

A guide to crime in the AP Stylebook

People are arrested on suspicion of committing a crime. In some states, the district attorney decides whether enough evidence exists to charge a suspect with a crime. If someone is arrested on a charge of murder, be sure the district attorney has charged the suspect. Otherwise, you'll be talking about libel to the suspect's lawyer. This is a distinction from the AP Stylebook, which suggests the wording "arrested on a charge of." This may be legal in some states, but not all. "Arrested on suspicion of" avoids the issue of whether someone has been charged with a crime.

Assault: Technically, an assault is the threat of violence, such as pointing a gun at someone or yelling "I'm gonna kill you!"

Assault and battery: When someone is actually touched by the assaulter or his agent (stick, knife, gun, etc.), battery has occurred.

Burglary: Entering a building (but not necessarily breaking in) with the intent to commit a crime is burglary. Even if the criminal is scared out of the house before swiping the jewels, the crook has committed burglary. However, if you mistake someone else's house for your own – perhaps you are too drunk or tired to tell the difference – you have not committed burglary.

Larceny (legal term for stealing and theft): This is the wrongful taking of property.

Robbery: Used in a legal sense, it is the use of violence or threat in committing larceny. "Give me your money or I'll shoot" is a threat to a bank teller. If I brandish a gun when I take your wallet, I am using the threat of violence. If I throw you against a wall when I take your wallet, I am using violence.

Used in commonly accepted broader sense, it means to plunder, which means a house can be robbed when a person is not present.

You rob a person or house, but you steal the jewels or money.

Theft: Larceny without threat or violence is theft.

Homicide: This is the legal term for slaying or killing.

Murder: Malicious, premeditated homicide is murder. Unless police say premeditation was involved, don't say a victim was murdered until someone is convicted in court. Instead, say the victim was killed or slain.

Manslaughter: This is homicide without malice or premeditation.

Assassin: A politically motivated killer is an assassin.

Killer: This is a generic term for anyone who kills with a motive of any kind.

Murderer: Someone who is convicted of murder in a court of law.