

Associated Press Style Guide

Writing about Climate Change

2024

climate change, climate crisis

Either term can be used in broad references to the general state of the climate: increasing extreme weather and rising average global temperatures.

The terms often can be used interchangeably. But in general, use the term *climate change* when referring to long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns, and the science explaining or describing those shifts. These shifts have resulted in both slow-onset and extreme weather.

Slow-onset changes include increasing temperatures; loss of biodiversity; land and forest degradation; desertification (the change of arable land into a desert); ocean acidification; sea level rise; and glacial retreat. Extreme weather includes heat waves, droughts, storms, and floods from heavy rain or rising seas.

The term *climate crisis*, used by the United Nations and others, may be used when describing the current situation. But use the term sparingly and provide specifics as much as possible.

Climate change, resulting in the *climate crisis*, is largely caused by human activities that emit carbon dioxide, methane and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, according to the vast majority of peer-reviewed studies, science organizations and climate scientists.

Avoid attributing single occurrences to climate change unless scientists have established a connection. At the same time, stories about individual events should make it clear that they occur in a larger context.

global warming Use the term *global warming* in referring to the increase of average temperature around the world. It is one aspect of climate change. Do not use this term as a synonym for *climate change*.

More terms and concepts

fossil fuels Coal, oil and methane, referred to as *fossil* because they are formed underground over millions of years. Use the specifics rather than the shorthand term *fossil fuels* when possible.

greenhouse gases

Greenhouse gas emissions are the main driver of climate change. They consist largely of carbon dioxide and methane. Do not use the abbreviation GHG. Two key greenhouse gases are *carbon dioxide* and *methane*.

carbon dioxide Much of climate change comes from the extra carbon dioxide resulting from burning fossil fuels and biomass; land-use changes; industrial processes; and other human activities. The shorthand CO₂ is acceptable on second reference.

methane A powerful climate-warming gas that leaks from coal mines and from gas wells, pipelines and other parts of natural gas delivery systems; is released by livestock; is generated in landfills; and is produced by certain agricultural practices. It is the main constituent in *natural gas*.

When discussing emissions more broadly — not just carbon dioxide — use an all-encompassing term such as *greenhouse gases*, *planet-warming gases* or *heat-trapping gases*.

carbon budget The amount of carbon dioxide, which when released into the atmosphere warms the planet, that can be emitted globally before the world will exceed the goal of limiting temperature rise thresholds set by the 2015 Paris Agreement. That 2015 agreement called for limiting warming to 2 Celsius at the top but ideally 1.5 C (3.6 degrees Fahrenheit or 2.7 degrees, respectively). Then in 2018, upon further review, IPCC scientists said warming should be capped at 1.5 C to avoid the worst impacts of global warming. Today, most international climate goals are based on the 1.5 C limit.

carbon capture Usually short for *carbon capture utilization and storage*. Refers to an effort to capture CO₂ emissions that would otherwise escape into the air, most frequently at the stacks of power production facilities or other large industrial sites, and transport it for long-term storage, often underground. Many companies and nations include carbon capture as an essential part of their plans to reach net zero emissions. But so far, this is happening at scale in just a few places and is far from being a major climate solution.

carbon footprint Just about every business, government entity, product and mode of transportation has a *carbon footprint*, or an amount of greenhouse gases (mostly carbon dioxide, but others as well) put into the atmosphere. These greenhouse gases mostly come from the consumption of coal, oil and methane.

climate change deniers, climate change skeptics, climate change doubters Do not use terms like *climate change deniers*, *climate change skeptics* or *climate change doubters*. Be specific about an individual or group of people's beliefs. For instance: *people who do not agree with mainstream science that says the climate is changing*. Or *people who do not believe that human activity is responsible for the bulk of climate change*. Or *people who disagree with the severity of climate change projected by scientists*.

climate goals When referring to how a policy or action will impact climate goals, either negatively or positively, make sure to specify what goal or goals to which you're referring.

In 2015, countries at the United Nations climate conference signed the Paris Agreement, where they agreed to limit the average warming across the globe to "well below" 2 degrees Celsius (3.6 F) and pursue efforts to cap warming to 1.5 degrees (2.7 F) compared to preindustrial times. Countries are expected to show how they plan to help achieve these goals by submitting their commitments to emissions reductions to the U.N. every five years. These submissions are called Nationally Determined Contributions.

When reporting on whether something is or is not in line with climate goals, always check whether this refers to the 1.5 C goal, the 2 C goal or national ambitions, and specify this in your reporting.

climate target This refers to temperature limits, concentration levels or emissions reduction goals used toward the aim of avoiding dangerous impacts on humans and the planet.

Other terms:

adaptation The process of adjusting to the current effects of climate change and preparing for future effects. For example, building a sea wall to combat flooding from rising seas is a way that a city may adapt to climate change.

baseline scenario This term refers to scenarios that are based on continuing with the current levels of emissions without mitigation policies or measures beyond those already in place or planned.

blue carbon This refers to carbon dioxide captured by living organisms in coastal and marine ecosystems and stored within these systems. These include mangroves, salt marshes and seagrasses. Explain the term if used.

community solar A form of solar — larger than residential rooftop but smaller than an industrial solar farm for people who lack access to their rooftops, or have rooftops that are shaded or otherwise unsuitable. Users may pay a monthly fee or own a share.

desertification The process in which land becomes increasingly dry, with the amount and lushness of vegetation decreasing and eventually disappearing. Explain the term if you use it or quote someone using it.

direct air capture The effort to extract climate-warming carbon dioxide directly out of the air. Current efforts are expensive and extremely small scale.

equity When talking about climate change, equity is the principle of fairness in sharing the burden and is a basis for understanding how the effects and responses to climate change, including costs and benefits, are distributed in and by society in equal ways.

energy transition The global shift away from fossil fuels to clean energy for electricity, industry and transport to reduce climate change.

funding rounds Startup companies that offer climate solutions typically raise money in rounds as they ramp up, for example *Series A*, *B* and *C*.

geothermal Usually refers to the use of the Earth's heat to make steam that drives a turbine to make clean electricity. May also refer to using the heat without turning it into electricity, as with residential geothermal or district heating.

greenwashing Advertising or claims by companies, countries or other organizations that aim to deceive the public to believe a certain product, policy or organization is environmentally friendly. The term can be used independently or in direct quotations if one organization is accusing another of greenwashing. Explain the term when used.

high emitters When referring to how polluting a country or company is, it is sometimes helpful to look at those emissions in the context of how much the country or company emits into the atmosphere compared with others and for how long they have been polluting.

As carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere for hundreds of years, it is important to consider historical emissions in reporting.

Per capita emissions are sometimes used when comparing the carbon footprints of nations, particularly high-emitting countries like the United States, China, India, Russia and others.

hydrogen Believed by some to have a role in the clean energy transition because it can be burned, generating high heat without releasing carbon dioxide. However, two key questions that should be asked are: What is the source of the hydrogen? Most commercial hydrogen today is obtained from methane, a fossil fuel. And second, what kind of energy was used to separate hydrogen from other atoms? The only truly clean hydrogen is produced in a process that does not rely on fossil fuel and is powered by renewable energy.

mitigation Human intervention to reduce emissions or enhance the sinks of greenhouse gases, efforts aimed at combating climate change.

Indigenous knowledge This refers to the understandings, skills and philosophies developed by societies with long histories of interaction with their natural surroundings. For many Indigenous peoples, Indigenous knowledge informs decision-making about fundamental aspects of life, from day-to-day activities to long-term management of rivers, wildfires and other aspects of the environment.

Indigenous knowledge, or knowledges (both singular and plural are used), is increasingly talked about as a tool to combat climate change, the idea being that Indigenous peoples sustainably managed their lands for thousands of years.

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change A United Nations group created in 1988 to evaluate and contribute to scientific study of climate change. *IPCC* is acceptable on second reference.

lithium ion Currently the most common type of battery, both for electric vehicles and for grid storage, but comes with intrinsic restrictions. These limitations plus the mining of lithium and associated environmental concerns have prompted a race for alternative battery chemistries.

livestock Domesticated animals and in particular cows release significant methane into the atmosphere via flatulence and belching.

landfills Landfills are a significant source of global methane. It is produced especially in wet environments when organic material is buried and its carbon bonds with hydrogen from water under anaerobic conditions.

loss and damage In international climate negotiations, the term is used to refer to the contention that developed nations, which have done the most historically to cause climate change, should compensate developing countries, which have contributed little to climate change but often bear the worst effects. Explain the term when used. If possible, provide details on the compensation being debated.

net zero The term is used by countries and companies and refers to balancing greenhouse gas emissions to the point that the amount taken out of the atmosphere is equal to the amount emitted. When using the term, be specific about the goal. For example, *by 2030 several American tech companies are aiming to make their operations net zero*. Hyphenate when used as a modifier. Explain the term when used.

phasedown, phaseout These terms come up frequently in negotiations over national goals for use of fossil fuels. *Phasedown* is understood to mean a gradual reduction in fossil fuel use. *Phaseout* means ending all use of fossil fuels by a specific time.

small island developing states A distinct group of developing countries facing specific social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities. When using the term, explain it. Do not use the abbreviation *SIDS*.

storage Refers to storing clean electricity from solar and wind power for use later when those sources are not available, avoiding the need to make electricity at those times from climate-harmful sources such as natural gas or coal. Efforts are underway to develop batteries and other methods that can store clean power for days at a time, sometimes called long-term storage.

vulnerability The International Panel on Climate Change defines it as the propensity or predisposition to be adversely affected. Vulnerability encompasses a variety of concepts and elements including sensitivity or susceptibility to harm and lack of capacity to cope and adapt.

weather event When possible, avoid this term and instead be specific if the reference is to a specific flood, landslide, mudslide, hurricane, etc.