

Following style, not fashion

by Bill Walsh

Associated Press Stylebook and Briefing on Media Law, 36th edition, edited by Norm Goldstein. 430 pp., \$11.75.

The *Associated Press Stylebook*, now available in its 2001 edition, is to newspaper English what *The Chicago Manual of Style* is to the English of serious books and magazines. Even those newspapers that have their own stylebooks generally follow the AP model: liberal abbreviations, spare capitalization, no serial commas, no en dashes, “loose” em dashes, few if any italics, and the s-saving possessive style (*Reynolds’ movies*, not *Reynolds’s*).

No other book spells out these newspaper conventions as well or aims at such a broad audience (the AP, a not-for-profit cooperative, has a membership consisting of 1,550 U.S. daily newspapers), and any publication with less-than-academic formality could do much worse than rely on it. Even editors of a more academic bent who might scoff at it as a stylebook will find it a worthwhile and often surprising reference work.

Does *Chicago* tell you that Ben-Gurion International Airport is in Lod, Israel, about 10 miles south of Tel Aviv?

The *AP Stylebook*, however, shares the limitations of the medium it serves. It’s sloppy at times, but without the standard newspaper excuse of deadline pressure. It presents easily remembered rules of thumb instead of inviting readers to think about finely drawn distinctions.

Sometimes there’s too much guidance (an *angry* entry tells us we get *angry at* someone or *with* someone), and sometimes there isn’t enough (there is no advice on headline writing). Inconsistencies in the presentation of that guidance mean that sometimes two people arguing a point can both find support for their positions. The book’s foundation is solid, but the revisions over the years appear to have been done with varying degrees of attention to detail.

This is a conservative stylebook. Sometimes its resistance to change makes it look silly—only last year did it stop calling for the routine inclusion of *Miss*, *Mrs.*, or *Ms.* with women’s last names (though eons have passed since it stopped calling for *Mr.*). But generally this prescriptive conservatism provides a welcome sense of stability. When the 4th edition of *Webster’s New World College Dictionary*, the dictionary AP prescribes as a backup to the stylebook, somewhat rashly listed *website* as the preferred form, AP stayed with *Web site*. I’ve been waiting for two decades for AP to get with the times on *teenager* and *town-house* and *hotline*, but if *teen-ager* and

town house and *hot line* can serve as a bulwark against the onewordization of every technical term that pops up, I can live with erring on the side of the antiquated.

For a book written largely for editors, the *AP Stylebook* contains more than its share of editing lapses. The new edition’s switch to *Quebec City* from *Quebec*, for instance, is reflected in some entries but not others. And a no-nonsense policy on corporate names that for many years has kept newspapers from looking like press releases (“Do not use all capital letter names unless the

letters are individually pronounced: *CRX*, *USX*. Others should be uppercase and lowercase”) is still there, but it’s contradicted: *7Up* has inexplicably become *7UP*. New advice on *eBay* and *iMac* also contradicts the general rule, and the lack of advice on all-lowercase names is among missed opportunities too numerous to list here. The expanded Internet guide, while ambitious and generally



This spiral-bound paperback, which can be ordered directly from the AP (www.ap.org), is both more up-to-date and less expensive than the conventionally bound paperback edition published by Perseus.

► BROWSING

Books appear in roughly reverse chronological order, from the not yet published to the sorry-we-missed-it-last-issue:

Let a Simile Be Your Umbrella: More On Language, by William Safire. Crown, 400 pp., \$25.00. A trove of items from recent “On Language” columns, arranged alphabetically from “Adultery and Fraternization” to “Zeens and Mags.”

The Warden of English: The Life of H. W. Fowler, by Jenny McMorris. Oxford, 252 pp., \$30.00. This biography makes clear that the man behind *Modern English Usage* was every bit as remarkable as his handiwork.

The New Oxford American Dictionary. Oxford, 2,022 pp., \$50.00. A greatly expanded edition, containing more than 250,000 definitions.

The Copy-Editing and Headline Handbook, by Barbara G. Ellis, Ph.D. Perseus, 351 pp., \$16.00 paperback. This guide for neophyte newspaper copy editors imparts an enormous amount of information and advice.

handy, is not up to the standards of the rest of the book. Most notably, it calls for *login*, *logon*, and *logoff* without elaboration. “I login to my computer”? I don’t think so. See the *knock out* (v.), *knockout* (n.) entry for an illustration of how that kind of verb works.

Flawed though the *AP Stylebook* may be, all in all I still love it. My feelings about the stylebook are much the same as my feelings about Microsoft software: it’s great, but it could be a lot better. ■

Bill Walsh is the copy-desk chief for the business section of The Washington Post. He is the author of Lapsing Into a Comma: A Curmudgeon’s Guide to the Many Things That Can Go Wrong in Print—and How to Avoid Them and runs The Slot: A Spot for Copy Editors (www.theslot.com) on the World Wide Web.