

Study Skills

CAPITAL LETTERS

You probably don't need as many as you may think!

... or perhaps you haven't given them much thought at all. If not, here is a little advice.

General principles

As a general rule and in normal prose, capital letters should be avoided unless the word in question is:

- the first word of a sentence
- the first person singular pronoun, as a subject, 'I' - yes, even in e-mails; otherwise, it's a spelling error!
- a title (Mr, Mrs, Ms, Miss, Dr. ...)
- a proper noun.

Proper nouns are the names of particular examples of the more general classes named by common nouns. For example, 'man', 'town', 'car' and 'country' are all common nouns; 'John', 'Hull', 'Volkswagen' and 'France' are proper nouns.

Each of the four common nouns above names a class which contains many individuals. But if I say to you, "point to the man", you cannot do it, unless something in our conversation has already identified which man we are talking about. If I say "point to John", it should be easier. Similarly, you can "go to France" with some accuracy; to "go to [a] country" is less sensible English.

In other words, proper nouns are more specific than common ones. It is the proper nouns, along with their associated adjectives, that should have capital letters.

Here are some examples:

- People's first and family names; 'householder', 'wife' and 'manager' are common nouns; 'Jane Smith', 'Tony Blair' and 'Peter Wilson' are equivalent proper nouns.
- Countries, continents and other place names such as those of towns and cities or regions (Russia, Russian; Africa, African; Paris, Parisian; Andalusia, Andalusian ...); 'continent' is a common noun; 'Asia' is a proper noun.
- Those nouns and adjectives which designate nationalities or languages (Arab, Arabic ...); 'language' and 'nationality' are common nouns; 'Japanese' is proper, both as a noun and as an adjective.
- The days of the week and months of the year. Points of the compass may or may not be capitalised, according to their status as proper or common nouns. So someone might have a 'north-facing garden' in the 'North of England' and many people live in the 'northern lands' of many countries but only some in the 'Northern Territories' of Canada.

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- Particular posts (jobs) in particular contexts. Most companies have a chairman (common noun); a particular company, such as Ford, has its own Chairman (proper noun). Many countries have presidents; their constitutions usually lay down how the President is to be elected (the word 'the' is an indication that here 'President' is a proper noun with a capital); and each has its own President. John F. Kennedy was, famously, President (proper noun) of the United States. (And note how, although 'state' is a common noun, commonly used to mean roughly the same as 'country' or 'nation', that particular country, the United States, is a proper noun and therefore has capital letters.)
- Particular examples of institutions. Many cities have a university (common noun), but the University of Hull and Oxford University have capitals because here they are proper nouns, being the names for particular universities.

When whole words are capitalised, this is the equivalent of a loud voice in speech. It is usually used in direct speech:

Suddenly, he noticed the thief running off and shouted "THAT'S HIM"

Capitals in titles

Titles and sub-titles of and within articles, essays or assignments may follow a different convention. Other than the titles of complete works for publication, the words of which are normally all capitalised (see below), titles and sub-titles can be written in one of two ways:

either as normal text, but perhaps in bold type and/or underlined, e.g.

An evaluation of the theory of evolution by natural selection in the light of recent findings in natural science

or with the initial letters of only the nouns and adjectives capitalised, e.g.

An Evaluation of the Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection in the Light of Recent Findings in Natural Science

Note also that, in general, titles tend to omit verbs and do NOT end with a full stop.

Capitals in bibliographies and reference lists

Similar conventions apply to capitals in these contexts. Note where they are used in the following example:

Loughran J.J. and Russell T. (eds.) (1997) "Teaching about Teaching: Purpose, Passion and Pedagogy in Teacher Education" London: Falmer Press.

So THINK carefully before you use a capital letter.