



## Editing rules will be memed: Using memes to support writing practice in journalism courses

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### Abstract

This article presents a classroom assignment that uses memes to help journalism students engage with editing rules. Students identify a writing rule or convention they find most difficult, design a meme to illustrate it, and contribute their work to a class collection. The assignment combines humor, peer learning, and critical reflection, producing a shared resource that acts as a crowd-sourced repository of editing guidance that students can reference as they continue refining their editing skills. The article outlines how the assignment works, highlights its pedagogical value, addresses potential pitfalls, and discusses observed impacts. While designed for a journalism class, the assignment can be readily adapted for writing courses in strategic communication.

Editing, whether it involves grammar, Associated Press style, or journalistic conventions, remains a persistent challenge in journalism classes. Students often find it difficult to master editing rules, while traditional exercises may seem repetitive or disconnected from their everyday media practices. This assignment adapts internet memes, a form of communication students know and routinely practice outside of class (Milner, 2018; Shifman, 2014), to support the teaching of editing in journalism classes by asking students to translate challenging editing rules into memes and contribute them to a shared class collection. Having students reframe editing rules in this way challenges them to think critically about their recurring errors and to practice distilling knowledge into quick, memorable takeaways. The result is a collection of memes that functions as a collective editing reference that is at once humorous, practical, and expressed in students' own voices.

Although this article draws on my experience

developing the assignment for journalism classes, it can be readily adapted for courses in strategic communication and, given its accessibility and minimal resource requirements, is well suited to a variety of learning environments.

**Assignment design.** Students are asked to reflect on the editing rule or convention they find most challenging by revisiting their writing, create a meme that encapsulates this rule, and upload it to a shared slide deck on Google Drive, which becomes a crowd-sourced repository of actionable editing guidance that students can reference as they continue refining their editing skills.

The memes can relate to any aspect of editing, such as grammar, AP style or journalistic writing conventions, and should provide actionable guidance for overcoming the challenge, as illustrated in Figure 1. For example, if a student struggles with prioritizing active voice, their meme might illustrate the “by zombies” heuristic, a frequently used (and, as a meme

in Figure 1 humorously notes, often overused) technique for distinguishing between active and passive voice constructions by adding the phrase “by zombies” after the verb. Or, if a student’s challenge is applying AP style to numerals, the meme could depict formatting rules for different types of numerals. Other possibilities include rules for attribution (e.g., favoring the neutral “said” over the opinion-implying “claimed”), abbreviations (e.g., accepted state abbreviations that in AP style differ from postal code abbreviations), or punctuation (e.g., the general avoidance of the Oxford comma in most simple series).

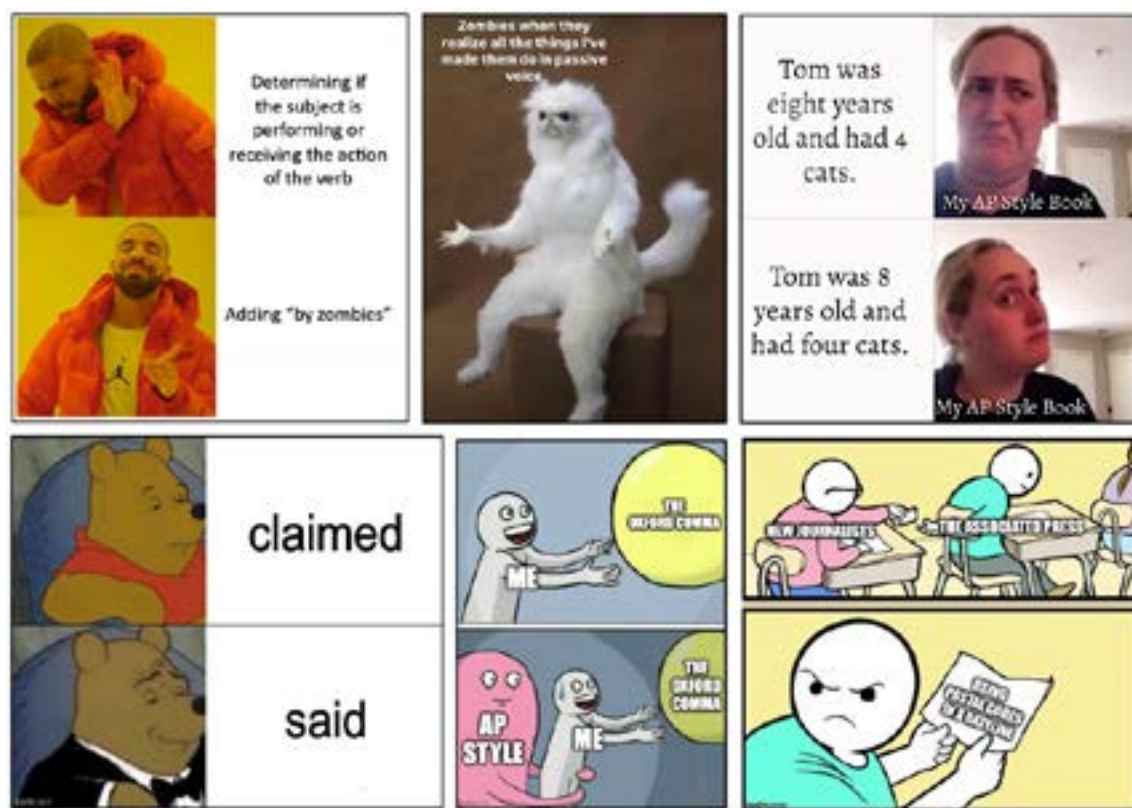
When introducing the assignment, I provide examples of editing-related memes that I have either created myself or sourced from previous semesters, but I deliberately limit the number of examples to strike a balance between establishing the assignment’s expectations and preserving students’ creative freedom and to ensure that the final collection reflects the unique learning challenges of each cohort.

Students are welcome to use any meme generator of their choice (e.g., <https://imgflip.com>, <https://makeameme.org/>). These tools are typically user-friendly and free.

**Pedagogical value.** This assignment invites students to engage with editing practices by presenting them in formats they are accustomed to consuming online but rarely encounter in the classroom. Memes help students apply their knowledge of editing guidelines in ways that demand both creativity and a deeper understanding of the material. Their brevity, moreover, pushes students to think critically about how to convey complex concepts quickly and clearly, which is itself a core editing skill. Further, reflecting on their struggles and reframing editing rules in their own voice prompts students to take greater ownership of their learning. Finally, by asking students to contribute their work to a crowdsourced collection, the exercise extends beyond individual practice, fostering peer collaboration and allowing students to learn from one another’s challenges and insights.

While other digital tools journalism instructors might consider for classroom use, such as generative AI, can raise legitimate privacy and ethical concerns, online meme generators typically don’t collect personal data or require account registration. As a result, this assignment remains readily adaptable while avoiding ethical pitfalls.

Figure 1: Examples of student work.



*Credit.* Clockwise from top left: courtesy of Gracie Johnson, Molly Nall, Georgie Rydson, Marie Fix, Emma Cubberley, Madelyn Von-Canon.

**Addressing potential pitfalls.** One potential pitfall of using memes in an academic context is the perception that they are trivial or solely entertainment-driven, which can undermine their educational value. To address this, it can be helpful to emphasize that memes are more than mere digital amusements: they can carry significant cultural meaning and serve as tools for commentary, humor, and even political resistance. It is also worth pointing out that memes have been the subject of numerous academic studies (e.g., Ekdale & Tully, 2014; Harlow *et al.*, 2020; Kananovich, 2025; Mielczarek, 2020; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019), illustrating their importance in understanding modern communication. Framing memes this way helps students see them as a legitimate and valuable medium for conveying complex ideas.

It is also important to stress that this crowdsourced collection of memes complements but does not replace the careful study and practice of editing rules. That's why it makes sense to introduce this assignment in the second half of the semester, once students have accumulated sufficient experience and established a solid foundation in their study habits and practices. To drive this point further in my own classroom, whenever we discuss a rule featured in a meme, I prompt students to consider deviations from that rule or context-specific exceptions, which deepens their critical understanding of when, and why, the rule applies and reiterates the importance of cultivating their editorial judgment through consistent practice.

**Observed impact.** Past pedagogical research on using memes outside journalism and communication contexts shows that memes, thanks to their memorable nature and accessible humor, can be highly impactful, eliciting student interest, enhancing retention, and fostering a positive learning environment (Daniels, 2025; Mendez-Reguera & Lopez Cabrera, 2020; Rodriguez-Guillen *et al.*, 2024; Sidekerskienė & Damaševičius, 2025; Tidy *et al.*, 2024).

My experience using memes resonates with these findings. As a result of this assignment, I observe students gaining greater confidence in applying editing principles to their own work. I also explicitly incorporate the memes into classroom handouts and writing worksheets, which places editing rules in fresh contexts and enables students to internalize and recall them quickly. This approach also fosters a greater sense of community, as students enjoy seeing their memes recognized in this way, using them as our “collective shorthand” and discussing the editing rules

behind them.

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