

Best Writing Practices Guide for NSS Publications

Formerly known as the “Style Sheet”

Updated 9/18/2021

Consistency is an important consideration when writing material intended for publication. Besides consistent style and formatting, you should be consistent in spelling words not commonly found in dictionaries. Caving vocabulary is often spelled haphazardly because there is no “official” source to consult. This is now the official source when it comes to National Speleological Society (NSS) publications.

Style and Formatting

Use single, not double space, after periods.

Don't indent paragraphs using tabs or spaces. These will have to be removed for proper formatting in the layout program.

Capitalize NSS internal organizations (IOs). [**Example:** the Digging Section]

Capitalize Convention when referring to the NSS event and Society when used by itself to refer to the NSS. [**Example:** I am going to Convention, the Society's premier event.]

Italicize books, periodical titles, and other publications. [**Example:** *NSS News* and *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies*]

Use quotation marks for article titles in the body of an article. [**Example:** The author of “Donation of Perkins Cave to the NSS” is John Wilson.]

Italicize words in foreign language, but not names of cities or people.

Use italics for emphasis, not bold, capitals, or underlines.

Use the long em dash with no spaces on either side for a sudden change, disruption, interruption, or for emphasis. [**Examples:** They had 250 feet of rope—enough to drop the pit—so they rigged in. There are so many reasons to use an em dash—too many to list really.]

Abbreviations and Acronyms

- a.m., p.m. (lower case only)
- USA, TAG, NSS (no periods)
- Spell out units of measure. [**Examples:** 5 meters, 20-foot-deep drop, 2 inches]
- Don't abbreviate state or country names in body text. State abbreviations may on occasion be used in captions if need be to shorten them. [**Examples:** West Virginia, not WV; Mexico, not Mex.]
- Don't abbreviate or capitalize compass directions. [**Examples:** southern, to the north]
- Establish acronyms at first use. [**Example:** The Virginia Region (VAR) is one of the oldest in the organization. Cavers from VAR love deep pits.]

- Establish a short form to represent a longer phrase that you'll use a lot. [Example: The *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies* (Journal) is widely read by cavers. The Journal is available on the NSS's website.]

Grammar Pointers and Common Mistakes to Avoid

Contractions versus possessives: The following are contractions: it's, they're, he's, she's, you're. The following are possessives: its, their, his, her, your. [**Examples:** It's on its way. He's on his way. She's on her way. They're on their way. You're on your way.]

Plurals versus possessives: Add an "s" (or "es") to make something plural. Add an apostrophe plus an "s" to make it possessive. [**Examples:** We found the caves in the 1960s. (2 plurals—caves, 1960s) The cave's owner gave us permission to enter his cave. (1 possessive—cave's)].

Abbreviations that are made plural don't include an apostrophe, a very commonly seen error. [**Example:** SLRs or DVDs, not SLR's or DVD's]

Hyphenating adjective phrases: Hyphenate phrases before the noun but not after. [**Examples:** A four-level cave/a cave with four levels; a 3-foot-tall crawl/a crawl that is 3 feet tall.]

Separate adjectives by commas when they describe the noun equally. [**Example:** A large, heavy rock or a heavy, large rock.]

Use a comma before "and" or "or" in a series of three or more items. [**Example:** I was with Bob, Carol, Ted, and Alice.]

Do not use a comma to separate adjectives when they are cumulative. [**Example:** A large fallen rock (a fallen rock that is large)]

Do not add a hyphen after adverbs ending in -ly when used in a phrase. [**Example:** A tightly curved passage]

Do not use a hyphen for "very," "more," or "most" in front of adjectives. [**Examples:** A very wide room; a most amazing formation; a more common mistake]

Remember that "feet" is plural and "passage" is singular. [**Examples:** 35 feet were surveyed and 35 feet of passage was surveyed]

Spelling

When spell checker marks a compound word wrong, such as "ridgewalk" or "handline," writers often just add a space between the words, which "takes care" of the problem. Some of these words exist in dictionaries, but spell checker still marks them wrong. Some words are difficult to find in a dictionary or you'll find differing spellings. Style guides such as Associated Press or the *Chicago Manual of Style* handle some spellings differently, such as "a.m." or "AM" or "A.M." As a result, this section of the *Best Writing Practices Guide for NSS Publications* (Guide) will attempt to put some order in the confusion. The spellings below were selected in order to remain as consistent as possible throughout NSS publications.

Internet-related

- email (one word, not hyphenated)
- internet (lower case)
- website (one word, lower case)
- Now that we are putting active hyperlinks in our online versions, authors are encouraged to make active hyperlinks in Word documents.
- Consider shortening really long URLs in text using a program like bit.ly.

Preferred Spelling for Terms Used a Lot by Cavers

- Aboveground (similar to “belowground” and “underground”)
- Airflow
- Archaeology (note the “ae”)
- Belowground (similar to “aboveground” and “underground”)
- Borehole
- Climb-down (noun; two words when used as a verb)
- Climb-up (noun; two words when used as a verb)
- Convention (capitalized when referring to the annual NSS Convention)
- Derig
- Down-climb (noun)
- Downstream
- Foothold
- Freshwater (single word when used as an adjective)
- Grottos (cave clubs)
- Handhold
- Handline
- Helictite (not helectite)
- Led (past tense and past participle of the verb “lead”) [**Example:** She will lead the trip today; yesterday she led the trip.]
- Prusik (capitalized because it’s a proper name; but “prusik/prusiking/prusiked” as a verb is not capitalized)
- Pull-down (hyphenated when used as an adjective)
- Rappel, rappelled, rappelling (commonly misspelled as “repel,” etc.)
- Rerig
- Ridgewalk
- Saltwater (single word when used as adjective)
- Society (capitalized when referring to the NSS)
- Through-trip
- Underground (similar to “aboveground” and “belowground”)
- Upstream
- Wetsuit

Numbers

Write out numerals one through nine when used as whole numbers; use numerals if you have a fractional number under 10. [**Examples:** six cavers, 6 1/2, 4.5]

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Exception to above: USE NUMERALS FOR ALL MEASUREMENTS (passage widths, heights, pit depths, etc.). [**Examples:** a 9-mile-long cave; three 5-inch-long salamanders]

Use numerals for numbers 10 or over in text. [**Examples:** 10 cavers, 20 3-inch bolts]

Spell out numbers that start a sentence. To avoid awkward occurrences, flip the sentence around if possible. [**Example:** “Two hundred twenty-five feet were surveyed that day.” becomes “On that day, 225 feet were surveyed.”]

Spell out fractions in descriptions. [**Example:** He brought two-thirds of the supplies.]

Use numeric fractions for measurements. [**Example:** three 1/4-inch bolts]

Do not use apostrophes in decades since they’re not a possessive. [**Example:** The 1980s]

Use “to” or an en dash for number or date ranges, not a hyphen or short dash. [**Examples:** 12 to 15 feet (not 12-15 feet); 12–24 cavers (note the wider en dash, which can be found under the Insert/Symbol tab); January 11–15, 2022]

Hyphenate both elements of ranges with dimensions with a space after the first element. [**Example:** a 12- to 20-foot meander (not a 12-to-20-foot meander)]

Use hyphens when the numbers are part of a compound adjective. [**Examples:** A 350-foot pit; a 5-mile-long cave]

Hyphenate dimensions that are compound adjectives before a noun but not after. [**Example:** Three 25-foot-deep pits, but three pits 25 feet deep]

Calendar Section of the NSS News

Use this format: Date first, name of event, brief description, contact info. Please avoid lengthy descriptions.

Contact info should include, in this order: Address, phone, email, web address/URL.

Don’t use “email:” or “web address:” when giving these addresses.

Book Review Bibliographic Info for the NSS News Should Ideally Include:

- Title or what-it-is-if-it-isn't-a-book
- Author
- Editor
- Publisher
- Year
- Number of pages
- Type of binding (hard or soft; perfect-bound or stapled)
- Dimensions (for example, 8.5"x11")
- ISBN
- Where-to-get-it, price