

At the Columbia Mailman School, we strive to create online content that is clear and consistent. Our voice is conversational rather than institutional, with a lively and authentic tone. When we write about complex technical information, the meaning should be easy to grasp—even for those who do not work in public health. Write using the active voice, with plain, jargon-free prose.

Our style is based on the [Associated Press stylebook](#) and the [Merriam-Webster dictionary](#).

This Style Guide is a living document. Please direct any questions, comments, and suggestions to Tim Paul in the Office of Communications at [tp2111@columbia.edu](mailto:tp2111@columbia.edu).

## ACADEMIC DEGREES

- Do not use periods in degrees.  
*Correct: PhD, DrPH, MD, MPH*
- Avoid listing multiple degrees in favor of the individual's highest degree.
- When referencing an alumnus's graduation year, list the degree and the graduation year set off with commas, e.g., MPH '09. If adding a field of study, insert a comma between the degree and year, e.g. MPH in epidemiology, '09.
- If a non-Columbia Mailman degree must be included, it should be indicated in prose rather than using an acronym, when space allows.  
*Correct: Mary Bassett, MPH '86, earned her medical degree at Columbia's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1979.*
- When degrees are spelled out, they should be capitalized when referring to a specific degree and lowercase when referencing a generic degree type.  
*Correct: She holds a Master of Public Health degree in sociomedical sciences. Correct: She holds a master's degree.*

## ACRONYMS

- Acronyms may be used, but the first instance of the center or program must include the full spelled-out name, e.g., the Center for Infection and Immunity (CII).
- If introducing a scientific abbreviation, avoid parentheses, e.g., Bishphenol-A, or BPA.

## ADDRESSES, NEIGHBORHOODS, TIMES

- For the street name, always abbreviate Street, Avenue, and Boulevard to St., Ave., and Blvd. Always spell out Alley, Drive, Road, Circle, Terrace, etc.
- If the street name is a number street, 9 and below, spell it out. If it is 10 and above, use the number.  
*Correct: 167 W. Seventh St. or 630 W. 168th St.*
- Capitalize Northern Manhattan and Lower Manhattan.
- For events, list the date first, then the time, and then the location; the latter should include a street address.
- Event dates do not need to include the day of the week or the year. If the day of the week is included, do not abbreviate it.

- The time should be listed using the least digits possible and in lowercase letters with punctuation marks.  
*Correct: 4-5 p.m. or 9:30-10 a.m.*

## DATA

- Use data as a singular noun  
*Correct: The data suggests air pollution plays a role in obesity.*

## DEPARTMENTS

- Department names should use uppercase on their own but lowercase in titles.  
*Correct: the Department of Epidemiology*  
*Correct: Andrew Rundle, associate professor of epidemiology*
- Do not use abbreviations (EPI, SMS, etc.)

## EMAIL ADDRESSES

- Email addresses should always be spelled out, not simply linked to or abbreviated as a uni.

## HEADLINES

- For Web article pages, headlines should convey the idea of the story, ideally using between 40 and 70 characters (including spaces).
- Capitalize words in headlines and subheads except prepositions of less than four letters. Only use punctuation where necessary.
- Headlines on the home page should be limited to three lines. Tip: Use the Teaser Text option to shorten a homepage headline while preserving a longer article title.
- Do not use periods in the subtitle unless you have more than one sentence.

## HYPERLINKS

- Online URLs should be rendered invisible as hyperlinks, not spelled out.
- Link first instances of faculty names to their faculty directory page, center, or program names to their respective Web pages. Do not link to degrees.
- Do not link to the School's homepage on article pages.

## INSTITUTION NAMES AND EVENTS

- In formal communications, such as press releases, use "Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health" on first mention. Do not use possessive "Columbia's Mailman School of Public Health."

- In formal communications, for a second reference, use “the Columbia Mailman School,” followed by third reference as “Columbia Mailman”
- In informal communications, such as website articles, blog posts, or promotional materials, after the first reference you may use “the School” or “our School,” if it is clear you are referring to Columbia Mailman School.
- If you only can use one word in a formal communications (for example, a joint press release, or approving a reference in a news article), use “Columbia epidemiologist,” *not* “Mailman epidemiologist”
- Do not use “MSPH” or “Mailman” to refer to the Columbia Mailman School.
- When referring to Columbia, “University” is always capitalized.
- Formal names of special events are capitalized, e.g., Commencement.

## LECTURES, CONFERENCES, COURSES, ETC.

- The title of a talk or lecture must be italicized or in quotation marks, or both.  
*Correct: Professor Salim S. Abdool Karim, PhD, gave a talk titled “New Hope for HIV Prevention.”*
- Conferences, course titles, panels, speaker series, and symposia should be capitalized, not put in quotes. Do not capitalize words like “annual meeting.”

## MISCELLANEOUS

- Healthcare is one word.
- Capitalize Internet; make website, webcam, webcast, and webmaster one lowercase word *but* use Web, Web page, Web feed.
- Avoid use of the plural pronoun “they” in place of the singular “he” or “she” unless it refers to a specific gender identity. Try recasting the sentence instead.
- Always use “and” instead of “&.”
- Use two-letter postal codes for states, i.e., AL for Alabama.

## NUMBERS

- Spell out numbers one through ten, then use numerals for numbers greater than ten, except when the number is the first word of a sentence.
- When two or more numbers apply to the same category in a paragraph or a series of paragraphs, do not use figures for some and words others. Instead, use all figures.  
*Correct: There are 25 graduate students in the A class, 9 in the B class, and 8 in the C class, making a total of 42 students in all three. (“Three” is spelled out because it does not belong to the same category.)*
- Express percentages as figures; spell out “percent” rather than using the percent sign.  
*Correct: 3 percent, 130 percent*
- For large sums of money, use figures with a dollar sign, and spell out million and billion, i.e., \$1.8 million.

## PHOTO CAPTIONS

- Do not use degrees and graduation years in photo captions, unless that information is not included within an article.
- Credit the photographer where appropriate.  
*Correct: Photo: Alan Orling*
- Only use periods if the caption is a complete sentence.

## POINT OF VIEW

- Most of our online writing uses the third person. In rare cases when the author is identified, such as a Student Voices blog, use the first person.

## PUBLICATIONS

- Publications (journals, books, films, magazines, newspapers) are set in italics.
- Individual works (journal articles, thesis papers, lecture titles) get quotation marks.
- The editor in a publication reference is always listed after the publication, e.g., Professor Salim S. Abdool Karim, PhD, co-wrote the chapter “Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome” in the *Oxford Textbook of Public Health* (Roger Detels, Robert Beaglehole, Mary Ann Lansang, and Martin Gulliford, eds.).
- Between editor and publisher, use a semicolon, e.g., (Roger Detels, Robert Beaglehole, Mary Ann Lansang and Martin Gulliford, eds.; Oxford University Press).
- When the author is part of a list of co-authors, use “et. al.”

## PUNCTUATION

- In lists, use a serial comma before an “and.”  
*Correct: Research on cancer, asthma, and HIV/AIDS*
- En dashes are used when writing a range, e.g., 3–5 treatments.
- Em dashes are used to separate content within a sentence and without a space, e.g., a pile of vegetables—topped by an eggplant—caught her eye. Do not use double dashes (--).
- Use periods with abbreviations such as U.S. and U.N.
- Surround Jr., Inc., Esq., etc. with commas.
- Hyphenate all elements of phone numbers.
- Only use one space between sentences.
- Use curly quotes and apostrophes: “” and ’ (not "" and ")

## TIME

- Use numbers followed by lowercase a.m. or p.m. and only the necessary digits, i.e., 8 p.m.

## TITLES

- Titles should be rendered in uppercase if before name; lowercase after names and set off by commas.
- On first reference, always use the initial “P” in Dean Fried’s name.  
*Correct: Dean Linda P. Fried, MD, MPH*
- Formal titles should be capitalized, i.e., W. Ian Lipkin, MD, John Snow Professor of Epidemiology. All other titles should be lowercase, i.e., W. Ian Lipkin, professor of neurology and pathology.
- Where applicable, the first reference to a person should be, “Elizabeth Jones, PhD” and subsequently, she should be referred to as “Jones”—*except* Dean Fried should be called “Dean” in every instance
- Capitalize names of scholarships, professorships, foundations, etc.
- When quoting someone, use present tense “says,” except when the statement clearly was made in the past, e.g., In the television interview, Branas said...
- Use “chair” instead of “chairman” or “chairwoman”