ACES welcomes AP Stylebook entry on suicide; AP reveals changes at 2015 conference

By Taylor Carlier

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
March 27, 2015

PITTSBURGH – The most influential change to the 2015 Associated Press Stylebook, which was unveiled at The American Copy Editors Society’s national conference today, was the addition of a section of guidelines pertaining to suicide.

As ACES focused on the theme of “Getting it Right” for its 2015 conference, the AP Stylebook announced its updates to guidelines, which most notably included new entries about language sensitivity. Other additions and changes to the Stylebook were released earlier on the guide’s online version, but the suicide entry in particular is something that goes along with one of ACES conference theme tracks — cultural sensitivity.

“Copy editors aren’t just the guardians of punctuation and grammar,” ACES President Teresa Schmedding said about the changes. “Increasingly, we are becoming an ethical filter as well. Editing is a multi-faceted job, and the seriousness of it isn’t always at the forefront of people’s minds. These changes to the Stylebook are a good reminder that editors of all kinds need to keep sensitivity at the top of the editing checklist.”

The suicide entry will be added as follows:

“Generally, AP does not cover suicides or suicide attempts, unless the person involved is a well-known figure or the circumstances are particularly unusual or publicly disruptive. Suicide stories, when written, should not go into detail on methods used.

Avoid using committed suicide except in direct quotations from authorities. Alternate phrases include killed himself, took her own life or died by suicide. The verb commit with suicide can imply a criminal act. Laws against suicide have been repealed in the United States and many other places.

Do not refer to an unsuccessful suicide attempt. Refer instead to an attempted suicide.

Medically assisted suicide is permitted in some states and countries. Advocacy groups call it death with dignity, but AP doesn’t use that phrase on its own. When referring to legislation whose name includes death with dignity or similar terms, just say the law allows the terminally ill to end their own lives unless the name itself of the legislation is at issue.”

For many years, the changes to the Stylebook that have caused the biggest waves have to do with long-time grammar rules being changed, but ACES is supportive of the direction the group went with sensitivity because of the direction journalism, writing and social media are moving.
“While we, as copy editors, might get more riled up about state abbreviations or making website one word, these types of changes aren’t likely to change lives,” Schmedding said. “But how we handle suicide and style issues on that level, will. Today’s story on the co-pilot of the Germanwings plane crash is a prime example of the need for consistency and responsible coverage when editors need to make style decisions on information of this kind quickly.”

Schmedding was a member of a group of editors and academics who were consulted on changes to the 2015 AP Stylebook. She is also quoted about the importance of the Stylebook for copy editors on the back of the new edition, which will be released in May.

ACES, the American Copy Editors Society, is a non-profit 501(c)(3) education and membership organization working toward the advancement of copy editors. Our aim is to provide solutions to editing problems, training and a place to discuss common issues. ACES is an international members’ alliance of editors working at newspapers, magazines, online news sites, public relations and marketing agencies and corporations. ACES was started in 1997 by Pam Robinson of Long Island, N.Y., and Hank Glamann of Houston. For more information, visit www.copydesk.org.

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