

CAPITAL LETTERS

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Intermediate Grammar
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In English, we do NOT use **capital letters** very much. We use them mainly for the first letter of sentences, names, days and months as well as for some abbreviations. We always write the first person pronoun as a capital I.

It is not usual to write whole sentences in capitals. A sentence or paragraph written in capitals is very difficult to read. Did you ever see a book written in capital letters? Of course not! We cannot easily read lots of text in capital letters. Lawyers, for example, know that capitals are difficult to read and that is why they often write contracts in capital letters!

We often overuse capitals — sometimes out of fear of offending important people, sometimes to show that a certain word is important to us. However, overuse of capitals, particularly when addressing outside readers, can convey the image of a bureaucracy that is overawed by its own concepts and processes.

The main purpose of using capital letters is to focus the reader's attention on particular people, places and things. In other words, you are being more specific about what you are referring to.

When and how to use capital letters can be a thorny problem. It may be acceptable to drop capital letters when writing casually to friends but if you are writing anything more formal then you need to use capital letters correctly.

However, it's important to know that, with regard to professional or academic writing, capitalization in English entails quite a bit more than simply knowing to begin names and titles with capital letters.

You should always use a capital letter:

1. To start a sentence
2. After a period
3. Nationalities and social groups
4. Days and months
5. Holidays and special occasions
6. Historical eras and episodes in history
7. Religions and names of deities
8. Planets
9. Man-made structures and landmarks
10. Natural landmarks
11. Brand names
12. Organisations
13. The full name of armies, navies, and air forces
14. Government matters or when referring to a specific government
15. Specific degrees
16. Subject or unit of work
17. For a proper noun - However, if you use a generic word to replace a proper noun (even though you may still be referencing the same person or organisation), use lowercase (e.g. always capitalise 'The Lighthouse Foundation,' but write 'the foundation' in lowercase)

Rules in Using Capital Letters

Rule #1:

To Start a Sentence

There are no exceptions to this rule.

This means that, after a full stop, you always use a capital letter.

If the previous sentence ends with a question mark or exclamation mark, you should also use a capital letter, ? and !, like full stops, indicate the end of a sentence. However if in the sentence you have a clause in parenthesis (brackets) or sequence separated by dashes, and if these end with a question mark or exclamation mark, you should continue with lower case after the second bracket or dash.

Is it always necessary to use capitals to start a sentence? The answer is definitely yes.

She told herself – was it acceptable to talk to oneself? – that the answer was obvious.

The use of a capital after a colon (:) varies depending on whether you are writing in British or US English, just as the spelling of 'capitalisation' and 'capitalization' are different in British and US English.

You should use a capital letter after a colon with US spelling but not with UK spelling.

Rule #2:

Titles

In titles, capitalise only the important words, not minor words such as 'and' and 'but'.

'Title Case', with all the important words capitalised, is rather out of fashion at the moment. Most academic journals and standard referencing systems, for instance, prefer what is known as 'sentence case', with a single initial capital.

However, it's good to understand the rules, in case you are required to use title case at any point.

Using the title of this article as an example:

Sentence case: "When to use capital letters"

Title case: "When to Use Capital Letters"

In title case, in this example, 'Use', although small, is an important word in the title, and should therefore be capitalised. 'To', however, is not important and therefore not capitalised.

Rule #3:

For Proper Nouns

Proper nouns name something specific, for example, Jane, John, Oxford University, Denver, Qantas, Microsoft, Everest, Sahara. In other words, capitalize the names of people, specific places, and things.

Proper nouns (nearly) always start with a capital letter. There are exceptions to this rule and in marketing sometimes lower-case characters are purposefully used for some proper nouns. Examples include iPhone, eBay and oneworld Alliance. However, in most cases, proper nouns start with a capital letter.

Caution is needed however, even when you are referring to a specific place or thing. If you use the more general noun rather than the proper noun, this should not be capitalised.

Further examples:

"I went to the University of Oxford today."

"I went to Oxford today and had a look at the university."

Capitalising is correct in both sentences. In the first the proper noun 'University of Oxford' is used.

In the second sentence, the more general noun 'university' is used and so it is not capitalised.

The word 'I' is not a proper noun, it's a pronoun. In English 'I' is always capitalised. In many other languages the equivalent word is not capitalised.

We don't capitalize the word "bridge" unless it starts a sentence, but we must capitalize Brooklyn Bridge because it is the name of a specific bridge.

The word "country" would not normally be capitalized, but we would have to write China with a capital "C" because it is the name of a specific country.

The word "state", while not normally capitalized, would be written with a capital if it is in the name of an organization, such as The State Board of Education.

Rule #4:

Acronyms

Acronyms generally work like title case: you capitalise the important words, and not 'and', 'of', 'for' and so on.

The easiest way to work this out is to write out the full title, and then you can see which words don't need to be capitalised.

To make this clear, here are some examples:

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Department for Education (DfE)

Manchester United Football Club (MUFC)

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Ministry of Transport (MoT)

Head of Department (HoD)

World of Warcraft (WoW)

Rule #5:

Contractions

For contractions, capitalise the initial letters of words, but not subsequent letters within the same word.

Contractions are like acronyms, but also include one or more letters from within the same word. Examples of this include HiFi, which is short for 'High Fidelity', and SciFi, short for science fiction.

The way to deal with these is to write out the phrase and have a look. Although the words that are abbreviated may not be capitalised, as in 'science fiction', the abbreviation always contains capitals for the start of each new word to make the word boundaries and pronunciation clear. We frequently use SkillsYouNeed, contracting the spaces but making the phrase easier to read.

Rule #6:

Overusing Capitals is Rude

WRITING ENTIRELY IN BLOCK CAPITALS IS SHOUTING, and it's rude.

We've all done it: left the Caps Lock on while typing. But in email etiquette, online chats and/or forum posts, writing in capitals is the online equivalent of shouting. It's rude, so best not to do it unless you really do want to shout at someone. Even then, consider whether you'd really do it if that person was in front of you, and also whether it will get you anywhere.

Although it's usually best to avoid writing in capitals, it can be useful to write odd words in capitals to give them emphasis. HELP! You're going to LOVE the surprise.

It's also much harder to read block capitals as all the letters are the same height, so you will make your point much more easily if you use lower case.

Sometimes, especially when completing a handwritten form, BLOCK CAPITALS are preferred since this can make data entry or automatic computer recognition of handwriting easier and more accurate.

Rule #7:

Capitalize the first word in quotations

provided the quoted material is a complete sentence.

For example:

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "The only way to have a friend is to be one."

Rule #8:

Capitalize titles when they are on the signature line of a letter, when the title comes immediately before a name, or when the title replaces the use of a name

Here are some examples:

Sincerely,

Vicky Marquez, President

or:

Ms. Vicky Marquez

or:

Hello, Senator. It's nice to see you again.

Do not capitalize titles when they are not used as a direct address to a person. For example:

The senator will be in town today to inspect the building of the railway.

Rule #9:

Capitalize directions only when they refer to specific regions.

For example:

My favorite place in the world is Northern Ontario.

Do not capitalize "north," "south," "east," and "west" when giving directions:

Drive six blocks north, and then turn right.

Rule #10:

All large words in the titles of movies, books, and other publications should be capitalized, while all small words (a, an, the, but, and, if, as, or, nor, to name a few) should not be capitalized unless they are the first or last words in the title

For example:

A Life Less Ordinary

The word "A" would not normally be capitalized, but because it is the first word in the title, we must capitalize it.

War of the Worlds

The words "of" and "the" are not capitalized because they are small and are not at the beginning or end of the title, though exceptions to the "small words" rule do exist.

Rule #11:

The first word of a salutation should be capitalized, as well as the first word of a closing.

For example:

Dear Billy,

or:

Regards,

John Smith

Rule #12:

Capitalize words derived from proper nouns.

For example:

I like English, but math is my favorite subject.

English is capitalized because it is derived from the proper noun England, while math is not capitalized because it is not derived from a proper noun.

Specific course titles should, however, be capitalized. For example:

I don't know what I'm going to do. I have to take Math 101 next year and it looks hard!

Rule #13:

Capitalize when two or more sentences follow a colon.

For example:

We have set this restriction: Do your chores before watching television. That includes washing the dishes.

Do not capitalize after a colon if you are writing a list, or if there is only one sentence following the colon:

There are many metals hidden away within the earth's crust: gold, zinc, and lead are just a few examples.

or:

There is a way to remember test information: study a lot the night before your big midterm!

Now you have a better idea of how to use capitals in your writing. If you still feel unsure, consider having your writing proofread by the professionals.