



Learning Associated Press Style: A Teaching Technique

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Abstract

Mastering the journalistic style of writing is a new challenge many underclassmen have never attempted. Dr. Nia Johnson of Samford University details an activity designed to help foster the academic adjustment required to learn Associated Press style by engaging students in their own learning, interacting with others, and actively, critically thinking about the material.

Journalistic writing and AP style stand in contrast to the formal research style of writing taught in many language arts classes at both the secondary and higher education levels. Students learning to write for the media for the first time must essentially unlearn a style of writing they've spent a great deal of time studying and grasp a much different way of presenting information to mass audiences. Instructors of introductory newswriting courses must be aware of this challenge facing their students and plan accordingly.

People learn through "thinking about the meaning of the new knowledge and connecting it to what they already know" as well as when they "interact with others; ...actively engage in an activity; ...receive the new material multiple times but in different ways; ... [and by] making and correcting mistakes than from being correct in the first place," according to international education development expert Dr. Linda Nilson (2016, pp. 4-5). With Nilson's research in mind, this activity is designed to help students master new-to-them material by catering to a variety of learning styles and applying multiple categories of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Bloom, et al.,

1956) by achieving three learning objectives:

1. Demonstrate an understanding of AP style.
2. Develop a collaborative presentation of the material.
3. Identify, describe, and explain correct usage of Associated Press style.

The Activity: Steps and Procedures

This AP style learning method is comprised of two parts: a group presentation and a review game. The execution takes one week in a typical 15-week semester, with two or three additional weeks of time for the groups to prepare their presentations.

The instructor assigns students to groups of roughly equal numbers, making sure each group contains students of mixed-ability and is as diverse as possible. Each group is assigned an AP style topic, like time, titles, numbers, addresses, or abbreviations. The students are informed that their job is to research everything about AP style regarding their topics and present their research in a fun, easy-to-remember way. Each group should use games, skits, visual aids or other creative techniques to help their classmates

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remember the AP style rules being presented. Students are instructed that the presentations should last 15–20 minutes, involve each member of the group, and be designed to teach the assigned topic adequately enough that their classmates will be prepared for an AP style test.

With the presentations students “produce new or original work,” the pinnacle of Bloom’s taxonomy, and also work their way through each of the preceding steps (Bloom, et al., 1956). The collaborative effort also contributes to the educational process (Nilson, 2016).

A review game helps to tie together all the information from the presentations and lets the instructor identify areas where students may be struggling. To play, the students sit with their groups and are told to take out one sheet of paper. A question appears on the screen, and the groups take turns conferring about and answering the questions. The questions are a variety of multiple choice, fill in the blank, and editing exercises. However, a group cannot simply provide the correct answer; they must also explain why that answer is correct. When they provide a fully correct answer, the team selects a tosser who crumples the paper into a ball and tosses it into an empty trashcan for an additional point; thus, the name of the game: AP Style Trashketball. The value of Trashketball comes in its subtle contribution to the experience: the gamification of the material, a fun and unexpected element in a college-level classroom that enhances group comradery and allows students to relax and play during class.

Participating in the review game requires the students to demonstrate a remembrance and understanding of the material, and to apply, analyze and evaluate that information in actual writing scenarios. The gamification of the review process has shown effective in both anecdotal observation of this activity’s execution, and in research regarding using games in the classroom (Nilson, 2016). Further, the team game aspect allows for additional collaboration, which provides for an enhanced learning experience (Slavin, 2012).

Assessment

The group presentations take place early in the semester, allowing students to connect with their classmates on a quicker and more personal basis, and allowing students to continue to master the topic through the application of AP style in subsequent writing assignments. The effectiveness of the presentations is determined at their conclusion, as each typically includes a short review game like Kahoot, an online game-based learning platform that allows students to competitively answer questions as individuals or teams. This allows the instructor to note how well the class comprehended the material and provide any clarifying or additional information.

Trashketball is also designed to be an assessment of the presentations, as it provides an opportunity for students to demonstrate an understanding of what they learned and allows the instructor to see what topics may require more instruction. During Trashketball, the chance to discuss the questions before

Table 1 – Student Feedback: Group Presentations

Question	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
How difficult was the group presentation project? (0=easy; 10=hardest project ever)	0	8	3.21	2.11
How much did you enjoy the group presentation project? (0=worst project ever; 10=most fun school assignment ever)	2	10	5.86	2.42
How much did this project help you grasp AP style? (0=no difference; 10=I understand so much better now.)	4	10	7.43	2.29
How clear were the instructions? (0=I had no idea what to do; 10=I knew exactly what to do.)	5	10	9.21	1.47
How clear were the expectations for this assignment? (0=I had no idea what I would be graded on; 10=I knew exactly what the final result would be.)	5	10	8.79	1.74
How was the group work aspect of this project? (0=I would have preferred to do this alone; 10=I loved my group!)	0	10	6.43	3.56

answering employs an effective cooperative learning experience Nilson (2016) calls “think, share, pair”, where students think about an answer and then share their thought processes with a partner before discussing the answer as a class. Additionally, the concept of the fully correct answer, meaning students must explain the reason why an answer is correct, ensures that students have not simply learned the answer to a question, but can reason with the material and apply it to multiple situations.

The formal assessment of the presentations and review is an AP style test. After teaching and learning the material, and reviewing the material with Trashketball, the students have a few days to study individually before taking the test, which assesses each topic covered in the presentations.

Allowing class time for students to work on their presentations helps prevent scheduling issues among group members and helps the instructor determine if there are major group discords or work disparities. By working in groups, students form a quicker and better bond with some of their fellow classmates early in the semester, which leads to greater interaction and discussion throughout the rest of the course. The presentations and the review game also provide a change to the class routine, which keeps the course interesting

and the students better engaged.

A survey of more than half the students in this course during the 2020 calendar year gauged their perspectives about this learning method. The questions and students’ responses are presented in Tables 1, 2 and 3. Overall, students enjoyed the project, did not find it too easy or overly difficult, self-reported gaining a good understanding of AP style, and self-reported maintaining a good understanding of AP style a year or more after the class ended.

In the first section of the class in 2020, the average score on the AP style test taken a week after the presentations and review game was 95%, with a high score of 100% and low score of 86% (SD=1.91). In the second section of the class in 2020, the average score was 92%, with a high score of 104% (a bonus question allowed for a highest possible score of 105%) and a low score of 74% (SD=4.31).

One open-ended question on the AP style test allowed students to provide feedback about the presentations and review game learning method:

“I think the key to grasping AP style is repetition of the same basic principles presented over and over again in different ways. A kinesthetic activity like Trashketball definitely keeps the learning environment dynamic.”

Table 2 – Student Feedback: Review Game

Question	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
How difficult was the review quiz? (0=easy; 10=hardest project ever)	0	10	3.31	2.55
How much did you enjoy this quiz? (0=worst project ever; 10=most fun school assignment ever)	5	10	8.08	1.77
How much did this quiz help you better grasp AP style? (0=no difference; 10=I understand so much better now.)	3	10	7.64	1.99
How clear were the instructions? (0=I had no idea what to do; 10=I knew exactly what to do.)	5	10	9.14	1.55

Table 3 – Student Feedback: Grasp of AP Style Post-Course

Question	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
How well do you grasp/remember AP style now? (0=don't remember any at all; 10=remember everything perfectly)	2	8	6.71	2.46
How much do you think the AP style presentations and review game helped you remember AP style after our class ended? (0=did not help at all; 10=helped completely)	2	10	6.79	2.62

“My understanding of AP style definitely improved. Before I would just do what felt correct and hope for the best, but the AP style portion of the material was super helpful.”

“My favorite thing about this class so far is how much we get to engage and participate with our classmates and in the lessons. It’s very hands on which makes it more fun and interesting.”

“The games and the challenges keep us entertained while simultaneously helping us learn the information so quickly.”

“Playing Kahoots, Trashketball, and doing group projects help me stay really engaged and interested!”

Conclusion

Learning Associated Press style is necessary for journalism and mass communication students, and the group presentations and Trashketball review game described here can help students more easily and quickly master this important material in a fun and relaxed way that promotes real learning through engagement and critical thinking. The kinesthetic component of the Trashketball review game, combined with cooperative learning and critical analysis of the material, make this an effective way to ensure students truly learn Associated Press style.

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