

STYLE GUIDE

USBE Student Support Section

A Concise Guide to Grammar and Formatting

The purpose of this document is to serve as a short guide to style, grammar, and formatting for written material generated by the Utah Board of Education Special Education Services section.

This guide is based on the Associated Press (AP) style manual, but also uses a modified Chicago Manual of Style format when appropriate.

Document Layout and Design

All documents should use the following layout.

Margins

Margins should be 1" all around. This corresponds to the "Normal" selection for margins in Word.

Spacing

Unless otherwise specified, all documents should be single-spaced.

Alignment

Content should be aligned with the left margin.

Indentations

Indentations should be 0.5" in from the left margin and created with the "Tab" button.

Fonts

Accessible fonts should be used. These include, in order of preference, Montserrat, Open Sans, and Calibri.

Font size should be 11pt for all body text.

Accessibility

To make documents accessible to screen readers and users with disabilities, headings, lists, and other stylistic elements should be created using the Styles pane.

Do not create headings by changing the font size, italicizing, or bolding individual words, as this will render them invisible to screen readers.

Further instructions on creating accessible documents can be found in the [Accessibility Guide](#).

Basic Grammar

All documents should use standard American spelling and grammar.

Avoid sentence fragments in your writing. Sentence fragments are sentences that lack a main clause. In English, the main clause has a subject and verb. For a sentence to be a complete sentence, it must contain a main clause. For example: "because they jumped" is a sentence fragment because it lacks a subject. The sentence that began this paragraph, however, is not a sentence fragment. It is an imperative sentence issuing a command. The subject, while not stated, refers to the person who should follow the directive.

Documents should use the active voice. The active voice is a sentence where the subject comes before the verb and the object. For example, “Andrea signed the document.” The passive voice is when the object comes first, as in: “The document was signed by Andrea.” While the passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, its overuse often creates a lack of clarity. Thus, passive voice should be used sparingly.

Check your document for subject-verb agreement. Subject-verb agreement is when the verb form agrees with the subject in number. A plural subject requires a plural verb, for example, “The cats are hungry” versus “The cat is hungry.”

Other recommended best practices for clear and concise writing include the following:

- Use parallelism.
- Avoid unnecessary jargon.
- Avoid the excessive use of adjectives.
- Give concrete examples and explanations.
- Put the main idea first, and before exceptions and conditions.
- Favor short sentences with a limited number of dependent clauses.

Punctuation

The purpose of punctuation is to create clear and comprehensible writing. The following grammatical rules should be used but should not outweigh clarity or concision. For further guidance on punctuation, please visit [the Purdue OWL](#).

Periods

Use only one space after a period and before the next sentence. For example, the space between these sentences.

Commas

Use commas to separate independent clauses when they are joined by a conjunction, such as “and” or “but.”

Avoid comma splices, which are independent clauses separated only by a comma.

Use commas after introductory clauses, phrases, or words that come before the main clause.

Use a comma before a quotation; for example, “quote.” AP style does not use the Oxford or serial comma, so omit the final comma in a simple series. For example, “bacon, lettuce and tomato,” unless such an omission would compromise comprehension and clarity.

Colons and Semicolons

Use a colon after an independent clause when a list or quotation directly follows.

Use a semicolon to join two independent clauses of equal significance.

Use a semicolon when the second clause begins with “however,” “therefore,” “thus,” or another conjunctive adverb, and when the second clause begins with a transition like “in fact,” “for instance,” or “such as.”

Dashes and Parentheses

Use dashes to set off a phrase or list within the main body of the sentence, or to take the place of commas, parentheses, and colons. For example, “The period between the wars—roughly 1919 to 1937—was a period of economic and cultural turmoil.”

Avoid using parentheses. Use dashes instead.

Parentheses may be used for in-text citations.

Italics

AP style does not use italics. However, this usage does not adequately address the needs of this section.

Use italics to set off titles of books, reports, and other standalone works, as well as periodical titles.

Use italics to set of key terms and phrases when first used, and when followed by a definition of terms.

Quotation Marks

Use quotation marks to set off material directly taken from another source or reproduced verbatim.

Use quotation marks to set of titles of shorter works, such as poems, articles, and chapter titles.

Use quotation marks to refer to letters, words, or phrases when used as a linguistic example or as itself. For example, if I refer to the letter “M,” then it should be set off by quotation marks. Or if I refer to a student’s statement that, “The assignment was confusing.”

Periods and commas are placed inside the quotation marks. Dashes, semicolons, and colons are placed outside of the quotation marks.

Words and Numbers

This section provides guidance on the correct usage of words and numbers.

Words

It’s and its. “Its” is the possessive, and functions like hers or his. “It’s” is a contraction of “it is.” It’s not necessary to put an apostrophe in the possessive “its.”

Their, they’re, and there. “Their” is the plural possessive. “They’re” is a contraction of “they are.” “There” refers to a location or direction.

Effect and affect. “Effect” is usually used as a noun meaning the change or the result. “Affect” is usually used as a verb, as in “the weather is really affecting my allergies.” However, there are exceptions to this general distinction, as when “effect” is used as a verb. A more thorough explanation of the distinction between these two words can be found at the [Merriam-Webster Dictionary website](#).

Acronyms and Abbreviations

Avoid the overuse of acronyms.

When acronyms are used, spell out the phrase to be abbreviated and follow it with the abbreviation in parentheses. In longer documents or reports (exceeding 2,000 words), repeat the full phrase of the acronym or abbreviation at the start of major sections, including any appendices.

Numbers and Dates

Spell out numbers under ten. Numbers over ten should be written in numerals, such as 45 or 97.

Dates should be written as month, day, year. For example, June 24, 2021. Do not write them as, “the 24th of June, 2021.”

Abbreviate any month with more than five letters when writing out a date. For example, Nov. 5, 1955. Do not abbreviate March, April, May, June, or July.

Spell out the full month when it is not attached to an exact date. For example, “June was very hot that year.”

If a weekday is part of a date, put a comma after it and before the month. For example, “Friday, April 19, 1997.”

Formatting and Structure

This section outlines how to structure a document using titles, headers and footers, section headings, and lists, both bulleted and numerical. These styles have been modified for use by this department from the APA style.

The formatting and structure given here is intended to help ensure that all documents are accessible to persons with disabilities.

Frontmatter

Titles of documents are centered, bolded, and may use font size between 22pt and 28pt, but no larger.

Titles of documents do not have to appear in the navigation pane.

Subtitles of documents are centered, in font size 11pt, and in font color #5A5A5A.

Both titles and subtitles should employ standard headline capitalization rules according to the Chicago Manual of Style, which are as follows:

- Capitalize the first and last words in titles and subtitles.
- Capitalize all other major words.
- Lowercase the articles.
- Lowercase the prepositions except when used adverbially or adjectivally.
- Lowercase “and,” “but,” “for,” “or,” and “nor.”
- Lowercase “to.”

Headers, Footers, and Pagination

All document pages should be numbered, unless employing a cover page, title page, or other conventionally unnumbered frontmatter.

Page numbers should be in the foot and right justified.

Text in footers or headers should be 10pt.

A short title may be used in the foot to identify the document. For an example, reference the bottom right-hand corner of this style guide.

Section Headings

The use of headings makes documents accessible to screen readers. They provide a visual clarity and organization that helps readers process and comprehend the information presented.

Headings must be formatted using the Styles pane. Otherwise, they will not create an accessible document, or organize the sections properly for other formatting tasks, like the creation of a table of contents.

Headings are formatted according to a modified Chicago/Turabian style.

Headings are nested according to their level order and rank.

Avoid skipping over heading levels. For example, do not move from a level three heading to a level five heading. Skip ranks only when you are beginning a new section, as in moving from a level four at the end of one section and returning to a level two at the beginning of another section.

This document has been formatted according to this guide and can be used as a model.

Level 1 Headings

“Heading 1” in the Styles pane. Centered, boldfaced, headline-style capitalization, and on their own line. L1 headings are used to describe the title, topic, or purpose of a section. Therefore, they could substitute for either document titles or subtitles when appropriate.

Level 2 Headings

“Heading 2” in the Styles pane. Centered, headline-style capitalization, and on their own line. L2 headings indicate each main section of the document.

Level 3 Headings

“Heading 3” in the Styles pane. Left-justified, boldfaced, headline-style capitalization, and are on their own line. L3 headings indicate sub-sections.

Level 4 Headings

“Heading 4” in the Styles pane. Left-justified, italicized, sentence-case capitalization, and on their own line. L4 indicate sub-sub-sections.

Level 5 Headings

“Heading 5” in the Styles pane. Left-justified, sentence-case capitalization, and underlined. L5 headings may be used in one of two ways: on their own line or in line with the body paragraph. When on their own line, use sentence-case capitalization and no period. When in line, format as complete sentence and use a period.

No headings should use periods, except for in-line L5 headings.

Vertical Lists

Lists should employ either a tiered numerical system or a system that alternates between numbers and letters. For example, a numerical tier might look like this:

1. Main Point One
 - 1.1. Supporting Point One of One
 - 1.2. Supporting Point Two

1.3. First Sub-Supporting Point Two

2. Main Point Two

2.1. Supporting Point One of Two

3. Main Point Three

Whereas a system that alternates between numbers and letters might look like this:

1. Main Point

a. Subsection

a.i. Subsection

2. Main Point

Lists should be introduced by a complete sentence followed by a colon.

Bulleted lists should only be used for emphasis and visual clarity of information. They should not be used to arrange information that has a specific order or for lists with sub-sections.

Hyperlinks

Hyperlinks should be inserted into the body of the text using the Insert>Links> Link or by right clicking and hitting “Link.”

Hyperlinks should use meaningful titles to describe what they are linking to, rather than the URL. For example, do not link to the USBE using this format: <https://schools.utah.gov/> Use a description of the [Utah State Board of Education](#) to ensure accessibility to screen readers and for general clarity.

Visual Data: Figures, Tables, Images, and Graphs

All figures should be captioned and numbered, using the following convention: Figure 1: Description of the visual, including a citation (title, creator, date) when appropriate.

Captions can a few words, an incomplete or a complete sentence, several sentences, or a combination.

All figures should be numbered, and all in-text references to them should refer to those numbers (e.g., “as figure 1 shows . . .” or “as table 1 demonstrates . . .”).

The words “figure,” “image,” or “table” should be lowercased and fully spelled out, unless in parenthetical references (where “fig.” or “tab.” may be used).

To ensure accessibility, tables should not be used to organize information that can be represented in a hierarchical manner using headings.

To ensure accessibility, all visuals must use alt text. Please see the [Accessibility Guide](#) for further information on creating accessible tables and images.

References and Citations

In-Text References and Citations

References to External Sources

In-text citations in the body of the document should be formatted in one of the following ways:

1. Articles, news items, websites, or other general sources should follow the Author-Date style recommended by the Chicago Manual of Style.
 - a. In parentheses, put the author, date, and page number after the first mention or direct quotation. For example, “in a case study conducted at the University of Arizona (McCaffrey, Alomi, et al., 2006, 675).”
2. Statutes, laws, codes, and rules should employ the Bluebook citation style. A shorthand guide to this citation style can be found through the [University of Utah Marriot Library](#).
 - a. The most frequently used will be for Utah Codes, which use the following form: Utah Code then the section symbol (Word shortcut Alt + 0167) then the title number, the chapter number and the section number, all separated by dashes. For example, Utah Code § 53E-5-3.

All in-text citations require a full text citation in a reference list, either in the form of endnotes or as an appendix.

References to Internal Sources

In-text citations to internal sources in the body of the document are called cross-references. These can be divided as follows:

1. Cross-references to other documents in the USBE SpEd database should employ the following format: a short, descriptive version of the document’s title hyperlinked to the document’s pathway. For example, when writing a standard operating procedure for a compliance or regulatory task, use the [SOP Performance Procedure Template](#).
2. Cross-references to other sections or areas of the document should employ the following format: a short, descriptive title of the section hyperlinked by right clicking on the description, choosing “Link,” and then selecting “Place in This Document” from the left-hand list. For example, please see [Visual Data](#) for guidance on citing images.

Appendices

Documents that have citations, sample forms, example text, or other additional information that is relevant, but not essential to the main content, should use appendices.

Appendices should be enumerated using letters rather than numbers. For example, Appendix A not Appendix 1.

Appendices should be titled using the L1 Heading style.

Appendices should be titled appendix, the enumerating letter followed by a colon, and then a short description of the content. For example, Appendix A: Parent Focus Group Questionnaire.

Endnotes and footnotes should not be used, unless otherwise instructed.

All references should be listed in a bibliographic format according to the Chicago Author-Date style in an appendix, titled “References.”