

Capitalise Correctly

Having trouble capitalising? It's something that most of us started to learn when we were very young, but can be devilishly hard to truly master. Is it a Professor or a professor? Facebook or facebook?

You have probably encountered people Who Feel The Need To Capitalise Every Word Of A Sentence Like This. That's not quite right. Read on for a simple guide into the ins and outs of capitalising like a pro.

Capitalise is the British spelling, in the US it will be "capitalize".

Capitalise the first word in a sentence

One of the most basic rules of grammar: no matter what type of word the first word in the sentence is, it is usually capitalised. After you write a full stop (also known as a *period* in American English) at the end of one sentence, make a note in your mind to capitalise the first word of the next.

- The first word of sentence written in brackets (also known as *parentheses* in American English) in the middle of another sentence does not need to be capitalised, for example, in this sentence "also" is not capitalised. However, a sentence written in brackets which is not embedded in another sentence will need to start with a capital letter, for example: *I didn't really understand what was going on. (I don't often, to be honest!) Oh well.*
- If a complete sentence follows a colon (:), then the first word can be capitalised, although this is **optional**. However, note that capitalisation in this case is considered standard in many North American English grammar books.
- Capitalise the first word in a quotation, unless the quotation is syntactically joined to the sentence. A quotation describing what someone said is usually capitalised as it is apart from the sentence. Quoting a short word or phrase is not usually capitalised, as it does form part of the sentence, for example: *What is he doing with that "thing"?* You can also have longer quotes that are syntactically joined to sentences, for example: *She was sent here to "observe and discreetly ascertain what the hell we were up to".*
- Although many spell-checking services may correct this, the first letter of the first word after an ellipsis (...) does not need to be capitalised if it is in the same sentence. The spell checker will recognise the full stops (*periods* in American English) and try to capitalise the subsequent word, although this is wrong unless it is in a quote. When using an ellipsis in a quote, the next word is allowed to be capitalised at the writer's discretion, as the ellipsis signifies that the writer is still quoting from the same source, but has skipped a part. Capitalise if it makes sense in context.

Capitalise all proper nouns

This is perhaps the hardest thing to grasp when capitalising, as you need to be able to identify the difference between proper nouns which must be capitalised, and common nouns which, in English, do not require capitalising. Proper nouns are nouns which refer to one specific, unique thing, such as people, places and objects, as opposed to a common noun which could refer to more than one



entity which are not unique. For example, *a boy* and *the boys* are left uncapitalised as common nouns, as they could refer to **any** boy. However, *Bob* refers to one specific boy, and thus is a capitalised proper noun. Likewise, *the village* could refer to any village, whereas *Hethersett* refers to one village in particular. Proper nouns can often be distinguished by the fact that you can't usually put a "the" in front of them, for example, you can say *the city*, but it doesn't really sound right to say *the London*. Similarly, you can say *the program*, but you wouldn't say *the Skype*. Proper nouns also include things like organisations, religions, particular ideas and unique things. The following are some groups of proper nouns that must be capitalised that you should watch out for:

Personal names of people or animals

People's first, last, and however many in-between names are nearly always capitalised. Even though there are probably other people with the same name, when the name is **used** it refers to one person in particular and thus is a proper noun. One of the most obvious examples of proper nouns, you should **nearly always** capitalise names. There are a few exceptions, sometimes be seen with people who have a non-English derived surname, such as Dafydd ab Hugh, L. Sprague de Camp, Tim LaHaye, or D. J. MacHale. As a matter of courtesy, one should spell a personal name as the person so named desires.

Brand names and trademarks

Brands (legally called trademarks) refer to one specific brand of products, distinguishable from their competition and are usually proper nouns. They are defined as a "name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers".

Specific places and countries

Geographical locations like countries, established regions, seas, roads, cities, towns, etc. are all proper nouns as they refer to that place in particular. This also includes geographical features like the Equator, rivers, mountains and public places, structures and buildings. Note that the compass points or directions north, south, east and west do not need to be capitalised as they are not proper nouns, unless they are used as part of the name of an established region, for example, *East Anglia* or *Southern California*. Some examples:

- "Go north, then you'll find yourself in North Carolina."
- "I've come all the way from the South to see you!"
- "Our house is in the southwest region of Adelaide." In this case, the direction acts as an adjective, not a noun.

Calendar items

Days of the week, months and public holidays all need to be capitalised. Days of the week and months are fairly simple to remember, although you must remember that some of the month names have other meanings that should not be capitalised, for example, *I **may** go to the opera* or *Time to **march!*** Public holidays like Easter, Christmas Eve or St Patrick's Day must be



capitalised, no matter which words they are made up of. Similarly, famous historical events and time periods are also capitalised, for example, the *Middle Ages* or the *Revolutionary War*.

- Seasons do not get capitalised. Capitalising the seasons is a very old-fashioned habit that still lingers but spring, autumn (fall), summer and winter are not capitalised unless they are at the beginning of a sentence or form part of a renowned name.
- Avoid capitalising descriptors of eras, such as the eighties, the sixties, etc.

Capitalise adjectives derived from proper nouns, or "proper adjectives"

These are usually adjectives made up from proper nouns, and must be capitalised just like their descendants. Note that any other parts of speech derived from proper nouns should also be capitalised, for example, a "proper verb" like *Americanise* or a "proper adverb" like *Britishly*.

Nationalities and languages

These are the biggest example of proper adjectives, and must always be capitalised, as they are proper adjectives derived from the name of that particular region. For example, from the proper noun *Germany* comes the proper adjectives *German* (referring to the language that is spoken there) and *German* (referring to a person, object, custom, etc. that originates from Germany). However, this is not limited to nationalities which derive from a specific proper noun – it includes any race, tribe, etc. including names like "Cherokee" and "Asian"

- Note that this is complicated by varying approaches to national references when used in a non-literal sense, such as French fry/french fry, French doors/french doors or French poodle/french poodle. The capitalization or otherwise of these "non-literal" words is dependent on the style guide you're referring to and often on how much you'd really like to associate the French with French... or is it french... fries.

Capitalise personal titles when used specifically as titles, but not when just referring to the rank in general.

This includes the more common mister and miss, familial titles like sister and father, courtesy titles like earl and duchess and military ranks like wing commander and sergeant. When used as a title, the first letter must be capitalised whether the title is in its abbreviated form or not, for example, *Mister Jones* and *Mr Jones* (in each of these cases, the person's specific name is attached to the title). In the example given in the picture, the two titles are capitalised because they are used as personal titles, rather than just *a captain*, it is *the captain*. Although "Captain" does not precede a name, it is still capitalised because it is used **in place of** a name.

- Some examples:
 - "I disagree Senator Bandyandy." (direct address to person)
 - "Senator Bandyandy disliked attending committee meetings in the month of May." (before a person's name)



- The senator gave a speech at the dinner party held in honour of his years in office. (common noun)
- Royalty is also included. Any royal, imperial or position of office titles are also included in the title rule, although it is a little more complicated. You can say both *the king* and *the King* and either will be right depending on in which context it was used. When you are referring to a specific king, and this is clear, you can capitalise, for example, the King of Denmark. If you are in England, their queen is always referred to as "the Queen", and it is obvious which queen this is referring to. This title stands for her name - not many people would just refer to her as "Elizabeth"! Royal styles are also capitalised, e.g. *His Majesty*.
- Family names can also be thought of as personal titles. They are capitalised only when used in place of a name or preceding a name, e.g. *Uncle Joe*. Normally, the familial term is just a regular noun, e.g. *I have one sister*. However, when used as a substitute for a **name**, that usage is a proper noun. Remember: all names are capitalised. When used in front of a name, that is a personal title. This above rules about personal titles do also apply when "family" names are used in a medical or religious context, as in that case they are used as titles, for example, *Father Joseph*, or *Sister Kate*.

Check capitalisation for abbreviations

Initialisms and abbreviations are often written in all capital letters, although this differs depending on the word in general. (An initialism is a term often used for acronyms that are made up of and pronounced as a series of initial letters, for example, the *Federal Bureau of Investigation* or the *British Broadcasting Corporation*). These can be written in all capitals, for example, *FAQ* or *USA*, or also as a normal word, for example, *interpol* (*International Criminal Police Organization*) or *laser* (*Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation*). If you're not sure, look up the word in question in a search engine and see how others capitalise it.

- The capitalisation of "internet" or "Internet" is an interesting case still under evolution. Either way is currently accurate, dependent on what you use as your reference source, although it does seem to be evolving more towards being treated as a common noun, especially outside of North America.

Respect that publication titles have different capitalisation rules dependent on in-house guides and rules.

Things like book titles, movie titles, song and album titles, historical documents, laws, newspaper headlines, etc. are each treated a little differently. It's "War and Peace" not "War and peace", right? These titles aren't all always capitalised the same way, but follow similar patterns, quite like wikiHow article titles. Often, the first word (whatever it be may) and maybe the last word of the title is capitalised, along with any words that are not **articles** (like *a* or *the*), coordinate conjunctions or **prepositions** (like *of*, *to*, *or*) that have less than five letters, for example, *The Catcher in the Rye*.

- Titles using all capitalisation is a personal or organisational preference. While the initial letter should be capitalised at the beginning of the title, always aim for consistency of use



with either all upper or all lower case (after the initial word) for the entire title. Always check your organisation's or publisher's style guide to see what they prefer for titles.

Respect any words with inherent capitalisations

Some nouns have odd capitalisations, most commonly brand names, websites, etc. For example, this includes Apple Inc. products, often titled things like iPad, iPod; software like MediaWiki and websites like deviantArt and even wikiHow! These words are always spelt thus regardless of other rules. wikiHow can go at the start of the sentence without capitalising its first letter, because it is always spelt with a lower case w.

- Where possible, do your best to avoid placing an unusually capitalised noun at the beginning of the sentence, and that way you can avoid writing "iPod" or "WikiHow".
 - For example, change "iPods are used by high school students for learning purposes" to "High school students use iPods for learning purposes".

Tips

Always capitalise "I" when it is used as the nominative first-person singular pronoun, as in "I am happy". This also applies to all contractions of I, including "I'm" and "I'd".

- Things that are written in a list or bullet points will always need to be capitalised, whether or not they are full sentences.
- Capitalise any valedictions in letters or emails, for example, *Yours sincerely*.
- When writing an address, the word following the proper name of the road or street must be capitalised, e.g. *High Street* or *Fifth Avenue*.
- Beware of capitonyms, words which change their meaning depending on whether or not they are capitalised. You won't encounter them too often. One of the most common examples of this is with astrological bodies. When *Sun* and *Moon* are capitalised, it can usually be assumed that the text is referring to the *sun* that our Earth orbits around, and the *moon* that orbits us. Likewise, when *Earth* is capitalised it refers to our planet, rather than *earth* in the ground. In a religious context, *God* refers to the one god of monotheistic religions such as Christianity, rather than *a god*. Some people choose to capitalise "Earth" all of the time, as a sign of respect; you'll need to go with what suits you (or your workplace/editor's rules) on that one.
- If you're confused about the spelling of an initialism, abbreviation, inherently capitalised word like iPod, etc. one of the easiest ways to find out is simply to look up the word in a search engine and to see what comes up.
- When instant messaging or texting, it can be okay to relax and not spend too much time worrying about correct capitalisation, but try not to resort to typing in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS for prolonged periods of time. This makes it seem like you are shouting, and makes it more difficult to read. If possible go for something like a single exclamation mark instead!
 - This is even more relevant when concerning writing essays, emails, articles on the internet, etc. If you have the option, go for a single exclamation mark, **bold**, *italics* or even underline. This will make your work look a whole lot more professional.
- Although many programs and browsers have spell-check capabilities, it's always worth learning how to capitalise correctly. The program can catch simple errors like not



capitalising the pronoun "I", but won't know if you're typing a title, or if you're talking about the Queen or queens, or even if it's wikihow or wikiHow.

Warnings

- There are many, many small rules and exceptions to these rules. Some of these rules are also somewhat contested, and people have differing opinions on what should be capitalised. This is only a brief guide to the basics. If you're wondering about something, look at similar texts to see how they capitalise it; look up the word in a search engine and see what you can find. The most important thing is to have consistency in what you're writing. A tiny repeated capitalisation error looks a lot more professional than alternating all over the place.
- Above all, do what your workplace or place of studies advises and stay up-to-date on any new organisation's preferences. Capitalisation rules in a work, publications or study context can be a way of setting an organisation or publication apart from others and compliance can show that you're serious about getting published... or paid!

