

**Capitalization** is the writing of a word with its first letter in uppercase and the remaining letters in lowercase. Experienced writers are stingy with capitals. It is best not to use them if there is any doubt.

**Rule 1.** Capitalize the first word of a document and the first word after a period.

**Rule 2.** Capitalize proper nouns—and adjectives derived from proper nouns.

**Examples:**

*the Golden Gate Bridge*

*the Grand Canyon*

*a Russian song*

*a Shakespearean sonnet*

*a Freudian slip*

With the passage of time, some words originally derived from proper nouns have taken on a life, and authority, of their own and no longer require capitalization.

**Examples:**

*herculean* (from the ancient-Greek hero Hercules)

*quixotic* (from the hero of the classic novel *Don Quixote*)

*draconian* (from ancient-Athenian lawgiver Draco)

The main function of capitals is to focus attention on particular elements within any group of people, places, or things. We can speak of *a lake in the middle of the country*, or we can be more specific and say *Lake Michigan*, which distinguishes it from every other lake on earth.

### Capitalization Reference List

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- Brand names
- Companies
- Days of the week and months of the year

- Governmental matters  
*Congress* (but *congressional*), *the U.S. Constitution* (but *constitutional*), *the Electoral College*, *Department of Agriculture*. **Note:** Many authorities do not capitalize *federal* or *state* unless it is part of the official title: *State Water Resources Control Board*, but *state water board*, *Federal Communications Commission*, but *federal regulations*.
- Historical episodes and eras  
*the Inquisition*, *the American Revolutionary War*, *the Great Depression*
- Holidays
- Institutions  
*Oxford College*, *the Juilliard School of Music*
- Manmade structures  
*the Empire State Building*, *the Eiffel Tower*, *the Titanic*
- Manmade territories  
*Berlin*, *Montana*, *Cook County*
- Natural and manmade landmarks  
*Mount Everest*, *the Hoover Dam*
- Nicknames and epithets  
*Andrew "Old Hickory" Jackson*; *Babe Ruth*, *the Sultan of Swat*
- Organizations  
*American Center for Law and Justice*, *Norwegian Ministry of the Environment*
- Planets  
*Mercury*, *Venus*, *Mars*, *Jupiter*, *Saturn*, *Uranus*, *Neptune*, but policies vary on capitalizing *earth*, and it is usually not capitalized unless it is being discussed specifically as a planet: *We learned that Earth travels through space at 66,700 miles per hour.*

- Races, nationalities, and tribes  
*Eskimo, Navajo, East Indian, Caucasian, African American* (**Note:** *white* and *black* in reference to race are lowercase)
- Religions and names of deities  
**Note:** Capitalize *the Bible* (but *biblical*). Do not capitalize *heaven, hell, the devil, satanic*.
- Special occasions  
*the Olympic Games, the Cannes Film Festival*
- Streets and roads

### Lowercase Reference List

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Here is a list of categories *not* capitalized unless an item contains a proper noun or proper adjective (or, sometimes, a trademark). In such cases, only the proper noun or adjective is capitalized.

- Animals  
*antelope, black bear, Bengal tiger, yellow-bellied sapsucker, German shepherd*
- Elements  
Always lowercase, even when the name is derived from a proper noun: *einsteinium, nobelium, californium*
- Foods  
Lowercase except for brand names, proper nouns and adjectives, or custom-named recipes: *Tabasco sauce, Russian dressing, pepper crusted bluefin tuna, Mandy's Bluefin Surprise*
- Heavenly bodies besides planets  
Never capitalize the *moon* or the *sun*.
- Medical conditions  
*Epstein-Barr syndrome, tuberculosis, Parkinson's disease*

- Minerals
- Plants, vegetables, and fruits  
*poinsettia, Douglas fir, Jerusalem artichoke, organic celery, Golden Delicious apples*
- Seasons and seasonal data  
*spring, summertime, the winter solstice, the autumnal equinox, daylight saving time*

**Rule 3.** A thorny aspect of capitalization: where does it stop? When does the *Iraq war* become the *Iraq War*? Why is the legendary *Hope Diamond* not the *Hope diamond*? Everyone writes *New York City*, so why does the *Associated Press Stylebook* recommend *New York state*? There aren't always easy formulas or logical explanations. Research with reference books and search engines is the best strategy.

In the case of brand names, companies are of little help, because they capitalize any word that applies to their merchandise. *Domino's Pizza* or *Domino's pizza*? Is it *Ivory Soap* or *Ivory soap*, a *Hilton Hotel* or a *Hilton hotel*? Most writers don't capitalize common nouns that simply describe the products (*pizza, soap, hotel*), but it's not always easy to determine where a brand name ends. There is *Time* magazine but also the *New York Times Magazine*. No one would argue with *Coca-Cola* or *Pepsi Cola*, but a case could be made for *Royal Crown cola*.

If a trademark starts with a lowercase word or letter (*e.g., eBay, iPhone*), many authorities advise capitalizing it to begin a sentence.

**Example:** *E*Bay opened strong in trading today.

**Rule 4.** Capitalize titles when they are used before names, unless the title is followed by a comma. Do not capitalize the title if it is used after a name or instead of a name.

**Examples:**

*The president will address Congress.*

*Chairman of the Board William Bly will preside at the conference.*

*The chairman of the board, William Bly, will preside.*

*The senators from Iowa and Ohio are expected to attend.*

*Also expected to attend are Senators Buzz James and Eddie Twain.*

*The governors, lieutenant governors, and attorneys general called for a special task force.*

*Governor Fortinbrass, Lieutenant Governor Poppins, and Attorney General Dalloway will attend.*

## **NOTE**

Out of respect, some writers and publishers choose to capitalize the highest ranks in government, royalty, religion, etc.

### **Examples:**

*The President arrived.*

*The Queen spoke.*

*The Pope decreed.*

Many American writers believe this to be a wrongheaded policy in a country where, theoretically, all humans are perceived as equal.

**Rule 5.** Titles are not the same as occupations. Do not capitalize occupations before full names.

### **Examples:**

*director Steven Spielberg*

*owner Helen Smith*

*coach Biff Sykes*

Sometimes the line between title and occupation gets blurred. One example is *general manager*: is it a title or an occupation? Opinions differ. Same with *professor*: the *Associated Press Stylebook* considers *professor* a job description rather than a title, and recommends using lowercase even before the full name: *professor Robert Ames*.

However, titles replacing someone's first name are generally capitalized.

**Example:** *Here comes Professor Ames.*

**Rule 6a.** Capitalize a formal title when it is used as a direct address. The more formal the title, the more likely it is to be capitalized.

**Examples:**

*Will you take my temperature, Doctor?*

*We're sorry to report, Captain, that we're headed for choppy waters.*

*That's what you say, mister.*

*Good afternoon, sweetheart.*

**Rule 6b.** Capitalize relatives' family names (kinship names) when they immediately precede a personal name, or when they are used alone in place of a personal name.

**Examples:**

*I found out that Mom is here.*

*You look good, Grandpa.*

*Andy and Opie loved Aunt Bee's apple pies.*

However, these monikers are not capitalized when they are used with possessive nouns or pronouns, or when they follow the personal name, or when they do not refer to a specific person.

**Examples:**

*My mom is here.*

*Joe's grandpa looks well.*

*The James brothers were notorious robbers.*

*There's not one mother I know who would allow that.*

**Rule 6c.** Capitalize nicknames in all cases.

**Examples:**

*Meet my brothers, Junior and Scooter.*

*I just met two guys named Junior and Scooter.*

**Rule 7.** Capitalize specific geographical regions. Do not capitalize points of the compass.

**Examples:**

*We had three relatives visit from the West.*

*Go west three blocks and then turn left.*

*We left Florida and drove north.*

*We live in the Southeast.*

*We live in the southeast section of town.*

*Most of the West Coast is rainy this time of year.* (referring to the United States)

*The west coast of Scotland is rainy this time of year.*

Some areas have come to be capitalized for their fame or notoriety:

**Examples:**

*I'm from New York's Upper West Side.*

*I'm from the South Side of Chicago.*

*You live in Northern California; he lives in Southern California.*

**Rule 8.** In general, do not capitalize the word *the* before proper nouns.

**Examples:**

*We visited the Grand Canyon.*

*They're fans of the Grateful Dead.*

In special cases, if the word *the* is an inseparable part of something's official title, it may be capitalized.

**Example:** *We visited The Hague.*

**Rule 9.** It is not necessary to capitalize *city, town, county*, etc., if it comes before the proper name.

**Examples:**

*the city of New York*

*New York City*

*the county of Marin*

*Marin County*

**Rule 10a.** Always capitalize the first word in a complete quotation, even midsentence.

**Example:** *Lamarr said, "The case is far from over, and we will win."*

**Rule 10b.** Do not capitalize quoted material that continues a sentence.

**Example:** *Lamarr said that the case was "far from over" and that "we will win."*

**Rule 11.** For emphasis, writers sometimes capitalize a midsentence independent clause or question.

**Examples:**

*One of her cardinal rules was, Never betray a friend.*

*It made me wonder, What is mankind's destiny?*

**Rule 12.** Capitalize the names of specific course titles, but not general academic subjects.

**Examples:**

*I must take history and Algebra 101.*

*He has a double major in European economics and philosophy.*

**Rule 13.** Capitalize art movements.

**Example:** *I like Surrealism, but I never understood Abstract Expressionism.*



**Rule 14.** Do not capitalize the first item in a list that follows a colon.

**Example:** *Bring the following: paper, a pencil, and a snack.*

For more on capitalization after a colon, go to "[Colons](#)," Rules 1, 3, and 4.

**Rule 15.** Do not capitalize "*the national anthem*."

**Rule 16a.** Composition titles: which words should be capitalized in titles of books, plays, films, songs, poems, essays, chapters, etc.? This is a vexing matter, and policies vary. The usual advice is to capitalize only the "important" words. But this isn't really very helpful. Aren't all words in a title important?

The following rules for capitalizing composition titles are virtually universal.

- Capitalize the title's first and last word.
- Capitalize all adjectives, adverbs, and nouns.
- Capitalize all pronouns (including *it*).
- Capitalize all verbs, including the verb *to be* in all forms (*is, are, was, has been, etc.*).
- Capitalize *no, not*, and the interjection *O* (e.g., *How Long Must I Wait, O Lord?*).
- Do not capitalize an article (*a, an, the*) unless it is first or last in the title.
- Do not capitalize a **coordinating conjunction** (*and, or, nor, but, for, yet, so*) unless it is first or last in the title.
- Do not capitalize the word *to*, with or without an infinitive, unless it is first or last in the title.

Otherwise, styles, methods, and opinions vary; for instance, certain short conjunctions (e.g., *as, if, how, that*) are capped by some, lowercased by others.

A major bone of contention is prepositions. *The Associated Press Stylebook* recommends capitalizing all prepositions of more than three letters (e.g., *with*, *about*, *across*). Other authorities advise lowercase until a preposition reaches five or more letters. Still others say not to capitalize any preposition, even big words like *regarding* or *underneath*.

Hyphenated words in a title also present problems. There are no set rules, except to always capitalize the first element, even if it would not otherwise be capitalized, such as *to* in *My To-go Order* (some would write *My To-Go Order*). Some writers, editors, and publishers choose not to capitalize words following hyphens unless they are proper nouns or proper adjectives (*Ex-Marine* but *Ex-husband*). Others capitalize any word that would otherwise be capped in titles (*Prize-Winning*, *Up-to-Date*).

**Rule 16b.** Many books have subtitles. When including these, put a colon after the work's title and follow the same rules of composition capitalization for the subtitle.

**Example:** *The King's English: A Guide to Modern Usage*

Note that *A* is capitalized because it is the first word of the subtitle.