

THE STYLE GUIDE of the
ASSOCIATION of GOVERNING BOARDS
OF UNIVERSITIES and COLLEGES
2026

CONTENTS

Introduction

Writing and Editing for AGB

1. Hyphens, Prefixes, and Suffixes
2. Other Punctuation
3. Capitalization
4. Numbers
5. Dates, Addresses, Times, and Telephone Numbers
6. Cyber Terms
7. Abbreviations
8. Miscellaneous Rules
9. Key Word Forms and Reminders
10. Editing for Academia
11. A Note on Layout and Production
12. A Note on Libel and Plagiarism
13. Images
14. AGB Awards

Introduction

The purpose of AGB's style guide is to set forth a basic set of standards to ensure uniform internal and external communication. The guide establishes best practices in the use of punctuation, capitalization, the formatting of numbers and dates, word usage, and the citing of sources. Every organization that publishes information in various formats needs such a guide to assist those who write and edit in achieving accuracy and consistency.

There are numerous style guides in use today—for example, the *Associated Press Stylebook* guide for journalism, the *United States Government Publishing Office Style Manual* for government publications, the *AMA Manual of Style* for medical publishing, and the *Chicago Manual of Style* for the American publishing industry, among others. AGB's publications are edited in accordance with the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

An important point to keep in mind is that the *AGB Style Guide* is a basic guide. It serves as a helpful reference for many of the style points common to AGB's emails, letters, magazine articles, press releases, blogs, reports, briefs, and books. But it is by no means comprehensive, and that is why the *Chicago Manual of Style* is an important resource for editing much of the information that AGB disseminates. (AGB's Content team has both online subscriptions and print editions, and a team member will be happy to assist you with specific questions.) The *Chicago Manual of Style* also provides some free resources on its website, including a [Citation Quick Guide](#) which AGB staff are encouraged to reference.

Dictionaries are also critical to accuracy and consistency, and there are numerous dictionaries in use today. An important point to keep in mind is that a dictionary provides more than spelling. It serves as an up-to-date guide to the English language today. AGB's publications are edited in accordance with the *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* ([Merriam-Webster.com](https://www.merriam-webster.com)), which is available online without a subscription. Some exceptions to Merriam-Webster's guidance are noted in section 9 of this style guide. And it would also be useful for writers and editors to refer to AGB's standard messaging guidelines: "[Standard Messaging](#)."

JULY 2025

Writing and Editing for AGB

Since 1921, the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges (AGB) has been the premier organization for strengthening higher education governing boards and the strategic roles they serve within their institutions and foundations. AGB provides leadership and counsel to member boards, chief executives, organizational staff, policymakers, and other key industry leaders to help them navigate the changing education landscape. These individuals and entities reinforce the value of higher education, innovate through the effective use of technology, and serve the needs of a shifting demographic. AGB also publishes a vast array of content that helps board members govern with confidence. The books, reports, articles, statements, blog posts, podcasts, toolkits, and more that AGB publishes have evolved over the years, but AGB's commitment to sound and strategic governance has not waivered.

Of course, the most important evolution that has taken place in publishing over the course of the past 15 years is the technological one. The terms "cyber risk" and "cyberattack," for example, are relatively new to the publishing landscape and writers and editors must acquaint themselves with these and many other cyber terms.

AGB has always been committed to producing content of the highest quality and has relied on writers—both staff and others—to produce this content. This style manual is a simple tool to help these individuals in this process.

1. Hyphens, Prefixes, and Suffixes

Hyphenation often is a matter of the editor's discretion. Our style favors hyphens when there is doubt. Consistency is key.

1.1

Hyphenate two or more words serving as a single modifier or two words forming a single adjective.

25-year-old woman
nine-year program
silver-plated spoon
in-service-training programs
poorly written bylaws (bylaw is one word)
lower-priced clothing
high-powered board member
a well-executed plan; the plan was well executed
ongoing online education
most persuasive proposals
better written book
strategic-planning process
higher education program
universitywide, campuswide, systemwide, institutionwide (all one word)

Some exceptions:

academic affairs committee
presidential search service
liberal arts college

Academic affairs, presidential search, and liberal arts are considered unit words

The decision-maker knew the decision-making process required tough decision-making.

Note: The *Chicago Manual of Style* recently inserted the hyphen for all uses of decision-making.

Sometimes the hyphenation decision depends on the meaning. “We need more-generous budgets” is correct if we mean that few of our budgets are generous enough. But “we need more generous budgets” is correct if we mean we already have some generous budgets, but we need more of them.

1.2

Do not use suspensive hyphenation.

Correct:

full-time and part-time students

Incorrect:

full- and part-time students

1.3

It's best to check the dictionary for the use of hyphens because there is little uniformity.

post-COVID (AGB style is to say "COVID-19" on first reference and then "COVID" unless referring to the disease specifically)

reelect

posttreatment

ex-wife

self-improvement

multicampus university

multi-institutional issue

nonprofit organization

cosponsor

well-being

antiabortion

non-tenure-track instructor

dot-com company

vice president, not vice-president

1.4

Do not confuse hyphens with longer em dashes, which are used for emphasis to break up clauses in a sentence, and en dashes, which are used for date or number ranges: "He cut off ties with everyone—including his own wife." AGB uses an em dash with no spaces between the dash and the surrounding words. (It is formed by simultaneously hitting the "control," "alt," and "hyphen" keys.)

2. Other Punctuation

2.1

Periods are followed by one space. This is especially important in documents that are to be typeset.

2.2

Quotation marks and parentheses travel in pairs. Periods and commas always go inside quotes; semicolons and colons usually go outside. Placement of question marks and exclamation points depends on the meaning of the sentence. You can dispense with quotation marks with brief, unattributed quotations. Examples: He said, No; or She said, Forget it! (Note the capitalization.)

Use a comma after “said” to set up a quotation if only one sentence is being quoted. If more sentences are quoted, use a colon.

He said, “I’m going to the store.”

He said, “I’m buying the DVD of ‘Little Miss Sunshine.’”

He asked, “How long will it take?”

He said: “Always tell the truth. But tell it in a way that helps you.”

2.3

Use a **semicolon** between independent clauses (phrases with subjects and verbs). When separating a series of items requiring semicolons (as below), the penultimate and last items also should be separated by a semicolon.

They decided to run the race; build a boat, a car, a plane; take along their children; and call all their relatives.

2.4

Do not use an **apostrophe** when pluralizing figures or names, unless the apostrophe is needed to avoid misunderstandings. The exception is “do’s and don’ts”

the 1960s

dot the i’s

circle the a’s

do’s and don’ts

the Smiths

2.5

An **ellipsis** is three periods used to indicate omission of quoted material. In AGB style, it is permissible to dispense with ellipses when truncating a quote—as long as the speaker or writer's meaning is not distorted. An ellipsis at the end of a sentence requires final punctuation (a period, question mark) unless it is used to indicate that the sentence was unfinished, in which case only the three points are used.

He often said that too many were left....but why?

He left the sentence unfinished.... (actual material deleted at end of sentence).

That means...(sentence trails off, not meant to be ended).

2.6

Don't use quotation marks or ellipses for effect.

2.7

Numbered items in copy take a set of parentheses because (1) that's our tradition.

2.8

Colon: The most frequent use of a colon is at the end of a sentence to introduce lists. (There were three considerations: time, money, and feasibility.) Use **commas** to separate items in a list following a colon.

If a full sentence follows the colon, begin that sentence with a capital letter.

Do not use a colon after a verb or preposition (except the verb "said" when it precedes a multisentence quotation).

Correct:

Three criteria are the following:

Incorrect:

Three criteria are:

He did so by:

2.9

Comma: Wrongly placed commas can drastically alter meanings. The most important, most basic, and most frequently misunderstood or ignored rule is the following:

Use a comma when a conjunction (and, but, because, yet, though) links two clauses that could stand alone as separate sentences or when the subject of each clause is expressly stated. *When the subject of the second clause is not stated, do not use a comma before the conjunction.*

The trustee liked the college, and those who attended the college liked him.

The student liked the college and decided to apply.
Do not use a comma after a conjunction.

Example:

He went to school, but according to Joan, he went directly home.

Correct:

And according to Joan, he went home.

Incorrect:

And, according to Joan, he went home.

Use a comma in a series to separate elements and before the final conjunction in a series (known as the serial comma). Note the example in rule 2.7.

Use a comma to indicate a nonrestrictive phrase. Without a comma, the phrase becomes restrictive, meaning confined to a finite set. Examples:

On public boards, where the workload is heavy...

The space shuttle Challenger....

With a comma, the first sentence means that the workload is great on all public boards. Without a comma, it would refer only to those public boards where the workload is heavy. Similarly, because more than one space shuttle exists, the absence of a comma indicates a restrictive phrase referring to a specific shuttle (that is, Challenger cannot be surrounded by commas and presented as a synonym for all existing space shuttles).

Use a comma after example-giving phrases: "For example," "namely," and "that is" are most common. (Note: AGB style is not to use "i.e." and "e.g." Use "that is" and "for example" instead of these abbreviations, followed by a comma.)

The flag is red, white, and blue.

The colors of the flag are the following: red, white, and blue. (Note: no semicolons here.)

Use a comma to separate adjectives equal in strength.

a dark, dangerous secret

No commas before or after Sr., Jr., or III in names or before Inc. for corporations
Correct: Joseph Biden Jr.

2.10

Exclamation point: Use rarely, only when truly emphatic. Never use a comma or period after an exclamation point.

2.11

Look in *Strunk and White* for rules governing possessives. Generally, form the possessive singular by adding "'s" regardless of the final consonant.

Charles's friend
Burns's poems
the witch's malice
Congress's rules

2.12

Quotation Marks and Italics:

When quoting a series of paragraphs, put quotation marks at the beginning of each paragraph but only at the end of the last one.

Quotation marks are not used in question-and-answer formats.

New words or phrases being introduced to the reader can be placed unattributed in quotation marks. Eliminate the quotation marks on subsequent references.

Quotations within quotations take a single quotation mark.

Extended quotations from written sources, for example, should run in italics, indented, without quotation marks.

Do not confuse your keyboard's ditto marks (straight up) with quotation marks, which in most typefaces are curved and facing right or left. The same goes for the apostrophe.

In handling titles:

Use quotation marks for non-AGB reports, book chapters, movies, short stories, songs, articles, essays, columns, and pamphlets.

"The Leadership Imperative"

Italicize books/booklets, AGB reports and statements, radio and television programs, plays, poems, newspapers, magazines, ships, titles of artistic works (paintings, statues), and operas. Don't underline anything unless for extreme

emphasis. Underlining indicates text should be italicized. This applies in business letters as well as typeset material.

The name of a series of books, paragraph header, or official name of a policy should be in title case only (no quotes or italics).

The Buildings and Grounds Committee, from the AGB Board Basics Series
The Princeton University Policy on Institutional Statements and Expressions of Care for Non-academic Units

2.13

Brackets: Use them to interrupt quotations for an editor's insert, as in [sic]. Brackets also can serve as parentheses within parentheses.

3. Capitalization

3.1

Avoid unnecessary capitals. If in doubt, check the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

3.2

Lowercase proper nouns in plural uses.

The Shenandoah and Potomac rivers.

Montgomery and Prince George's counties.

Harvard and Yale universities

the universities of Maryland, Connecticut, and Delaware

3.3

When using the full name of an organization, capitalize it; when not, don't.

the U.S. Supreme Court ... the high court

the University of Chicago... the university

the Association of Governing Boards ... the association

the AGB Board of Directors...the association's board of directors

the Center for Public Higher Education Trusteeship and Governance...the center

the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics...the commission

the Trump Administration...the administration

Full and partial names of congressional committees and commissions and federal departments are capitalized. General references to committees, commissions, and departments are lowercased, as are references to congressional subcommittees.

the U.S. Department of Education...the Education Department

The department proceeded with the investigation.

U.S. Postal Service

House Education and Labor Committee

Senate subcommittee on economic policy

Capitalize acronyms. See also 7.9.

3.4

Capitalize formal titles when they precede the name. Use lower case when they follow the name, unless it is an acronym which has already been defined. Do not capitalize generic descriptions even when they precede the name.

Capitalize racial differentiation terms.

AGB Director Betty Jones
attorney June Jones
trustee Bill Wilson
Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust
the Reverend Jones (Reverend always takes "the")
Dr. Smith (use Dr. only for medical doctors, see rule 7.4)
History Professor Bill Edwards
Bill Edwards, professor of history
AGB President Robert Gale
Robert Gale, a former president of AGB
Susan Smith, CFO of XYZ University
African American, Native American, Black, White, Brown

Exceptions: Use title case for formal titles, even when they follow the name, in rare circumstances when they are part of the title of a piece of content, such as a paragraph header, the title of a chapter, title of a web page, in the caption of a photo or video, or in the subject line of an email. See rule 2.12 and the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

3.5

Capitalize references to public laws, such as Public Law 92-603. Subsequent references can be abbreviated, such as P.L. 92-603. Capitalize "legislature" only when used with the name of a state.

3.6

Capitalize "Act" when referring to a specific law. Do not capitalize "bill."

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act became law in 1965, and the act has been funded every year since then. The child nutrition bill was defeated.

3.7

Capitalize all words, except prepositions and articles of three or fewer characters, in titles of books, plays, periodicals, and articles.

"View From the Board Chair" column in *Trusteeship*

3.8

Do not capitalize or italicize "the" in names of newspapers and magazines. (Because newspapers and magazines differ on whether to include the definite article in their names, this policy saves you the work of checking in each case.) Same goes for universities. Penn State, Ohio State, and George Washington are among those that specify "The" before their name. We don't do it.

the *New York Times*
the *Chronicle of Higher Education*
American University, not The American University

3.9

Do not capitalize full names of academic degrees. Abbreviations are okay in first use.

bachelor of arts (BA), or bachelor's degree
doctor of philosophy (PhD)

3.10

Capitalize and use numerals for references to charts, tables, and figures used in a story.

3.11

Capitalize well-established nicknames, fanciful appellations, and vivid personifications:

the Midwest
the Windy City
the Corn Belt
the Great Society
Mother Nature

3.12

Do not capitalize the following:

administration
board, unless part of formal title (Missouri Coordinating Board for Higher Education, the Missouri board)
email, ecommerce, elearning
federal, unless architectural style or part of formal government title
congressional
member of Congress
presidential

4. Numbers

4.1

Spell out one through ten and use numerals for 11 and higher. (Exceptions below for ages and percentages.)

4.2

Use all numerals or all words (whichever is reasonable) in a series or comparison. If most figures in a sentence are double digits or higher, use numerals throughout the sentence.

2 books, 16 pencils, 12 erasers
five books, eight pencils, twelve erasers
3 to 15 dogs

4.3

Use decimals for numbers in the millions and billions unless writing out an exact number is necessary, such as in research projects. Use commas after three digits.

Correct:	Incorrect:
3.25 billion	three and a quarter billion
3,259,398	3,250,000
4,003	4003

4.4

When showing a range of numbers, use “to” (not a hyphen) unless you’re dealing with years, ages, votes, pages, or statistical research reports.

from 15 to 17 men
from \$30,000 to \$50,000
from 3 percent to 20 percent (not 10-20 percent)
all students ages 9-21
the years 1967-69, 1999-2002, and 2004-07
including pages 113-126
by a 5-4 vote (the highest number first)

4.5

Generally, use figures and the “\$” sign when writing about money.

Correct:
the book cost \$30 (note: *not* \$30.00). I spent \$7.50. Give me a dollar.
Careless:
\$3 million dollars

4.6

Use numerals with percentages unless it's an isolated reference. Do not use "%" in prose, only in tabular material. Use "percent" in prose following a numeral. The noun is "percentage," not percent.

4.7

Use numerals when referring to figures, tables, and pages.

4.8

Use "Number" with figure or rank.

Number 1 draft choice.

4.9

When part of a name, "st," "nd," and "rd" are acceptable (7th Cavalry, 5th Battalion); generally, they are not.

5. Dates, Addresses, Times, Telephone Numbers

5.1

Follow this style for dates:

We know December 25, 2052, is important. We know February 2052 is important. We know that December 25 is important.

Incorrect: December 25th

Do not abbreviate months.

5.2

Follow this style for addresses:

Use numerals for names of streets, except New York City's avenues.

In addresses, abbreviate St., Ave., Blvd., Terr., R.R., Dr., Pl., Rd., La. (Do not abbreviate these in general references.)

Do not write P.O. Box 46; Box 46 is sufficient.

Do not abbreviate Point, Port, Circle, Plaza, Oval, Fort, Mount (except Ft. for military; Mt. for geographic point).

Do not use a comma between the state and Zip Code.

Examples:

1776 14th St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036

8 East 72nd St., New York 10017

190 West Tree Dr., Eugene, OR 97403

383 Fifth Avenue, New York 10019

5.3

Spell out the names of states when they are used alone, such as in the body of the text. When used with cities, in endnotes, or on *informal* mailing envelopes, follow this style:

AL	GA	MD	NJ	SC
AK	HI	MA	NM	SD
AZ	ID	MI	NY	TN
AR	IL	MN	NC	TX
CA	IN	MS	ND	UT
CO	IA	MO	OH	VA
CT	KS	MT	OK	VT
DE	KY	NE	OR	WA
D.C.	LA	NV	PA	WV
FL	ME	NH	RI	WI
				WY

Note that AGB follows this abbreviation style except when sending out formal invitations and then the state is spelled out.

5.4

In text, “United States” is preferred as a noun, and “U.S.” is preferred as an adjective.

5.5

Spell out Canadian provinces and territories; spell out Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands.

5.6

These cities do not require mention of states, even in addresses:

Anchorage	Honolulu	New York
Atlanta	Houston	Oklahoma City
Baltimore	Indianapolis	Omaha
Boston	Iowa City	Philadelphia
Buffalo	Las Vegas	Phoenix
Chicago	Los Angeles	Pittsburgh
Cincinnati	Louisville	Reno
Cleveland	Memphis	Salt Lake City
Colorado Springs	Miami	St. Louis
Dallas	Miami Beach	San Diego
Denver	Milwaukee	San Francisco
Detroit	Minneapolis	Seattle
El Paso	Nashville	Tulsa
Fort Worth	New Orleans	

5.7

Use this style for city-state references:

I'm going to Butte for a visit.

I'm going to Butte, MT, for a visit.

I'm going to the Butte (Montana) school system.

I'm going to Montana for a visit.

I'm going to examine the Butte County (Montana) school system.

I'm going to Butte County, Montana, for a visit.

5.8

Use the following style for time references:

noon, not 12 noon

4:40 p.m.
5 a.m., not 5:00 a.m. or 5 am

5.9

Use the following style for telephone numbers:

(202) 296-8400
(800) 356-6317 (no need to put a "1" before 800)
+(Country Code) #####

5.10

Do not capitalize any letters within or underline email addresses or websites. Hint: When the type turns blue on your screen, it will print underlined. To avoid this, right-click on the e-mail address or Web site. A pop-up menu will appear. Left-click on Remove Link, and the hyperlink will disappear.

5.11

Do not underline web and email addresses in narrative text. Remove the blue hyperlink. Visit the brand guide.

Example: For more information, send an e-mail to Membership@AGB.org or visit www.AGB.org.

6. Cyber Terms

Cybersecurity is of the utmost concern today and board members, academics, and students must have at least a fundamental grasp of what cybersecurity is and what cyber terms mean in today's technology-driven world. Cyber is a prefix that means "computer" or "computer network." Some commonly used cyber terms are:

cybersecurity

cyber risk

cloud

software

breach

firewall

malware

spyware

virus

Trojan horse

Encryption

See AGB's book, [*Cyber Risk Oversight for Higher Education Boards*](#).

7. Abbreviations

7.1

Avoid abbreviations. Spell out anything that would be offensive or puzzling if abbreviated.

7.2

Avoid using "etc." Never use "et cetera." Use "and so forth," "and so on," or "and the like."

7.3

Spell out and capitalize political or professional titles that precede a name.

Governor Smith

President Jones

Professor James

7.4

Do not use Dr., Mr., Mrs., Miss, or Ms. Following initial mention of a full name, use only the last name in succeeding references. (Exception: U.S. presidents should be referred to as Mr. Lincoln or Mr. Biden and medical doctors may be referred to as Dr., such as Dr. Smith or Dr. Jones.) Do not refer to doctorate holders as PhDs, EdDs, or JDs, unless it is in the front matter or back matter of a publication, in an author bio, masthead, or other special acknowledgments section.

7.5

Spell out weights and measures in general usage.

He weighs 160 pounds.

She ran four miles.

It measured nine inches.

Periods follow abbreviations of U.S. weights and measures but not metric abbreviations:

10 cc	50 kw	7 gal.
16 mm	100 btu	4 doz.
4 kg	10 ft.	
5 gr	15 bu.	

7.6

Use the following style for officeholders:

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont)
Rep. Olympia Snowe (R-Maine)
Gov. Martin O'Malley (D-Maryland)

7.7

Use an ampersand only when it is part of a formal name:

Baltimore & Ohio Railroad

Not:

Association of Governing Boards of Universities & Colleges

7.8

District of Columbia: Abbreviate and set off with commas when used with Washington, D.C. (Exception: Washington, D.C.-based association.)

7.9

For first reference to an organization, spell out the name and put the initials in parentheses if there is a second reference coming. In subsequent references, the initials should be used alone. It is not necessary to place the initials in parentheses if they will not be used later.

Initials of organizations familiar to our audience may be used in a first reference. Examples: AGB, TIAA-CREF, FBI, NAACP, CIA, IRS, and AFL-CIO. The initials of some universities may be used without first being offered in parentheses after the full name: UCLA, MIT, and SUNY. Close to home: UVa. is okay on second reference.

Use "the" before an organization's name only if that is the common parlance. AGB, for example, is never "the AGB." Other organizations that do not take the definite article include ACE, NACUBO, OMB, EPA, FEMA, VA, DoD, and HUD.

7.10

Do not abbreviate "versus" except in legal citations.

nature versus nurture

Roe v. Wade

7.11

The U.S. Department of Education is abbreviated ED, not DOE.

7.12

Times take periods: 9 a.m.

8. Miscellaneous Rules

In bibliographies, consistency is essential. Use academic style—periods between authors' names and titles, with the name of the publisher's city (and state, if necessary) followed by a colon.

Blackfoot, Emery. *Chance Encounters*. Boston: Serendipity Press, 1997.
Spencer, Scott. "Childhood's End." *Harper's Monthly*. May 2001, 16-19.

For details, check the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

In general, we try to avoid using footnotes, preferring to incorporate the source information into the text when possible or appropriate. Footnotes distract readers' attention, and the vast bulk of our members do not use our material in an academic context. In most cases, footnotes are unnecessary. The notable exception is for AGB research projects.

Pronouns: When preparing AGB content and using pronouns, please use their/they/them rather than his/her. This approach is more inclusive. When needed, rewrite text to avoid a plural pronoun associated with a singular reference. This avoids non-standard grammar.

Example/correct: College presidents must know their boards.

Refer to the chairman of a board as the "board chair" or simply the "chair." Also, avoid gender stereotypes such as businessman (say business executive) and fireman (firefighter).

Use middle initials when possible, unless the person ordinarily does not. Sometimes initials are needed to avoid confusion with another person.

Avoid unresolved comparatives:

Example: He earned more.

Correct: He earned more than his boss.

Be careful when using "al" endings. AGB is an education association. The education meeting was not educational.

Use "feel" when discussing hands, not opinions.

He felt badly. (He had a poor sense of touch.)

He felt bad. (He had a was ill.)

Keep verb forms together, with the adverb preceding the verb form, unless the construction is awkward or sounds stilted.

Preferred:

The physical plant of the institution usually is not factored into its wealth.

This also would ensure that he could keep his job.

Avoid:

The physical plant of the institution is not usually factored into its wealth.

This would also ensure that he could keep his job.

Similarly, avoid splitting infinitives (unless the split phrase is needed for clarity or has become common parlance).

Example: He vowed to at least double his money.

“None” nearly always takes a singular verb, as in “none of the above is acceptable.” It takes a plural in cases such as “None of the fees have been paid.”

Percent can be used as a plural. Twenty percent were in favor. Be sure to write 10 percent to 20 percent, not 10-20 percent. The “%” sign is to be used only in tabular material, not in text.

Avoid using the words “above” and “below” in copy. Instead of “the table below shows statistics for...” write “Table 1 shows statistics for...”

Spell out fractions in text.

When in doubt, leave it out. Applies to many things in life, including punctuation and capitalization.

9. Key Word Forms and Reminders

Unless otherwise specified below, reference Merriam-Webster for preferred word forms and spellings. When Merriam-Webster lists multiple spellings, default to the standard U.S. variant.

Some audiences (such as the U.S. military) also have specialized naming, spelling, and capitalization conventions. For example, “military-affiliated” is preferred over “military-connected.” When in doubt, check with the author. Quotations should follow the source text but may include an editor’s insert (see 2.13).

acknowledgment: not acknowledgement.

adviser: not advisor.

alumni: Describes a group of people who graduated from an institution. Use “graduate” to describe a single person, never “alum,” “alumna,” or “alumnus.”

among, between: Among applies when there are multiple, roughly coequal parties; Between applies in a two-party relationship.

analog: not analogue.

anticipate, expect: Anticipate means to take action in advance of (“The boxer anticipated the body blow”); more often, the writer simply means expect, as in foresee.

anxious, eager: Anxious implies desire mixed with uncertainty; eager implies enthusiasm and impatience.

attorney, lawyer: Generally interchangeable, but an attorney is empowered to act for another; a lawyer is a person admitted to practice in a court system.

although, while: While is more properly used when a time element is involved. Although is preferred at the start of a sentence; inside of a sentence, “though” is preferred.

Note the distinction:

Although she was away, her cats were fed.
While she was away, her cats were fed.

because, since: Because denotes a specific cause-effect relationship; Since is more properly used in a time element. Do not use them interchangeably.

Again, the distinction:

Since her husband died, she's been calm.

Because her husband died, she's been calm.

behalf: "On behalf of" means as a representative of; "in behalf of" means in informal support of.

beside, besides: Beside means at the side of; besides means in addition to.

biweekly, semiweekly (and monthly): The former means every two weeks; the latter twice a week.

biannual, biennial: Biannual means twice a year; biennial means every two years.

cancelled: not canceled.

canvas, canvass: Canvas is heavy cloth; canvass is a noun and a verb meaning to survey.

capital, capitol: Capital is the city where a seat of government is located; do not capitalize. Capitol is a building; capitalize when part of a formal name—the U.S. Capitol.

century: Lowercase unless part of a proper name—20th Century Fox.

compared to, compared with: Compare like entities or qualities *with* one another; compare different entities or qualities *to* one another.

He compared his Honda with her Toyota.

He compared her smile to a sunny day.

complement, compliment: Complement means to supplement something; a compliment is praise. Complimentary (free) registration.

compose, comprise: Compose means to create or put together; comprise means to contain. A committee is composed of individuals; a committee comprises individuals. It is incorrect to say a committee is comprised of individuals.

congressional, not Congressional.

continual, continuous: Continual means repeated; continuous means uninterrupted.

convince, persuade: One is convinced of an idea, persuaded to take an action.

COVID-19: Per Chicago, use all capitals and include the number on the first reference. “COVID” only on additional references, unless referring to the disease specifically.

Example: COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease. The COVID era was highly disruptive to higher education. COVID-era policies led to shutdowns on most campuses. In fact, even after XYZ University's campus shut down, half of their student body became infected with COVID-19.

different: It takes the preposition “from,” not “than.”

dilemma: It means torn between two options (as in “horns of a dilemma”); do not use in place of problem or predicament.

directions and regions: Lowercase north, south, east, west when indicating direction; uppercase when indicating region.

He will head north.

He will head to the West.

disinterested, uninterested: Disinterested means neutral; uninterested means lacking attention or interest.

ebook: not e-book or eBook

enrollment: not enrolment.

ensure, insure, assure: Use ensure to mean guarantee; insure refers to insurance; to assure is to give confidence.

A good way to remember:

I assure you the board will insure the building to ensure its well-being.

entitled: It means a right to do something; it is not used with book titles.

equal: an adjective without comparative forms.

Wrong: a more equal distribution of wealth.

Right: a more equitable distribution of wealth.

every one, everyone: The former refers to individual items; the latter means all persons.

federal, not Federal.

farther, further: Farther means physical distance; further refers to extension of time or degree.

fewer, less: Use fewer with individual items, less for bulk or quantity.

flaunt, flout: Flaunt means to show off something; flout means to ignore the rules.

forgo, forego: Without the "e" you mean to do without; with the "e" you mean to precede.

fortuitous: It means happening by chance; does not mean fortunate.

fulfillment: not fulfilment.

fundraising, fundraiser: the event or person

group: Usually takes a singular verb: The group of dogs is hungry.

handicapped: Use "disabled."

homosexual: Use gay or lesbian.

hanged: as in by the neck; not hung like a picture.

he/she or his/her: Avoid if possible. Prefer plural "they/them/their" pronouns or say "he/she/they" or "his/her/their."

historic: The article "a" is used before words beginning with a sounded "h," such as historic, hotel, and harbinger. "An" is used before words with an unsounded "h," such as honor and heir.

hopefully: It means "in a hopeful manner." Do not use it to mean "it is hoped."

I, me: "I" is a subject, meaning it usually precedes a verb; "me" is an object, meaning it comes after a verb or preposition. Examples: I feel good. He hit me. Strict enforcement of this distinction can produce stilted English, as in "It is I," but it is worth preserving in most instances.

imply, infer: Writers or speakers imply in the words they use; a listener or reader infers something from the words.

if, whether: “Whether” generally is preferred to “if.”

Please let me know whether you intend to quit.

inservice: one word.

installment: not instalment.

institutionwide: not institution-wide (also, systemwide, campuswide, enterprisewide).

it's, its: Use the apostrophe in the contraction for “it is,” no apostrophe in the possessive.

judgment, not judgement: Spell it with just one “e”—same goes for acknowledgment.

lay, lie: Lay requires a direct object: I will lay me down. Lie takes no direct object: He lies on the beach. Past tense of lay is *laid*. Past tense of lie is *lay*. (If “lie” refers to not telling the truth, the past tense is *lied*.)

LGBTQ+: Not “LGBT” or “LGBTQ” or other variations. This term is widely known and a definition on first use is not necessary.

like, as: “Like” is a preposition that compares nouns: He swore like a sailor. “As” is a conjunction that links two actions: I kissed my wife, as I do each night.

likely: Don’t shorten to “They likely will win;” instead, say, “They are likely to win.”

Log on, login, and log-in: “Log on” is a verb. “Login” is a noun. “Log-in” is an adjective, meaning a word that describes a noun.

For example:

I need to *log on* to my computer. (“Log on” is an action.)

I forgot my *login* for this website. (“Login” is a thing.)

I will need a new *log-in* password. (“Log-in” describes “password.” In other words, it tells which password—a new “log-in” password.)

majority, minority: A majority/minority of what? Always specify (boards, people, institutions, and so forth). The verb tense is plural. For example: “The majority of boards follow that policy.”

may, might: Use “may” for permission, “might” for possibility.

media, news media: Use news media when referring to newsgathering organizations.

memorandum: not memo.

monologue: not monolog.

more than, over: “More than \$5 million, never “over” \$5 million. Same goes for “less than” and “under.”

multicampus: not multi-campus.

multi-institutional: not multiinstitutional.

nonmember: not non-member.

nonprofit: not non-profit or not-for-profit.

online, overall: Both are one word.

only: The word often is misplaced, as in the song “I only have eyes for you.” More authoritative to say, “I have eyes only for you.”

people, persons: Person refers to an individual; People is used when referring to a generalized, not specific number. Thousands of people; seven persons.

percent, percentage points: Be careful of the distinction: If enrollment goes up from 10 percent to 20 percent, it has risen by 10 percentage points but by 100 percent.

planning: Avoid redundancies: “advance planning,” “future planning,” “preplanning.”

presidential: not Presidential.

principle, principal: The first involves a belief or truth (adhere to lofty principles); the second involves someone who is most important (your high school principal was a prince of a pal).

prior, before: Before is nearly always more elegant than the affected “prior to”; prior works better as an adjective: a prior engagement.

rebut, refute: Rebut is a neutral word meaning to reply; refute means to successfully counter an opponent's argument.

spoiled: not spoilt.

staff member, staffer: Use "staff member."

student athlete: Not "student-athlete," unless it is being used to modify something else.

For example:

The board met with the student athlete.

The board hoped to address student-athlete concerns at the university.
(Both are correct because "student-athlete concerns" says what type of concerns.)

Supreme Court of the United States: Capitalize "Supreme Court" but not the "high court" or "the court." The Chief Justice is the Chief Justice of the United States. The other eight members are associate justices (capitalize it when it precedes the jurist's name). Supreme courts of the states are capitalized when used with the state's name.

telephone: telephone, phone, cell phone, mobile, smart phone.

traveling: not travelling.

underway, under way: Our dictionary says one word.

unique: It means one of a kind; avoid modifiers such as very, truly, quite, incredibly.

use: Use "use," not utilize, in the verb form.

very: Avoid using it.

viable: Too often misused to mean "workable"; it should be reserved for something that is capable of living and growing, as a fetus or a business.

videocassette, audiocassette: one word.

virtually: not practically.

virtually: not literally.

which, that: “Which” is used with nonrestrictive clauses; “that” is a restrictive pronoun.

I own the car that is parked here.

The car, which is parked here, is mine.

That is often unnecessary and should be eliminated where possible. Use it to avoid confusion, especially when another word comes between the verb and object:

The mayor announced today that the summer program will begin July 1.

The mayor announced the summer program will begin July 1.

(Hint: “Which” usually is used after a comma. Go “which” hunting through your copy to see if you’ve used “which” and “that” correctly.)

who, whom: Use “who” when someone is the subject of a sentence or phrase; use “whom” when someone is the object of a verb or preposition. A good trick is to substitute “he/she” or “him/her” for “who/whom” or “whoever/whomever” to determine the proper usage.

The woman who rented the room...

The woman to whom we rented the room...

We’re renting the room to whoever can pay for it.

Whomever you appoint will do an excellent job.

10. Editing for Academia

Some special things to remember:

academic degrees: The preferred form is to avoid abbreviations.

Mary Smith, who has a doctorate in English...
He received his master's from Purdue.

bachelor's degree and master's degree: These take apostrophes.

board of directors, board of trustees: Lowercase unless part of a formal title; singular in usage.

The board of directors is here.

boardroom: One word.

CEO: Better left to the corporate world; we prefer to use "chief executive."

chairman, chairwoman, chairperson: Use only if it is the formal title of a person; use "board chair" or simply "chair" when possible. Capitalize if it is a formal title before a name.

chancellor: Capitalize if it is a formal title before a name.

data: It takes a plural—these data.

dean: Capitalize if it is a formal title before a name.

dean's list: Always lowercase.

emeritus: This word is added to formal titles to denote individuals who have retired but retain their rank and title. Place it after the formal title—AGB President Emeritus Tom Ingram, or Tom Ingram, AGB president emeritus. **Do not italicize "emeritus";** like many foreign words, it has become Anglicized.

faculty: Use "faculty members" if space permits and on first reference. "Faculty" alone takes a plural.

grade, grader: Hyphenate noun forms (first-grader) and adjectival (fourth-grade pupil).

institutions: Try to alternate it with “colleges and universities” and “higher education institutions,” depending on context, space, and repetitiveness. (Avoid “institutions of higher education.”)

internet: Lowercase, unless the start of a sentence. Never “the Internet.”

leadership: Better used as an abstraction, not a group of people; use “**leaders**” when generalizing about actions by college presidents and board chairs.

master of arts, master of science: Master’s degree is acceptable.

PhD, PhDs: Preferred form is to say a person holds a doctorate in a certain field. Use abbreviations such as **PhD, EdD, and JD** after a full name only when it is in the front matter or back matter of a publication, in an author bio, masthead, or other special acknowledgments section where you need to identify many individuals by their degree on a first reference. Such abbreviations are set off by commas (Thomas C. Longin, PhD). Use “**Dr.**” only for a person with a medical degree.

presidency: Always lowercase.

president: Capitalize when part of a formal title before a name.

professor: Never abbreviate.

11. Notes on Layout and Production

11.1

In marking up copy on paper, use the standard proofreader's marks listed under "proofreader" in the dictionary. Comments from editors should be circled to distinguish them from words intended to be added to copy. Use the same marks on web proofs.

11.2

Cross references in AGB copy should appear in full sentences without abbreviations.

11.3

When fitting text in fully laid-out page-proofs, minimize the appearance of unsightly orphans and widows (single lines of type at the top of a column and extremely short lines of text at the end of a paragraph). Sometimes there is a tradeoff between the desire to avoid these and unspoken pressure to preserve the author's meatiest words. If cutting or adding harmless words to fix orphans and widows becomes impracticable, then the rule is as follows: Orphaned lines at the top of columns should extend two thirds across the column; widowed lines should extend at least five characters at the end of a paragraph. It is acceptable to have the last line of a text column begin a new paragraph but not when it begins with a new subhead.

12. Libel and Plagiarism

12.1

Libel: Make it clear to our authors that they should be able to verify the accuracy and source of all quotes and statements of fact.

12.2

Plagiarism: To avoid problems, writers should quote when using exact words from source material. When reporting on something published elsewhere (retelling the story in our own words), credit the source.

13. Images

Images used with permission in articles and publications should include captions specifying either the copyright holder or the entity with the right to share the image.

“Credit:” means we are listing the entity that shared it with AGB that is the copyright holder or we are listing the original creator.

“Courtesy of:” means we are listing the entity that shared it that has the right to share it, but that entity does not necessarily hold the copyright or know who the original creator is.

Examples:

Credit: Jane Smith

(Meaning Jane Smith is the creator or holds the copyright for the image)

Courtesy of: Stanford University

(Meaning Stanford University has the right to share the image, but might not hold the original copyright or know who the creator is)

Exceptions: Captions or other acknowledgments are optional for cover art and other images when those images are created by or for AGB and AGB holds the copyright or right to share. Credit/Courtesy of for those images may be addressed in an “acknowledgments” section.

14. AGB Awards

AGB has several awards for excellence in higher education governance and leadership. When discussing an AGB award, always spell out the full name of the award on first reference.

Those boards, institutions, and individuals who receive an AGB award should be referred to as "**recipients**" or "**honorees**." Never refer to them as "winners."

Examples:

AGB is proud to recognize all the 2025 honorees for the John W. Nason Award for Board Leadership, including the following Nason Award recipients: the Metropolitan State University of Denver Board of Trustees and the Tennessee Tech Foundation Board of Directors.