

FSSA writing style guide

These guidelines are based on rules from The Associated Press Stylebook. This resource provides guidelines on grammar, punctuation, usage and journalistic style. Using Associated Press guidelines is very important in communicating effectively with FSSA clients and stakeholders and helps maintain professional and consistent communications throughout the agency.

This style guide is designed to be a convenient reference for the most common style issues you're likely to face while writing for publication in print or online.

Subject	Explanation	Right	Wrong
Acronyms	Acronyms should be avoided whenever possible. Always spell the words out on the first mention. On subsequent mentions, it is preferable to use generic terms such as the board, the division, etc. If an acronym must be used, include the acronym in parentheses after the first use of the full name.	The Medicaid Advisory Committee meets next week. The committee's agenda is available online. The Healthy Indiana Plan is an affordable health insurance program. HIP covers Hoosiers ages 19 to 64 who meet specific income levels.	
Active voice	Use active voice whenever possible and appropriate. In the active voice, the subject of the sentence acts. In the passive voice, the subject of the sentence is acted upon. Verbs in the active voice are stronger, enhance clarity and make a sentence easier to read. Passive voice is appropriate when the actor is unknown, unimportant or obvious; e.g., <i>small items are often stolen</i> .	Active: DFR changed the decision.	Passive: The decision has been changed.
Apostrophes	Do not use apostrophes for plurals of acronyms or numbers. Use an apostrophe for plurals of a single letter.	ATMs, 1970s. The Oakland A's.	
Avoid unnecessary words	Eliminate most intensifying modifiers, such as <i>very</i> . Consider whether each adjective and adverb adds meaning.		
Capitalization	Do not capitalize <i>state, federal, department, division, board, program, section, unit</i> , etc., unless the word is part of a formal name. <i>Also see:</i> Headlines; Titles; Composition titles	File your paperwork with the state. She is employed by the state of Indiana. The Division of Family Resources office is open today.	

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Colons	Colons can introduce a list series or be used for emphasis. Capitalize the first word after a colon if it is the start of a new sentence or a proper noun.	<p>Tabitha had three conditions for dinner: greasy, fast and easy.</p> <p>Jamie would only accept one answer: yes.</p> <p>Here's one of the many reasons to plant a garden: First and foremost, it's a lot of fun.</p>	
Commas in a series	Do not use a comma before a conjunction in a simple series. Use a comma for a series that includes elements containing the word <i>and</i> or the word <i>or</i> .	<p>The American flag is red, white and blue.</p> <p>The menu offered a choice of pancakes, bacon and eggs, or waffles.</p>	
Composition titles	<p>Use quotation marks with most composition titles. Exceptions include reference works and periodicals.</p> <p>Capitalize all words in a title except articles; prepositions of three or fewer letters; and conjunctions of three or fewer letters unless any of those start or end the title.</p>	<p>“American Idol”</p> <p>Reader’s Digest</p> <p>“Born This Way”</p> <p>“Game of Thrones”</p>	
Continuous vs. continual	<i>Continuous</i> occurs without interruption, while <i>continual</i> occurs at regular intervals.		
Dates	When a phrase lists only a month and a year, do not separate the year with commas. When a phrase refers to a month, day and year, set off the year with commas. For dates, use numerals without <i>st</i> , <i>nd</i> , <i>rd</i> or <i>th</i> .	<p>The class begins in February 2017.</p> <p>Dec. 7, 1941, is a date which will live in infamy.</p> <p>He will retire on June 2.</p>	Wrong: The conference is on December 5th.
Define technical terms	If a technical word is necessary to your message, use it — but include a definition. Ways to define a word or phrase: Parenthetically (you can also use dashes or commas); in a simple declarative sentence; with an extended definition. A complicated concept might require its own paragraph or sidebar.	<p>Inflammation (heat, swelling and redness) is caused by the body’s protective response to injury or infection.</p> <p>When your body is hurt or becomes infected, it has a protective response of heat, swelling and redness called inflammation.</p>	

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Degrees	Spell out academic degrees. Use an apostrophe in <i>bachelor's degree</i> , a <i>master's</i> , etc. Use abbreviations for degrees only when you need to include a list of credentials after a name. An academic abbreviation is set off with commas.	She has a bachelor's degree. John Doe, LL.D, Ph.d., will present his paper at the symposium.	
Directions	Do not capitalize directional indicators except when they refer to specific regions.	Go south on University Boulevard. Most of the delegates were from the Midwest.	
Em dash: —	An em dash is longer than the en. It's as wide as the letter <i>M</i> . It can signify an abrupt change in the sentence or a pregnant pause, or to set off a clause within a sentence. It can also be used as attribution for a quote or in datelines. The em dash will lose its punch if you overuse it. Save it for special occasions. Do not use hyphens in place on an em dash.	She sometimes — but not always — remembers the difference. “To love abundantly is to live abundantly and to love forever is to live forever.” — Henry Drummond	Wrong: She sometimes - but not always -- remembers the difference.
Email	Do not hyphenate “email.”	She updated her email password.	
En dash: –	The en dash is slightly longer than a hyphen but smaller than the em dash. It's the width of the letter <i>N</i> . Use the en dash between a range of numbers or years. A hyphen is also acceptable in this usage.	1971–2024 or 1971-2024	
Headlines	Use sentence case for all headlines and subheaders. Only the first word and proper nouns are capitalized in headlines. Headlines never include ending punctuation unless it is a question mark. The first word after a colon is always uppercase in headlines.	French farmers drive 350 tractors to Parliament to protest low incomes Can we feed the world without starving the planet? Inside the Golden Globes: The moments the telecast didn't show	Wrong: French Farmers Drive 350 Tractors to Parliament to Protest Low Incomes
Health care and child care	<i>Health care</i> and <i>child care</i> are two words.	The Healthy Indiana Plan provides health care for low-income Hoosiers. To find child care in your area, visit childcarefinder.in.gov .	

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<p>Hyphens at the end of lines</p>	<p>Proper hyphenation results in text that fits neatly into a space without compromising on readability. Poor hyphenation can jar the reader, making it difficult to comprehend the text. Ensure your text looks natural and uniform. Avoid areas that are overly spaced or squeezed together. Use hyphenation to create an even, readable effect.</p> <p>Never stack hyphens: A stacked hyphen is when two or more adjacent lines have hyphens at the end of the lines. Avoid having too many hyphenated line endings in one paragraph even if the hyphenated words are not directly above or below each other.</p> <p>Always have at least three or more letters before or after the hyphen.</p> <p>Divide words at natural breaks, such as between the suffix and the rest of the word or between halves of a compound word.</p> <p>Avoid hyphenating proper nouns.</p> <p>Never hyphenate words in titles, headings, subheadings or other short text elements.</p>		<p>Wrong: Be sure to use end-of-line hyphenation properly. Typesetter Ann Dettoni says that the difference between average and professional typesetting is all in the details — and one such detail that is often overlooked is hyphenation. Proper hyphenation is essential to a comfortable reading experience and clear communication. There are too many hyphens in this text block.</p>
<p>Hyphens in compounds</p>	<p>A hyphen is used for compound modifiers when the modifier comes before a noun. Don't hyphenate if it comes after.</p> <p>Don't use a hyphen for a compound modifier: For commonly used terms where the meaning is clear (<i>sixth grade teacher, climate change bill</i>); if there are more than three words modifying a noun; for any adverb that includes <i>very</i> or a word ending in <i>ly</i>; for words that describe dual heritage (<i>African American</i>).</p> <p>Use hyphens for compound nouns that may not be read as one thought (<i>merry-go-round</i>); for some prefixes and suffixes (<i>ex-boyfriend, dairy-free</i>).</p>	<p>how-to guide small-business owner 10-pound weight blue-green water badly behaved Asian American His care needs to be long term.</p>	
<p>Hyphens, suspensive</p>	<p>Suspensive hyphenation is used to describe more than one element in a series.</p>	<p>10-, 15- or 20-minute intervals The third- and fourth-grade teachers share classroom supplies. state-owned and -operated hospitals</p>	<p>Wrong: 10, 15 or 20-minute intervals</p>

Subject	Explanation	Right	Wrong
Job titles and positions	<p>If a job title is part of the name, then capitalize it and do not use a comma between the title and the name.</p> <p>If either a person's name or job title is used as an appositive (including an article like <i>the</i>, <i>a</i>, or <i>an</i>), do not capitalize the job title but do use two commas or parentheses to surround the occupation or the title that follows.</p>	<p>Chair of the Board Jane Doe respectfully disagreed.</p> <p>The chair of the board, Jane Doe, respectfully disagreed.</p> <p>Jane Doe, the chair of the board, respectfully disagreed.</p> <p>Jane Doe (the chair of the board) respectfully disagreed.</p>	<p>Wrong: Chair of the Board, Jane Doe respectfully disagreed.</p> <p>Wrong: Chair of the Board, Jane Doe, respectfully disagreed.</p> <p>Wrong: Jane Doe the chair of the board respectfully disagreed.</p>
Money	<p>Use numerals and the \$ sign for all dollar figures. Do not use unnecessary zeroes.</p>	<p>The bill came to \$2,400.</p>	<p>Wrong: He has eight hundred dollars left.</p> <p>Wrong: I gave the driver my last \$5.00.</p>
Months	<p>When a month is used with a specific date, abbreviate only <i>Jan.</i>, <i>Feb.</i>, <i>Aug.</i>, <i>Sept.</i>, <i>Oct.</i>, <i>Nov.</i> and <i>Dec.</i> Spell out the month when it is used without a specific date.</p>	<p>July 4 is Independence Day.</p> <p>Nov. 11 is Veterans Day.</p> <p>The training will be held in September.</p>	
Numbers	<p>In general, spell out <i>one</i> through <i>nine</i>. Use figures for <i>10</i> or above and when preceding a unit of measure or referring to ages. Spell out a number that appears at the beginning of a sentence, unless that number is a year. Use numerals before <i>million</i> or <i>billion</i>.</p>	<p>He found seven of the 12 forms he needs.</p> <p>She traveled 6 miles.</p> <p>The 7-year-old building needs repairs.</p> <p>Eleven executives attended the meeting.</p> <p>2010 was a banner year for our program.</p> <p>The program has a \$1.7 million budget.</p>	
Parallel construction	<p>Parallel structure means using the same pattern of words to show that two or more ideas have the same level of importance. This can happen at the word, phrase or clause level.</p> <p>The usual way to join parallel structures is with the use of coordinating conjunctions such as <i>and</i> or <i>or</i>. This is especially important when writing lists.</p> <p>Do not mix forms. Changing to another pattern within a clause or changing the voice of the verb (from active to passive or vice versa) will break the parallelism.</p>	<p>This program's funding goes toward predicting, preventing, diagnosing and treating blood disorders.</p> <p>In our classroom, students are expected to be kind, respectful and prompt.</p>	<p>Wrong: Funding goes toward predicting, preventing, diagnosis and to treat blood disorders.</p> <p>Wrong: In our classroom, students are expected to be kind, respectful and arrive promptly.</p>

Subject	Explanation	Right	Wrong
Percentages	Use numerals for percent and percentages. Use the % symbol.	We saved 36% by buying in bulk.	Wrong: She knew 50 percent of the people.
Person-first language	<p>Person-first language is a way to emphasize the person and view the disorder, disease, condition or disability as only one part of the whole person. Describe what the person “has” rather than what the person “is.” Person-first language avoids using labels or adjectives to define someone.</p> <p>When possible, ask if a person or group uses identity-first language (<i>deaf students</i>) or person-first language (<i>students who are deaf</i>). Default to using person-first language if preference is not known or cannot be determined.</p>	<p>a person with diabetes</p> <p>a person with cancer</p> <p>a person with bipolar disorder</p>	<p>Wrong: a diabetic</p> <p>Wrong: cancer patient</p> <p>Wrong: a person who is bipolar</p>
Quotations	<p>Use a comma to introduce a complete sentence quotation. When using a sentence fragment as a quotation, do not set it off with a comma unless the sentence requires one for proper grammar. Do not capitalize the first letter of a sentence fragment quote.</p> <p>Use a comma instead of a period at the end of a quote that is followed by attribution. Do not use a comma if the quoted sentence ends with a question mark or exclamation point.</p> <p>Periods and commas always go within the quotation marks. Question marks and exclamation points go within the quotation marks when they apply only to the text in quotes.</p>	<p>John said, “They did not arrive in time.”</p> <p>Jane told the crowd to “get pumped up.”</p> <p>“Open your textbooks to page one,” John instructed.</p> <p>“That’s amazing!” Jane exclaimed.</p> <p>His favorite movie is “Airplane!”</p> <p>Was it Ben Franklin who said, “A penny saved is a penny earned”?</p>	Wrong: Did you ever read “The Lord of the Rings?”
Seasons	Do not capitalize the seasons spring, summer, fall and winter unless part of a formal name.	The board will release its decision in the fall.	
Sign up vs. sign-up	<i>Sign up</i> is used as a verb. <i>Sign-up</i> is used as a noun or adjective.	<p>Sign-ups are open until February.</p> <p>The sign-up sheet is nearly full.</p>	
Singular and plural, quantities less than 1	When the quantity is less than 1, the unit of measure is singular.	<p>0.5 gram</p> <p>0.2 second</p>	<p>Wrong: 0.5 grams</p> <p>Wrong: 0.2 seconds</p>

Subject	Explanation	Right	Wrong
<p>Spacing, symbols</p>	<p>Insert a space between the numeral and the symbol, except for %, °C, °F, ° (for angles), money symbols, fractions and inches/feet symbols. Abbreviated units of measure do not have a period, unless they close a sentence.</p>	<p>25 g 40 mL 60 kg 30% 28.5°C 4" \$250 5 ½ years</p>	<p>Wrong: 50 mg. Wrong: 2 dL.</p>
<p>States</p>	<p>Abbreviate state names when listed after a city. Use the traditional abbreviation followed by a period. States with five or fewer letters aren't abbreviated.</p> <p>Place one comma between the city and the state, and another comma immediately after the state name (unless it ends the sentence).</p> <p>When the state is part of a postal address, use the two-letter postal abbreviation (two capital letters, no period).</p> <p>Don't abbreviate if there isn't a city name before the state.</p> <p>Omit the state with a city when the context is clear, for well-known cities or when it would be redundant.</p>	<p>She has lived in Indianapolis, Ind., all of her life.</p> <p>100 N. Senate Ave., Indianapolis, IN 46204</p> <p>He moved from Virginia to Maryland.</p>	<p>Wrong: She has lived in Indianapolis, IN, all of her life.</p> <p>Wrong: Indiana's three largest cities are Indianapolis, Ind., Fort Wayne, Ind., and Evansville, Ind.</p>

Subject	Explanation	Right	Wrong
Street names and addresses	<p>Use the abbreviations <i>Ave.</i>, <i>Blvd.</i> and <i>St.</i> only with a numbered address. Spell them out and capitalize when part of a formal street name without a number. Lowercase and spell out when used alone or with more than one street name.</p> <p>All similar words (<i>Alley</i>, <i>Drive</i>, <i>Road</i>, <i>Terrace</i>, etc.) are always spelled out. Capitalize them when part of a formal name without a number; lowercase when used alone or with two or more names.</p> <p>Always use figures for an address number. Spell out and capitalize <i>First</i> through <i>Ninth</i> when used as street names: use figures with two letters for <i>10th</i> and above.</p> <p>Abbreviate compass points used to indicate directional ends of a street or quadrants of a city in a numbered address. Do not abbreviate if the number is omitted.</p> <p>Use periods in the abbreviation <i>P.O.</i> for post office box numbers.</p> <p>When a letter is appended to a number, capitalize it but do not use a hyphen.</p>	<p>1600 Pennsylvania Ave. Pennsylvania Avenue Massachusetts and Pennsylvania avenues 9 Morningside Circle 7 Fifth Ave., 100 21st St. 222 E. 42nd St., 562 W. 43rd St., 600 K St. N.W. East 42nd Street, West 43rd Street, K Street Northwest Route 1A</p>	
Subject-verb agreement	<p>Deciding whether a verb should be singular or plural is difficult sometimes. Some guidance:</p> <p><i>The number of</i>, <i>the total number of</i>: the verb is singular.</p> <p><i>A number of</i>, <i>a total of</i>: the verb is plural.</p> <p><i>As well as</i>, <i>in addition to</i>, <i>along with</i>: the verb agrees with the main subject only.</p> <p><i>Or</i>, <i>neither... nor</i>, <i>either... or</i>: the verb agrees with the subject closest to the verb.</p> <p><i>None</i>, other quantities: the agreement of the verb is context-dependent.</p> <p>The word <i>data</i> is plural and takes a plural verb form.</p>	<p>The number of samples was unknown.</p> <p>The total number of cases was hard to predict.</p> <p>A number of patients were examined.</p> <p>A total of 50 vials were sent to the laboratory.</p> <p>Rubella, as well as chickenpox, is contagious.</p> <p>The physicians or the nurse has to be present.</p> <p>The physician or the nurses have to be present.</p> <p>None of the medication was taken.</p> <p>None of the symptoms were present.</p> <p>The data were inconclusive.</p>	
Telephone numbers	<p>Use hyphens for telephone numbers.</p>	<p>800-403-0864</p>	<p>Wrong: (800) 403-0864, 800.403.0864</p>

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Times	To indicate times, use numerals except for noon and midnight. Do not use unnecessary zeroes. Always use <i>a.m.</i> and <i>p.m.</i> with lowercase letters and periods. Do not abbreviate days of the week.	The webinar will start at noon. 7 a.m., 1:45 p.m. The reports are due on Wednesday.	Wrong: 10:00 a.m., 2:30 PM Wrong: She was hired on Fri., June 4, 2010.
Titles	Capitalize formal titles used directly before a name. Lowercase titles that are not used before an individual's name. Never capitalize job descriptions regardless of whether they are before or after a name. Capitalize words such as <i>professor</i> , <i>doctor</i> , <i>coach</i> , etc., when they sub for a person's name. Capitalize words denoting family relationships in such uses.	Mike Braun, governor, addressed the crowd. In his address, Governor Mike Braun reflected on what's changed. The booklets were provided by case manager Jane Doe and project coordinator John Doe. Put me in, Coach! I asked Mom. He called his mother.	
Toward vs. towards	<i>Toward</i> , not <i>towards</i> .	Go toward the light.	Wrong: Go towards the light.
Unfamiliar terms	Writers can use quotation marks or italics to introduce an unfamiliar term on first use. Do not put subsequent references in quotation marks or italics. Either is acceptable as long as use is consistent within the same document or webpage.	Energy is measured in "joules." Energy is measured in joules.	
Who vs. whom	<i>Who</i> is used to refer to the subject of a sentence. <i>Whom</i> is used to refer to the object of a verb or preposition. When in doubt about which to use, try this: If you can replace the word with <i>he</i> or <i>she</i> , use <i>who</i> . If you can replace it with <i>him</i> or <i>her</i> , use <i>whom</i> .	Who brought these delicious tacos? To whom is the letter addressed? Whom do you contact? Who made those fancy tarts and to whom will he give them?	

Subject	Explanation	Right	Wrong
Word choices	<p>When you have a choice between words—especially when writing for non-specialists—use the common, everyday word.</p> <p>Use positive, not negative, words. Negatives like <i>don't</i> in front of a verb can make some readers stumble.</p> <p>Avoid long strings of nouns. Sentences with several nouns in a row can be difficult to navigate smoothly on the first try.</p> <p>Use inclusive language. Unless your document is about men, don't use only male pronouns (<i>he, his</i>).</p>		
Write short paragraphs	<p>Short paragraphs are easier to read than long paragraphs. The white space after a paragraph gives readers a moment to absorb the material they just read before moving to the next paragraph.</p>		
Write shorter sentences whenever possible	<p>Use short sentences to make your point clear on the first reading. People digest short sentences more easily than long sentences. Be direct. Get to the point; don't wander around first. Write sentences focused on one idea.</p>		