

CAPITALIZATION

Some words, like proper nouns (names for specific people, places, or things), are always capitalized. Others are capitalized only in certain situations. This handout is designed to help with the rules of capitalization.

GENERAL RULES

Beginning a Sentence

Always begin a sentence with a capital letter.

Example: This sentence begins with a capital letter. So does this one.

Quotations

Capitalize the first word when quoting a complete sentence.

Example: The teacher said, "Don't forget to study for the quiz."

Do not capitalize a partial quotation that is incorporated into a larger sentence.

Not capitalized: *Star Wars* takes place "a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away."

When the sentence in the quotation is interrupted, do not capitalize the second part of the quote.

Example: "Be proud of your accomplishment," said the speaker, "because it was hard to achieve."

When a quotation is interrupted, but the second part is a full sentence, begin a new sentence and capitalize the quote.

Example: "Be proud of your accomplishment," said the speaker. "Always remember the lessons you learned along the way."

Colons

If what follows a colon is not a complete sentence, do not capitalize. If what follows is a complete sentence, capitalize the first letter of the first word.

Incomplete Sentence : I have three pets: a dog, a cat, and a turtle.

Complete Sentence: My turtle has a big appetite: He eats everything I feed him.

PEOPLE

Personal Names

First, middle, and last names are always capitalized. Nicknames are capitalized, but terms of endearment are not.

Example: This house belongs to John Smith.

Do not capitalize non-English prepositions like "van," "von," and "da" in surnames unless they are used that the beginning of a sentence.

Not capitalized The spy's name was Bridgette von Hammersmark.

Capitalized: Von Hammersmark underestimated the detective skills of Hans Landa.

Words for Relatives

Words associated with relatives are capitalized when they stand in for or precede a person's name. **Example:** We went to visit Grandma today. We also saw Aunt Sally.

Example: We will visit my favorite uncle next week.

Do not capitalize those words if you could not replace them with the person's actual name.

Not capitalized: My grandmother lives in New York.

Note: You would not say "My Elizabeth lives in New York." "My" is a good indicator that you do not need to capitalize.

Not capitalized: I have an aunt who likes gardening. *Note:* You would not say "I have a Sally who likes gardening."

Titles

Capitalize titles when they precede a name. Do not capitalize them when referring to the position generally.

Capitalized: The bill was signed into law by President Obama.

Not capitalized: Who will be elected president of the club?

Groups

Names of political, racial, social, national, civic, and athletic groups should be capitalized.

Examples: Habitat for Humanity, the Baltimore Orioles, Asian American students

Capitalize names of religions and religious groups.

Examples: Christianity, Buddhism, Islam

Examples: Christians, Buddhists, Muslims

Religious Figures

The names of specific deities and holy books are capitalized. If you are using the word 'god' not in reference to a specific deity, then it will be lower case.

Capitalized: In ancient Greece, it was believed that Zeus lived on Mount Olympus.

Not capitalized: Belonging to a monotheistic religion means that you believe in one god.

PLACES

Continents, Countries, and Cities

Always capitalize names of specific places, such as countries, cities, continents, street names, schools, and landmarks.

Examples: Mexico, Paris, Africa, Maple Street, University of Maryland, the Washington Monument

Capitalize words that are derived from names of specific places.

Example: I love to eat Italian cuisine.

Specific geographical locations are capitalized. Words describing general landforms are not.

Capitalized: A good way to get a workout is to climb Mount Everest.

Not capitalized: On a clear day, the mountain is visible in the distance.

Directions

Directions are capitalized **only** if they refer to specific geographical regions.

Capitalized: Washington and Oregon are states in the Northwest.

Not capitalized: The Inner Harbor is south of my house.

Celestial Bodies

Names of planets, stars, and moons are capitalized. **Example:** Is there life on Mars?

However, only capitalize Earth if using it as the name of the planet.

Capitalized: I hope that someday there will be peace on Earth.

Not capitalized: Over time, geological events have altered the face of the earth.

THINGS

Academic Subjects

Academic subjects are not usually capitalized. However, they are capitalized as part of the name of a specific course, degree, or program.

Capitalized: Bob earned his bachelor's degree in Criminal Justice.

Not capitalized: Kelly likes to study mathematics.

Degrees

Write the names of academic degrees in lower case unless you are using the degree as a title or in a list where the degree should be capitalized.

Capitalized: I saw work done by Master of Fine Arts, Bob Smith.

Not capitalized: Bob is pursuing a bachelor's of science.

Corporations

Specific brand names of products should be capitalized. Do not capitalize generic names of products.

Capitalized: When I crave chocolate, I reach for a Hershey's bar.

Not capitalized: It's a bad idea to eat a candy bar each day.

Book and Article Titles

Capitalize titles of works, such as books, journals, magazines, articles, songs, plays, and films. For newspapers and magazines, only capitalize “the” if it is part of the official name.

Examples: *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Lancet*, *the Daily News*, *Rolling Stone*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Rain Man*

Note: The rules for capitalizing titles vary among style manuals, so be sure to check the guidelines of the style you are using. In general, always capitalize the first and last words of a title, along with the first word after a colon. Also, capitalize all nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs, and adjectives. Do not capitalize prepositions (e.g., with, to, for), articles (e.g., a, an, the), or coordinating conjunctions (e.g., and, but, or, for, nor).

TIME

Days of the Week

Days of the week, months, and holidays are capitalized.

Capitalized: We will be closed on Monday for Memorial Day.

Not capitalized: We will be closed for the holiday.

Seasons

Do not capitalize names of seasons unless they are part of a title.

Capitalized: I am required to attend Summer School.

Not capitalized: My family is going on vacation this summer.

Holidays and Historical Events

Capitalize the names of specific historical events.

Capitalized: My grandparents lived through the Great Depression.

Not capitalized: During an economic depression, many people are unable to find jobs.

Fogarty, M. (2008). *Quick and dirty tips for better writing*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin.

Fogarty, M. (2011). *The ultimate writing guide for students*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin.

Lester, M., & Beason, L. (2013). *The McGraw-Hill handbook of English grammar and usage*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Straus, J. (2008). *The blue book of grammar and punctuation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.