SECTION 2: CHECKING FACTS IN THE AP STYLEBOOK

You've already been introduced to the AP Stylebook in your first newswriting class. Your instructors expected you to abide by its rules as you wrote your stories. But the stylebook is of even greater importance to copy editors. They rely on it for guidance on at least five kinds of issues:

1. The stylebook lists the rules explaining when to abbreviate and capitalize words and when to use figures. Clearly, these rules are arbitrary: They were created by committees of editors. But they are the law at most papers.

2. The stylebook mandates preferred spellings. Lots of words have more than one spelling: adviser or advisor, ax or axe, canceled or cancelled, and goodbye, goodby or good-bye. You'll find each of these spellings in dictionaries. But newspapers want to be consistent. The stylebook tells which spelling to use. It also gives preferred spellings for many corporate, governmental and political entities.

3. The stylebook explains many grammatical problems. Copy editors often run into grammatical constructions they aren't sure are right. The stylebook may have the answer.

4. The stylebook explains word usage. Copy editors do not want to let the wrong word slip into the paper. They guard against mix-ups in words such as concrete and cement, continual and continuous, adverse and averse, between and among, convince and persuade, and arbitration and mediation. The stylebook is a good place to check the words you aren't sure of.

5. The stylebook also has lots of information that editors use to check the accuracy of stories and to gain background. You'll find facts about business, weather, sports, firearms, names of organizations, governmental bodies, religion and other topics. (As with any reference book, the information in the stylebook becomes outdated. If the facts in the story are different from information in the stylebook, you should question the reporter. But don't change copy unless you're sure you're right.)

Besides the AP Stylebook, many newspapers also have their own supplementary stylebooks as well as their preferred dictionary, which often serve these functions:

1. They may give guidance on sensitive questions. They may specify the paper's preferences for calling people gay or homosexual, using black or African-American or describing pickets at an abortion clinic as pro-life or anti-abortion.

2. They may give style rules for and explain the functions of local governmental and police agencies. Laws and procedures vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction. Stylebooks often explain some of these peculiarities and spell out how the paper handles them. An example: In some states, counties have both county commissions and county councils. Stylebooks may explain each body's responsibilities.

3. They give correct spellings and rules for abbreviations on second reference for local businesses and the names of groups, streets, buildings, airports, and so on. Stylebooks in Florida remind reporters and editors that a major north-south toll road is "Florida's Turnpike," not "The Florida Turnpike." The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's style supplement clears up some myths about the death of Margaret Mitchell, the author of Gone With the Wind. When the Olympics were held in Atlanta in 1996, the Journal-Constitution added a section with guidelines for stories about the Games.

4. Some include the newspaper's ethics code and synopses of state and local laws affecting the media. These ethics codes often explain the paper's rules on accepting free tickets and gifts, writing free-lance articles, and avoiding financial and social conflicts of interests. Many include guidelines for naming rape victims, identifying juvenile offenders and dealing with belligerent readers.

Unfortunately, the AP Stylebook doesn't make a lot of its information easy to find. For example, in many editions of the AP Stylebook, if you want to know whether shape-up is hyphenated, you can find the answer by looking up shape-up in the S section of the main part of the Stylebook. But if you want to know whether makeup is hyphenated, you have to turn to the U section and check under -up.