

Names and Credentials

Building Your Article · By Simon Townsend · 3 min read

A journalist can get most of a story wrong and recover with a correction. Spell a person's name wrong in print and you have told that person, their family, and their colleagues that you did not care enough to check. Simon's rule was simple: names first, last, and always.

Academic letters and post-nominals

Australian copy uses post-nominals, the letters after a name, only when they are relevant to the story. A medical specialist being quoted on a clinical matter carries "FRACP" if the story is about the College, but in a general news piece you would write "paediatrician" and drop the letters.

When you do include them, the convention is:

Honours first (AO, AM, OAM), then academic qualifications (PhD, MD, LLB), then professional fellowships (FRACP, FRACS, FAICD), then memberships.

"Dr" is the standard title for anyone with a PhD as well as medical doctors in Australian usage. "Professor" is used only by those currently holding a professorial title. "Emeritus Professor" for retired professors who still hold that honorific.

Do not write "Dr Jane Smith, PhD." The "Dr" and the "PhD" say the same thing. Pick one.

Honours from the Order of Australia are capitalised without stops: AC, AO, AM, OAM. The order of precedence from highest is AC, AO, AM, OAM. Mention the letter on first reference if it is relevant. Sir and Dame titles require the letters AC or AK and are given only for the highest levels of the Order.

Military ranks: on first reference, write the full rank ("Lieutenant General Angus Campbell AC, DSC"), and on subsequent references use the shortened form ("General Campbell") or surname only if the rank has already been established.

Police and emergency services ranks follow similar logic. "Commissioner," "Assistant Commissioner," "Superintendent" on first reference; surname or rank-plus-surname after.

Spell the name. Always.

Ask everyone you interview how they spell their name. Write it down. Read it back. This takes ten seconds and prevents the single most common embarrassment in news copy.

Common traps:

McDonald vs MacDonald. Different surnames. Check.

Stewart vs Stuart. Different spellings, different families.

Catherine vs Katherine vs Kathryn vs Kathy. These are different names, not variants. A person called Kathryn is not called Katherine.

Bridget vs Brigid vs Bridgit. All in use in Australia. None are interchangeable.

Geoff vs Jeff. Usually Geoff in Australia. Ask.

Indigenous names: always ask, never guess. Names from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages often have specific spellings that reflect community preferences. Ask the person or the community.

Migrant names and names from non-Roman scripts: ask, and ask how they like it rendered. Some people use one transliteration in English and another in their native script. Use their preferred English form consistently.

Hyphenated names: keep the hyphen. Do not collapse it. "Lindy Chamberlain-Creighton" is not "Lindy Chamberlain Creighton."

Nicknames: use the form the person uses in public. If a politician is "Albo" in public but "Anthony Albanese" on first reference in a news piece, do that.

First reference and later references

First reference: full name and relevant title. "Foreign Minister Penny Wong" or "Senator Penny Wong."

Later references: last name only. "Wong said yesterday..." Avoid switching between the full name, the first name, and the last name in a single piece unless the style guide says otherwise.

Most Australian publications do not use honorifics (Mr, Ms, Mrs, Dr) on subsequent references in news copy. The New York Times does. The Age, The Australian, the ABC do not. Check your house style.

Getting it wrong

If you misspell a name, issue a correction. Immediately. In print, in the online version, and in any social post that carries the error. A name misspelled once can be fixed. A name misspelled and then left standing is an insult.

Simon was particular about this. "There is no excuse for a misspelled name," he used to say. "None. There is a notebook, there is a telephone, there is a dictionary. Use them."

The habit to build

Every interview, ask: how do you spell your name? What is your full title? Is there an "A" in your middle initial? Any honours we should mention?

Write it down. Check it when you file. Check it again at the subbing stage. Then, once the piece is published, check it again.

A journalist who does this for a year will build the habit for life. A journalist who does not will be remembered for the one time they got it wrong.

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