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An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

## Correction Needed. Or Style?



- Washington Post Reprint: “David Minthorn is the grammar expert for the Associated Press”
- Word Study: “Elders, oldsters and old-timers: What’s your preferred term for ‘senior citizen’?”
- Student Activity: Make a Correction, Please
- Student Activity: FREE for ALL
- Student Activity: Style Manual: Numbers and Numerals

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**A**ccuracy and clarity of communication are hallmarks of journalism. In spite of the work of reporters and editors to publish no mistakes, errors occur. Corrections appear in both print and online editions of *The Washington Post*. Introduce students to this form of media transparency.

Media also has style manuals to attain consistency and clarity within a publication. When an organization is publishing what is equivalent

to a book each day, it needs standards and rules. The manuals provide guidelines for spelling, definitions and distinctions in word usage, punctuation and number use.

### CORRECTIONS

- A photo caption with a May 1 Sports article about tennis player Camra Long of Benjamin Banneker Academic High School in the District misspelled the first name of teammate Ayia Evans.

- A photo caption with an April 19 Travel article about Jessica Pociask and her exotic-travel company incorrectly said that Victoria Falls is in South Africa. The waterfall is in southern Africa, on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The Washington Post is committed to correcting errors that appear in the newspaper. Those interested in contacting the paper for that purpose can:

**E-mail:** [corrections@washpost.com](mailto:corrections@washpost.com).

**Call:** 202-334-6000, and ask to be connected to the desk involved — National, Foreign, Metro, Style, Sports, Business or any of the weekly sections. Comments can be directed to The Post's reader advocate, who can be reached at



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# David Minthorn is the grammar expert for the Associated Press

BY PAUL FARHI

• Originally Published July 28, 2011

In its modern, digital forms, writing has become something like an untended garden. It's overgrown with text-speak and crawling with invasive species like tweets and dashed-off e-mails. OMG, it's a mess.

So think of David Minthorn as a linguistic gardener, doggedly cultivating this weedy patch in the hope of restoring some order and maybe coaxing something beautiful out of it.

Minthorn's mission is the maintenance of English grammar, the policing of punctuation and the enforcement of a consistent written style for one of the world's largest news organizations. As the Associated Press's deputy standards editor, he's the news wire's word nerd, the go-to guy for settling all manner of niggling usage questions. Is it "e-mail" or "email"? "Smart phone" or "smartphone"? "Tea Party" or "tea party"? According to Dave Minthorn, it should be the latter in each case.

His distilled wisdom is the AP Stylebook, the bible for correspondents and editors and a



JENNIFER S. ALTMAN/FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

**David Minthorn in 2011 had 42 years of experience as an AP correspondent and editor.**

best-selling volume in its own right for the past three decades. Minthorn and two colleagues, Darrell Christian and Sally Jacobsen, are the Stylebook's editors. They spend all year arguing about what to include, updating the book to take account of new words and phrases such as "geotagging," "unfollow," and "Internet-connected TV."

For the past four years, Minthorn has also been the author of AP's "Ask the Editor" feature, in which perplexed writers from all walks of life (and all corners of the globe) seek his counsel on such pressing matters as the placement of commas and the

appropriate use of an apostrophe. Since taking over the column from its founder, Norm Goldstein, Minthorn has answered more than 8,000 of these queries, offering brief but definitive responses to questions such as:

■ "What is the plural of meatloaf? Meatloafs? Meatloaves? It isn't in the dictionary." Minthorn replied that AP's style is "meatloaves," noting that this "makes sense because the dictionary lists loaves as the plural of loaf, the food."

■ "Is it redundant to call the language Mandarin Chinese? Nobody uses the term Cantonese

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Chinese.” Mandarin is sufficient, Minthorn decreed.

■ “Is the short form of microphone mic or mike?” The informal form of microphone is “mic,” he responded. (*The Washington Post*, which has its own word-usage and style committee, disagrees, sticking with “mike,” no matter what the manufacturers print on your electronic devices.)

In fact, Minthorn is frequently asked how bulleted items, like those above, should be presented in a letter or formal presentation. (We’re not sure we did it right.)

“I feel a little bit of an obligation to answer as many of these questions as I can,” says the mild-mannered Minthorn. “I don’t get to all of them. But I try my best. People really want to know.”

“We get hundreds of suggestions a year [for changes]. We adopt the ones that we think have reached a critical mass.”

All told, Minthorn, who is 69, exerts a subtle yet profound influence on the way words appear online and in print. His judgments guide AP’s dispatches, which is no small thing. The New York-based news service, a nonprofit cooperative owned by member news organizations, has 3,700 employees in 300 bureaus around the world. On a given day, it claims, its work is seen by half the world’s population. Because of this ubiquity, Minthorn’s Rules of Order are about as close to a universal code of English usage as there can be.

And like any code, this one has its own breed of code-breakers. The somewhat Olympian

pronouncements by AP have led to a Twitter phenomenon called “The Fake AP Stylebook,” whose existence may be the only way a lot of people know there is such a thing as the AP Stylebook. Making fun of some of the tenets journalists hold dear, “Fake AP” has tweeted commands such as telling writers always to use the word “allegedly” to avoid accusations of bias: “the allegedly wet water,” “the allegedly poisonous poison.” Even those who enjoy the humorous wordplay, though, probably look to the real AP Stylebook when word decisions have to be made.

“You can imagine the sense of assurance you get when Dave Minthorn himself is doing the editing on a memo or a story for the wire,” says his immediate boss, Tom Kent. “It’s like doing math and having Einstein check your work.”

The most common “Ask the Editor” question is about the use of italics and quotation marks when citing books, movies or TV shows. Does one use them on some titles but not others, or not at all? Minthorn’s answer: AP puts quotes around titles (exceptions: the Bible and standard reference works, which get neither) and it never uses italics. This is for practical reasons more than anything. AP doesn’t transmit copy with embedded italics because not all computer systems can send or receive them.

The questions Minthorn fields from the public come from just about everywhere and everyone. Newspaper copy editors write to him, as do

public-relations executives, students, teachers, corporate and military types, librarians and “just plain word nuts.”

And, yes, they can be a little nutty about this stuff. Minthorn, Christian and Jacobsen kicked up quite a ruckus recently when they agreed to refer to electronic mail as “email” instead of “e-mail.” The pro-“e-mail” faction protested the hyphen-ectomy, but the AP style mavens declared that the extra character was unnecessary because it slowed writers down, if only by a fraction of a second. “We spend a lot of time debating these things,” Minthorn says. (The Washington Post prefers “e-mail.”)

Conversely, the punctuation gods ruled that the proper form of “bed and breakfast” is “bed-and-breakfast,” a change sure to please the hyphen lobby. Go figure.

You’ll get an argument, too, about the plural of “octopus.” Minthorn’s preference: “octopuses.” Fans of “octopi” will probably take exception.

Whatever his pronouncements, Minthorn doesn’t rule merely by fiat or whim. He has 42 years of experience as an AP correspondent and editor, so he’s hardly a novice at this. Besides, it’s not just his say-so. Minthorn consults references such as the American Heritage Dictionary of the American Language, the Concise Oxford Dictionary, Roget’s Thesaurus and “The Elements of Style,” the classic Strunk and White volume that is the Torah, New Testament and Koran for writing style.

When a reader asked him whether female softball players are basemen,

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Minthorn did some legwork before answering. Webster's was of no use, so he investigated how AP's sports department refers to women in other sports. In women's basketball, he learned, when a team switches out of zone defense it is said to be playing man-to-man. Hence, the Minthorn-ian judgment: Position players in softball are basemen.

This may all seem arcane and trivial to a world moving rapidly away from linguistic formality — C U L8tr, m8 — but not to Minthorn. “We take this very seriously,” he says. “We're not a bunch of old fogies sitting around in our ivory tower. We're alive to changes and new ideas. We have a real sense that new words and changes in language reflect the culture and give us an inkling to where society is headed.”

AP's senior managing editor, Michael Oreskes, argues that precision and clarity and “other hallmarks of proper style” are vital in an age in which rules seem to matter less and less. “Times of change are when standards matter most,” Oreskes says. “The faster the eye flits across the words, the more vital it is that language be immediately and abundantly clear. The world of journalism is lucky to have Dave. He is an asset for the whole profession.”

Minthorn's love of words springs from boyhood. He attended the Lakeside School in Seattle, where two memorable teachers, Frederick Bleakney and George Taylor, instilled in him the joy of writing and reading. Naturally, he went on to get a degree in English (Whitman College,

'64) and a master's in journalism (University of Oregon, '65).

Along the way he picked up an appreciation for more than just the finer points of English. During his long career at AP, he spent 16 years as a foreign correspondent, including 12 in Germany (where he met his wife). He became fluent in that language and now regularly tweets breaking-news alerts in German.

“Everyone has a passion,” says Oreskes. “Dave's is writing that cannot be misunderstood. He is a true believer in the power of the well-used verb, the properly ordered infinitive and the non-dangling participle. He sets rules so the rest of us will rise to them.”

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*Paul Farhi is The Washington Post's media reporter.*



## Morning Mix

# Elders, oldsters and old-timers: What's your preferred term for 'senior citizen'?

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BY JUSTIN WM. MOYER

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• Originally Published July 9, 2014

Oscar Wilde: "Wisdom comes with winters."

What also comes: social security, glaucoma and irritating monikers for the oldest among us.

Some terms are *prima facie* objectionable. "Ancient." "Fogey." "Blue hair."

Others seem fussy or vague. "Pensioner." "Patriarch." "Doyenne."

Journalists and policymakers — and regular folks — need a way to refer to those entering, ahem, their sunset years.

We know we tread on dangerous ground.

The Washington Post style manual: "When age is relevant to a story it may be discussed, but beware of adjectives such as elderly, middle-aged, etc. Young reporters especially tend to use these words about people who would not appreciate them."

But what do you rusty, moth-eaten, antediluvian geezers want to be called?

Ina Jaffe, who covers golden-agers for NPR, filed a story on Tuesday that attempted to get to the bottom of this sensitive matter.

Her conclusion, after NPR conducted a poll of 2,700 presumably aged listeners: "I can sum up the overall response by saying that they disliked pretty much everything."

Most — 43 percent — liked "older adult." Simple, straightforward and by far the most popular, according to NPR.

Almost a third liked "elder." And almost a third liked "senior" — but only 12 percent liked "senior citizen."

Then there were the loathed terms. Jaffe:

There were some terms you might expect to get a negative response like "geezer," "old-timer," the aforementioned "elderly." But even expressions often used in a positive context like "positive aging" or "successful aging" — a majority of gave them thumbs down. A couple of other common terms — "golden years" and "geriatric" — the vast majority disapproved.

The problem Jaffe identified on her beat: Many of the words we use for older adults — vague terms such as "retirees" — no longer reflect reality. Many don't retire at 65. If Hillary Clinton becomes president in 2016, she'll be 69 when she's inaugurated. And life expectancy in the United States is 78.7 years.

In other words, old folks ain't what

they used to be.

For those Methuselahs who don't like "elder," here are some other options — good and bad — culled from the Internet. Browse away — while you still can.

ancestor  
forebear  
superior  
veteran  
gaffer  
graybeard  
whitebeard  
dowager  
grandam  
dotard  
septugenarian, octogenarian,  
nonagenarian, centenarian  
the aged  
the old  
grandfather, grandmother  
grandsire  
old chap  
codger, old codger  
old dog  
old duffer  
presbyter  
Father Time

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*Justin Moyer is a reporter for The Washington Post's Morning Mix. Follow him on Twitter: @justinwmmoyer.*

# Make a Correction, Please

*The Washington Post* is “pledged to minimize the numbers of errors we make and to correct those that occur.” *The Post* checks disputed details and looks at the context to determine if and what correction is needed. Corrections include identifying when and where the error took place and providing the relevant context.

## IN PRINT

When needed, a CORRECTIONS column appears on page A2. The following was published May 2, 2015.

### CORRECTIONS

- A photo caption with a May 1 Sports article about tennis player Camra Long of Benjamin Banneker Academic High School in the District misspelled the first name of teammate Ayia Evans.
- A photo caption with an April 19 Travel article about Jessica Pociask and her exotic-travel company incorrectly said that Victoria Falls is in South Africa. The waterfall is in southern Africa, on the border of Zambia and Zimbabwe.

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## ONLINE

When stories are to be corrected online, *The Post* clearly lets the reader know the error and the correction at the top of the article. For example, on April 24, 2015, *The Washington Post* carried this online correction at the top of an Associated Press story:

**Correction:** Texas Prison-Riot Report story

SAN ANTONIO — In a story April 23 about a federal review of a West Texas prison, The Associated Press reported erroneously that The Geo Group, a company paid to run the Reeves County Detention Center, subcontracted out the prison’s health services to another company. The company that runs the prison’s health services was hired by the county, not The Geo Group.

A corrected version of the story is below:

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Letters to the Editor, appearing in the op-ed pages, may include corrections in addition to reactions and clarification of *Post* content from the public, experts and interested parties.

Find and discuss the Letters of the Editor. Which may be characterized as a correction? A explanation or clarification? An opposing point of view?

# FREE *for* ALL

Readers are encouraged to engage in dialogue with reporters and other readers. It is now common practice to include e-mail addresses of reporters at the end of articles. Online, readers may add comments after articles.

On Saturday, *The Post* publishes FREE for ALL. Readers' comments on and clarification of *Post* content and corrections are presented. Discuss the following that are part of the points of view published on May 2, 2015.

## *An incomplete ranking*

I read Jay Mathews's April 20 Education column, "Open AP, other challenging courses to all high schoolers" and its accompanying table, listing the top 50 Washington-area schools, as ranked by Mathews. I was surprised not to find some of the area's best schools, including St. John's College High School and Gonzaga College High School, both in Washington (and famous rivals).

While the ranking included private schools (marked with a "P," as clearly noted), it failed to state that private schools that declined Mathews's request for required data were not included. That is a very important detail, and its absence challenges the credibility of the analysis.

**Steven J. Anlian**, *Washington*

## *Paul Revere's real ride*

I laughed out loud while reading about the New Hampshire Rebellion's march about money in politics ["A voter backlash over big money?" front page, April 20]. The article cited the group's explanation that its march from Lowell, Mass., to Nashua, N.H., "retraced Paul Revere's famous ride . . . ."

Someone should tell the group's executive director that Revere's ride was from Charlestown to Concord and that he never left the Massachusetts colony along his way.

**Michael Weisman**, *Bowie*

## *Money lessons*

Jonnelle Marte's April 10 Get There column, "Financial education can't start early enough," conflated the distinctly different fields of economics and personal finance.

Economics is the study of how scarce resources are allocated. As such, introductory economics courses explore such issues as the components of output (i.e., gross domestic product), the impact of a minimum wage, the implications of trade imbalances and how a firm determines its profit-maximizing price. Economic students will not learn what kind of insurance to buy and what level of savings and types of investments are appropriate at specific stages of life. These issues are the purview of personal finance.

I wholeheartedly share concerns about young adults becoming financially literate in order to enjoy a financially stable life. But please keep in mind that economics, while a fascinating field of study, will imbue students with a vastly different set of knowledge than personal finance.

**William Marsteller**, *Rockville*

## Charges 'devoid of . . . substance'

Kathleen Parker's Dec. 21 op-ed column, "A wildfire of corruption," referred to the Moonlight Fire, a 2007 California forest fire that consumed approximately 65,000 acres, including more than 46,000 acres of public land. My office brought suit against logging company Sierra Pacific and other entities for negligently causing the fire. A few days before trial, Sierra Pacific settled the case for cash and property worth at least \$122 million.

In October, Sierra Pacific moved to set aside the judgment, claiming the federal government committed fraud on the court. That motion and its allegations were a central feature in Parker's column. At the time of publication, the federal government had yet to file a substantive response to the allegations and was not scheduled to do so until February. We filed that brief, and on April 17, a U.S. District Court denied Sierra Pacific's motion, the judge finding that none of the allegations of fraud or misconduct were true. The court stated, "Defendants have failed to identify even a single instance of fraud on the court, certainly none on the part of any attorney for the government. . . . Stripped of all its bluster, defendants' motion is wholly devoid of any substance."

Allegations of government misconduct readily attract attention and, when coupled with a scandalous headline and without the benefit of both sides of the story, probably attract readers. But readers should know that they were well represented by the assistant U.S. attorneys in this office who worked to hold Sierra Pacific accountable for its acts.

**Benjamin B. Wagner**, *Sacramento*  
*The writer is U.S. attorney for the Eastern*  
*District of California*

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## ‘Number, please’

Regarding the April 25 news article “Think your area code is lowbrow? New numbers just a payment away.”:

Area codes were introduced by the Bell System (American Telephone & Telegraph Co.) initially for use by operators; in the 1960s, they were available for use by nearly all ordinary customers as “direct distance dialing.”

The original plan was designed to speed up dialing on rotary dial telephones to cut down the time the equipment was engaged in processing the calls. Cities that received a large number of incoming phone calls were assigned numbers that required few clicks of the dial — New York, 212; Los Angeles, 213; Chicago, 312.

The telephone equipment recognized a long-distance call by the second digit of the area code. For states with a single area code, the middle digit was always zero; for states with multiple area codes, the middle digit was always one.

Originally, 213 covered a large area of Southern California; in the 1980s, 818 took Hollywood and Pasadena; then in the 1990s, 626 separated Pasadena from Hollywood. Thus, to refer, as an individual in the article did, to either the



COURTESY OF DORIS HOOD VIA KANSAS CITY STAR

**The telephone switchboard in Abilene, Kan.**

Hollywood (818) or Pasadena (626) area codes as being “original area codes” is incorrect. Both had been a part of the much larger 213 area code.

The North American Numbering Plan was initially administered by the Bell System. When AT&T was broken up in 1984, administration was undertaken by Lockheed Martin and later by Neustar. Cities never introduced area codes themselves. All of this is unimportant — ancient

history nowadays, of course. Number portability, switching systems operating over the Internet and cellphones have reduced the historic connection between an area code and a particular area. In effect, all U.S. phone users now have a 10-digit telephone number that can follow them anywhere, leaving the location on the planet for the software that drives modern telephone calls to sort out the routing details.

**Grant P. Thompson, Washington**

## Needing a fresh description

I was surprised at a description of one of the six Democrats vying for two open seats on the Arlington County Board [“Arlington candidates talk about trust,” Metro, April 17].

Katie Cristol was described as “the freshest face among the Democratic candidates.” Cristol, an education policy consultant and the youngest aspirant at 30, is making her first bid for elected office.

Is her face freshest because of her age? If so, is that really important to note and with that phrase? I hope it’s not because she’s a woman, because that would be more insulting than

complimentary. If it’s because she is new to the world of office-seeking, then that description also applies to Bruce Wiljanen, 63 and the oldest candidate. By contrast, why wasn’t he described as “having a face lined with years of life’s experiences” or some similar metaphor?

Language matters, certainly among candidates. Reporters’ words, intentionally or not, can hinder or help how we view political hopefuls. I urge The Post to be more cognizant of the power of its words.

**John Schachter, Arlington**

# Style Manual: Numbers and Numerals

“At *The Washington Post*, reporters and editors process more than 150,000 words every day, shaping them into sentences, paragraphs, headlines and graphics that convey information about every conceivable subject,” according to *The Washington Post* Style Manual introduction. The style manual includes spelling, definitions and distinctions in usage of words, punctuation guidelines and use of numbers.

As you read *The Washington Post* find one or more examples of numbers and numerals in text, in tables and informational graphics. Write a guideline based on what you see used and provide an example from *Post* content.

1. In addresses

2. Age of an individual

a.

b.

3. When conveying very large amounts (thousand, million, billion)

4. In Sports

a. Team record

b. Game scores

c. Names of events that include numbers

d. In odds, proportions, recipes and ratios

5. In informational graphics