cross-references usually refer the reader either to a major section of a chapter or to a specific page or range of pages within a chapter. In Chapters 1 through 5, which describe the most basic aspects of style, each paragraph describes a single point of style and is designated with a boldface numeral; hence, cross-references to points of style within these chapters often include a specific paragraph number.

In many cases, the styling conventions discussed in this book offer choices rather than a single rule, as over the years writers and editors have developed differing sets of rules to guide them in matters of style. One writer may favor a particular way of deciding when to use numerals and when to spell out numbers or how to form possessives of proper names ending in *s*, while another writer may favor other ways. Neither of these writers is necessarily wrong; each may simply be following a different style.

There are, of course, limits on the range of acceptable styles available to writers. In punctuating a list such as "license, title, and taxes," writers are often free to choose between a style that calls for placing a comma before *and* and a style that calls for omitting that comma. However, short of rewording the list, there is no practical alternative to using the other comma. One either uses it or risks confusing the reader. Moreover, most writers and editors try to be consistent in the choices they make regarding style rules. In other words, having decided on one page to use the comma before *and,* writers and editors try to use that comma for all other similar lists in the text they are working on.

Style manuals are designed to meet this need of writers and editors to choose acceptable and consistent styling practices. Writers know that as long as they consult a reputable style manual the stylings they choose will be among the acceptable ones and that as long as they always consult the same manual the choices they make are more likely to be consistent.

Most style manuals are written by editors working for a particular publication or at a particular publishing house, and they are usually written to describe the style rules in effect for that publication or publishing house. Many of today's best-known style manuals began as this sort of in-house set of style rules. Most of them have been revised and expanded to meet the needs of writers and editors in general, and some even describe styling alternatives that are not the preferred style of that publication or house; however, most style manuals that originated as in-house manuals retain the distinctive flavor of their house.

Like the style manuals just described, *Webster's Standard American Style Manual* was written and edited by working editors, the editors at Merriam-Webster Inc., and it reflects their experience in writing and editing for publication. However, the styling conventions described in this book are by no means meant to be exhaustive of or limited to the style rules followed in Merriam-Webster® publications. Instead this manual is based on Merriam-Webster's continuous study of the ways that Americans use their language. It draws on our extensive citation files, which include over 13 million examples of English words used in context gathered from books by respected authors, major metropolitan newspapers, and widely circulated general-interest magazines. In addition, a special reading-and-marking program for this book produced citations focusing on styling conventions followed in newsletters, annual reports, and special mailings by corporations and associations. Working from these sources, Merriam-Webster editors were able to establish which styling conventions are most commonly followed in standard American prose. This book records those results and constitutes, so far as we know, the first commercial attempt to develop a major style manual by means of the methods of descriptive lexicography that are the hallmark of this company's dictionaries.

Based as it is on this descriptive method, the manual recognizes both the consensus and the variety that are apparent in standard American style. The consensus in this book is recorded with simple descriptive statements, such as "A period terminates a sentence or a sentence fragment that is neither interrogative nor exclamatory."

In some cases, these statements have to be qualified, as in "The abbreviations A.D. and B.C. are usually styled in typeset matter as punctuated, unspaced, small capitals. . . ." The term *usually* is used throughout this manual to indicate that we have evidence that some writers and editors follow a different styling practice than the one we are describing. However, *usually* appears only in statements describing a styling practice

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that is clearly the prevalent practice. Hence, the writer who prefers AD or A.D. or AD knows that he or she is departing from the prevalent style but that such departures are not unprecedented in standard practice.

In describing styling practices that are clearly not prevalent, we have used the word *sometimes* to qualify the descriptive statement, as in "Commas are sometimes used to separate main clauses that are not joined by conjunctions." In most cases, a descriptive statement qualified with *sometimes* is also accompanied by an additional explanation that tells the reader what are the circumstances under which this styling is most likely to occur and what are the common alternatives to this styling. In the case of the example just cited, the reader is told that this styling is likely to be used if the main clauses are short and feature obvious parallelism. The reader is also told that using a comma to join clauses that are not short or obviously parallel is usually considered an error, that most writers avoid it, and that clauses not joined by conjunctions are usually separated with a semicolon.

The qualifiers *often* and *frequently* are used throughout the manual without meaning to suggest anything about the prevalence of the styling practice being described except that it is not universally followed. In saying, for instance, that "a comma is often used to set off the word *Incorporated* or the abbreviation *Inc.* from the rest of a corporate name; however, many companies elect to omit this comma from their names," we are not saying whether most companies do or do not favor using a comma in this position. We are saying that both practices are so well-established within standard style that their relative frequency is fundamentally irrelevant.

Finally, some styling practices raise questions that demand explanations that go beyond the use of a simple qualifier. In these cases we have appended a note to the description. Notes are introduced by the all-capitalized designation "NOTE," and they serve to explain, in as much detail as needed, variations, exceptions, and fine points that relate to or qualify the descriptive statement that precedes them.

The devices explained above are most in evidence in the first five chapters, which cover the most basic aspects of style. However, the approach taken in the first five chapters carries through the rest of the chapters even as they adopt a more discursive and less rigorous tone. Throughout these later chapters, we continue to describe both consensus and variety and to offer whatever additional information we can to help readers choose among alternatives when alternatives are available. This approach is certainly in evidence in Chapters 6 through 10, which describe the conventions followed in more specialized styling situations, such as presenting extended quotations or writing footnotes and bibliographies. The reader will encounter a slightly different flavor in Chapters 11, 12, and 13, as these chapters take up topics such as proofreading and typography which are not really questions of style but which are nevertheless of interest to many writers and editors.

Like all Merriam-Webster® publications, this manual is a product of the efforts of the entire editorial department. In addition to the people whose names are listed below, each member of this department has made a contribution to this book in some way—by offering suggestions during the planning stages of the book, by reviewing portions of the manuscript or responding to specific questions raised by the writers and editors of the book, or by contributing citational evidence that might otherwise have been missed. Writers and editors who assisted in preparing copy for this book include Madeline L. Novak and Stephen J. Perrault, Assistant Editors; Julie A. Collier and Kathleen M. Doherty, Associate Editors; James G. Lowe, Senior Editor; and Coleen K. Withgott, a free-lance colleague of this department. Proofreading was done by Kara L. Puskey, Editorial Assistant, and Peter D. Haraty, Daniel J. Hopkins, Madeline L. Novak, and Stephen J. Perrault, Assistant Editors, all of whom went beyond the strict call of duty to make good suggestions for improving the text. Manuscript typing was done by Helene Gingold, Department Secretary, and by Georgette B. Boucher and Barbara A. Winkler; other kinds of invaluable assistance were provided by Gloria J. Afflitto, Head of the Typing Room, and Ruth W. Gaines, Senior General Clerk. E. Ward Gilman, Senior Editor and Supervisor of Defining, provided expert copyreading and masterly rewriting of large portions of Chapters 1 through 4. Frederick C. Mish, Editorial Director, reviewed the entire manuscript, offered many excellent suggestions, and provided much support and wise counsel that were crucial to the successful completion of this project. Finally, while the colophon at the back of this book acknowledges the contributions of our typesetter and printer, special mention should be made of Carmen Vaccarelli of P&M Typesetting, whose careful attention and good judgment contributed greatly to the appearance of this book.

John M. Mors
Editor

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Chapter 1

Punctuation

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Punctuation marks are used in the English writing system to help clarify the structure and meaning of sentences. To some degree, they achieve this end by corresponding to certain elements of the spoken language, such as pitch, volume, pause, and stress. To an even greater degree, however, punctuation marks serve to clarify structure and meaning by virtue of the fact that they conventionally accompany certain grammatical elements in a sentence, no matter how those elements might be spoken. In many cases, the relationship between punctuation and grammatical structure is such that the choice of which mark of punctuation to use in a sentence is clear and unambiguous. In other cases, however, the structure of a sentence may be such that it allows for several patterns of punctuation. In cases like these, varying notions of correctness have grown up, and two writers might, with equal correctness and with equal clarity, punctuate the same sentence quite differently.

This chapter is designed to help writers and editors make decisions about which mark of punctuation to use. In situations where more than

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one pattern of punctuation may be used, each is explained; if there are reasons to prefer one over another, the reasons are presented. However, even after having read this chapter, writers and editors will find that they still encounter questions requiring them to exercise their judgment and taste.

The descriptions in this chapter focus on the ways in which punctuation marks are used to convey grammatical structure. The chapter does not explain in any detailed way the use of some punctuation marks to style individual words and compounds. Specifically, this chapter does not discuss the use of quotation marks to style titles and other kinds of proper nouns, the use of apostrophes to form plurals and possessives, the use of hyphens to form compounds, or the use of periods to punctuate abbreviations. For a discussion of these topics, see Chapter 2, "Capitals, Italics, and Quotation Marks"; Chapter 3, "Plurals, Possessives, and Compounds"; and Chapter 4, "Abbreviations."

General Principles

In addition to the rules that have been developed for individual marks of punctuation, there are also conventions and principles that apply to marks of punctuation in general, and these are explained in the paragraphs that follow.

Open and Close Punctuation

Two terms frequently used to describe patterns of punctuation, especially in regard to commas, are *open* and *close*. An open punctuation pattern is one in which commas and other marks of punctuation are used sparingly, usually only to separate major syntactical units, such as main clauses, or to prevent misreading. A close punctuation pattern, on the other hand, makes liberal use of punctuation marks, often putting one wherever the grammatical structure of the sentence will allow it. Close punctuation is often considered old-fashioned, and open punctuation more modern; however, contemporary writing displays a wide range of practices in regard to commas, and some grammatical constructions are still punctuated in ways traditionally associated with close punctuation (see paragraphs 8 and 22 under Comma in this chapter).

Multiple Punctuation

The term ***multiple punctuation*** describes the use of two or more marks of punctuation following the same word in a sentence. A conventional rule says that multiple punctuation is to be avoided except in cases involving brackets, parentheses, quotation marks, and sometimes dashes. Unfortunately, it is not possible to formulate any simple general instructions that would allow writers and editors to apply this rule. This book addresses the question of multiple punctuation by including a section entitled "With

Other Marks of Punctuation" at the end of the treatment of each mark of punctuation for which there is a specific convention regarding multiple punctuation.

Boldface and Italic Punctuation

In general, marks of punctuation are set in the same typeface (lightface or boldface, italic or roman) as the word that precedes them, but most writers and editors allow themselves a number of exceptions to this rule. Brackets and parentheses are nearly always set in the font of the surrounding text, usually lightface roman, regardless of the text they enclose. Quotation marks are usually handled in the same manner; however, if the text they enclose is entirely in a contrasting typeface, they are set in a typeface to match. Some writers and editors base decisions regarding the typeface of exclamation points and question marks on the context in which they are used. If the exclamation point or question mark is clearly associated with the word or words that precede it, it is set in a matching typeface. If, on the other hand, it punctuates the sentence as a whole, it is set in the typeface of the sentence.

> **Summary:** Recently completed surveys confirm the theory that . . .
>
> You did *that!*
>
> We were talking with the author of the book *Who Did That?*
>
> Have you seen the latest issue of *Saturday Review*?

Spacing

The conventions regarding the amount of space that precedes or follows a mark of punctuation vary from mark to mark. In general, the usual spacing around each mark of punctuation should be clear from the example sentences included for each mark of punctuation. In cases where additional explanation is needed, it is included at the end of the discussion, often under the heading "Spacing."

Ampersand

An ampersand is typically written &, although it has other forms, as *&*, *&*, and &. The character represents the word *and*; its function is to replace the word when a shorter form is desirable. However, the ampersand is an acceptable substitute for *and* only in a few constructions.

1. The ampersand is used in the names of companies but not in the names of agencies that are part of the federal government.

   American Telephone & Telegraph Co.
   Gulf & Western Corporation
   Occupational Safety and Health Administration
   Securities and Exchange Commission

NOTE: In styling corporate names, writers and editors often try to reproduce the form of the name preferred by the company (taken from an annual report or company letterhead). However, this information may not be available and, even if it is available, following the different preferences of different companies can lead to apparent inconsistencies in the text. Publications that include very many corporate names usually choose one styling, usually the one with the ampersand, and use it in all corporate names that include *and*.

2. Ampersands are frequently used in abbreviations. Style varies regarding the spacing around the ampersand. Publications that make heavy use of abbreviations, such as business or technical publications, most often omit the spaces. In general-interest publications, both the spaced and the unspaced stylings are common.

   The R&D budget looks adequate for the next fiscal year.
   Apply for a loan at your bank or S & L.

3. The ampersand is often used in cases where a condensed text is necessary, as in tabular material. While bibliographies, indexes, and most other listings use *and*, some systems of parenthetical documentation do use the ampersand. For more on parenthetical documentation, see Chapter 8, "Notes and Documentation of Sources."

   (Carter, Good & Robertson 1984)

4. When an ampersand is used between the last two elements in a series, the comma is omitted.

   the law firm of Shilliday, Fraser & French

Apostrophe

1. The apostrophe is used to indicate the possessive case of nouns and indefinite pronouns. For details regarding this use, see the section on Possessives, beginning on page 79, in Chapter 3, "Plurals, Possessives, and Compounds."
2. Apostrophes are sometimes used to form plurals of letters, numerals, abbreviations, symbols, and words referred to as words. For details regarding this use, see the section on Plurals, beginning on page 74 in Chapter 3, "Plurals, Possessives, and Compounds."
3. Apostrophes mark omissions in contractions made of two or more words that are pronounced as one word.

   didn't   you're   o'clock   shouldn't've

4. The apostrophe is used to indicate that letters have been intentionally omitted from the spelling of a word in order to reproduce a per-

ceived pronunciation or to give a highly informal flavor to a piece of writing.

"Head back to N'Orleans," the man said.

Get 'em while they're hot.

dancin' till three

NOTE: Sometimes words are so consistently spelled with an apostrophe that the spelling with the apostrophe becomes an accepted variant.

fo'c'sle for *forecastle*
bos'n for *boatswain*
rock 'n' roll for *rock and roll*

5. Apostrophes mark the omission of numerals.

class of '86 politics in the '80s

NOTE: Writers who use the apostrophe for styling the plurals of words expressed in numerals usually avoid the use of the apostrophe illustrated in the second example above. Either they omit the apostrophe that stands for the missing figures, or they spell the word out.

80's *or* eighties *but not* '80's

6. Apostrophes are used to produce the inflected forms of verbs that are made of numerals or individually pronounced letters. Hyphens are sometimes used for this purpose also.

86'ed our proposal
OK'ing the manuscript
TKO'd his opponent

7. An apostrophe is often used to add an *-er* ending to an abbreviation, especially if some confusion might result from its absence. Hyphens are sometimes used for this purpose also. If no confusion is likely, the apostrophe is usually omitted.

4-H'er AA'er CBer DXer

8. The use of apostrophes to form abbreviations (as *ass'n* for *association* or *sec'y* for *secretary*) is avoided in most formal writing.

Brackets

Brackets work like parentheses to set off inserted material, but their functions are more specialized. Several of their principal uses occur with quoted material, as illustrated below. For other aspects of styling quotations, see Chapter 7, "The Treatment of Quotations."

With Editorial Insertions

1. Brackets enclose editorial comments, corrections, clarifications, or other material inserted into a text, especially into quoted matter.

> "Remember, this was the first time since it became law that the Twenty-first Amendment [outlining procedures for the replacement of a dead or incapacitated President or Vice President] had been invoked."
>
> "But there's one thing to be said for it [his apprenticeship with Samuels]: it started me thinking about architecture in a new way."
>
> He wrote, "I am just as cheerful as when you was [sic] here."

NOTE: While the text into which such editorial insertions are made is almost always quoted material, they are sometimes also used in nonquoted material, particularly in cases where an editor wishes to add material to an author's text without disturbing the author's original wording.

> Furthermore the Committee anticipates additional expenses in the coming fiscal year [October 1985–September 1986] and seeks revenues to meet these expenses.

2. Brackets set off insertions that supply missing letters.

> "If you can't persuade D[israeli], I'm sure no one can."

3. Brackets enclose insertions that take the place of words or phrases that were used in the original version of a quoted passage.

> The report, entitled "A Decade of Progress," begins with a short message from President Stevens in which she notes that "the loving portraits and revealing accounts of [this report] are not intended to constitute a complete history of the decade. . . . Rather [they] impart the flavor of the events, developments, and achievements of this vibrant period."

4. Brackets enclose insertions that slightly alter the form of a word used in an original text.

> The magazine reported that thousands of the country's children were "go[ing] to bed hungry every night."

5. Brackets are used to indicate that the capitalization or typeface of the original passage has been altered in some way.

> As we point out on page 164, "The length of a quotation usually determines whether it is run into the text or set as a block quotation . . . . [L]ength can be assessed in terms of number of words, the number of typewritten or typeset lines, or the number of sentences in the passage."
>
> They agreed with and were encouraged by her next point: "In the past, many secretaries have been placed in positions of responsibility *without being delegated enough authority to carry out the responsibility.* [Italics added.] The current pressures affecting managers have caused them to rethink the secretarial function and to delegate more responsibility and authority to their secretaries."

NOTE: The use of brackets to indicate altered capitalization is optional in many situations. For more on this use of brackets, see the section on Alterations, Omissions, and Interpolations, beginning on page 167, in Chapter 7, "The Treatment of Quotations."

As a Mechanical Device

6. Brackets function as parentheses within parentheses.

   The company was incinerating high concentrations of pollutants (such as polychlorinated biphenyls [PCBs]) in a power boiler.

7. Brackets set off phonetic symbols or transcriptions.

   [t] in British *duty*

8. Brackets are used in combination with parentheses to set off units in mathematical expressions. They are also used in chemical formulas. For more on the use of brackets in mathematical expressions and chemical formulas, see Chapter 6, "Mathematics and Science."

   $x + 5[(x + y)(2x - y)]$ $Ag[Pt(NO_2)_4]$

With Other Marks of Punctuation

9. No punctuation mark (other than a period after an abbreviation) precedes bracketed material within a sentence. If punctuation is required, the mark is placed after the closing bracket.

   The report stated, "If we fail to find additional sources of supply [of oil and gas], our long-term growth will be limited."

10. When brackets enclose a complete sentence, the required punctuation should be placed within the brackets.

    [A pawprint photographed last month in the Quabbin area has finally verified the cougar's continued existence in the Northeast.]

    NOTE: Unlike parentheses, brackets are rarely used to enclose complete sentences within other sentences.

Spacing

11. No space is left between brackets and the material they enclose or between brackets and any mark of punctuation immediately following.
12. In typewritten material, two spaces precede an opening bracket and follow a closing bracket when the brackets enclose a complete sentence. In typeset material, one space is used.

    We welcome the return of the cougar. [A paw print photographed last month has verified its existence locally.] Its habitation in this area is a good sign for the whole environment.

    We welcome the return of the cougar. [A paw print photographed last month has verified its existence locally.] Its habitation in this area is a good sign for the whole environment.

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