Capitalization: Don’t Commit a Capital Crime

Over-capitalization and under-capitalization are crimes of a capital nature, and the punishment is lack of readership.

Generally, capital letters signify proper nouns and proper adjectives, announce the start of a new sentence, and begin quotations. Here are thirty good rules:

1. Capitalize proper nouns. A proper noun is the official name of a person, place, or thing:
   - John Doe
   - Boise, Idaho
   - Kentucky Derby
   - the Empire State Building
   - the University of South Dakota
   - Saturday, June 30

   But do not capitalize common nouns. A common noun is a general classification:
   - any man
   - the city
   - the horse race
   - the building
   - the college
   - a day

2. Capitalize proper adjectives. A proper adjective is derived from a proper noun:
   - Japanese tourist
   - Southern states
   - Texas ranchers
   - Machiavellian

3. Do not capitalize common words: some nouns and adjectives have become so common they aren’t capitalized:
   - french fries
   - dutch oven
   - china (dishes)
   - danish pastry
   - roman numeral
   - napoleon dessert

4. Capitalize words that show family relationships when they are used instead of a name or as part of a name:
   - I waved hello to Mother.
   - There goes Uncle John.

   But don’t capitalize them if they are preceded by a possessive (my, your, their):
   - I waved hello to my mother.
   - There goes your uncle.

5. Capitalize nicknames and other identifying names:
   - Alexander the Great
   - A-Rod
   - JLo
   - the Presidential Palace
   - Hell’s Angels
   - the Bronze Age

6. Capitalize titles when they immediately precede a personal name as a title:
   - Mayor John Smith
   - Senator Jane Jones
   - General Eisenhower
   - President Wilma Day
   - Ms. Abigail Wood
   - Dr. Evan Jameson
Do not capitalize when they are descriptive:
Dwight D. Eisenhower was a great general and president.
Next month the president, Wilma Day, will give a speech.

7. Capitalize professional titles and their abbreviations when they follow a personal name:
Jane Smith, J.D.                John Jones, D.O.

8. Capitalize personified nouns:
He heard Justice cry out his name.
She wore Winter well.

9. Capitalize brand names, proprietary names, trademarks, and commercial products:
Wheaties          Brawny
Volkswagen Bug    Clorox

10. Capitalize specific political and geographical locations and derived adjectives:
Salt Lake City     Down Under
Oneida County      Egypt
Tinseltown         Egyptian

Only capitalize “state”, “city” and “county” if it follows the name:
Maryland State    She works for the county
The state of Maryland     Chicago is also called the Windy City

11. Capitalize the names of nationalities, languages, races, and tribes and their derived adjectives:
Italian           Apache
Caucasian         Farsi

12. Capitalize words of direction when used to designate a specific place:
South Pole        Lower Manhattan
Middle East       Deep South
Upper West Side   Eastern Seaboard

Do not capitalize north, south, east, and west if they refer to a direction or section:
He drove southwest of Denver to vacation in northern New Mexico.
She left northern California.
The westerly winds are strong.
They expect snow in the eastern part of the state.

13. Capitalize the names of specific geographic features and the common nouns that are part of proper names:
Appalachian Mountains  Suez Canal
Indian Ocean          the Great Lakes
14. Capitalize the names of buildings, monuments, streets, bridges, parks, and other specific locations and the common nouns that are part of proper names:
   Pentagon
   Route 66
   Central Park
   Statue of Liberty

15. Capitalize the names of organizations, business firms, and institutions:
   Roosevelt High School
   American Red Cross
   General Mills
   Harvard University

16. Capitalize the names of political parties and religious denominations and their members:
   Democrats
   Tea Party
   Methodist
   Buddhism

17. Capitalize the names of sacred writings and specific creeds, confessions of faith, and prayers:
   King James Bible
   Koran
   Lord’s Prayer
   the Resurrection

18. Capitalize nouns and pronouns that refer to a specific Supreme Being:
   God
   Allah
   Lord
   Yahweh

19. Capitalize specific cultural and historical events, wars, treaties, laws, and documents:
   Declaration of Independence
   Revolutionary War
   Geneva Convention
   the Fifth Amendment

20. Capitalize the names of historical and cultural periods:
   Golden Ages
   Prohibition
   Dust Bowl
   Elizabethan Era
   But don’t capitalize decades or centuries:
   the sixties
   the nineteenth century
   the seventeen hundreds
   the nineteen-seventies

21. Capitalize the names of international organizations, and specific branches, departments, and other divisions of government:
   the Supreme Court
   the Armstrong Commission
   Department of Defense
   the Kansas Legislature
   the Obama Administration
   the United Arab Emirates

22. Capitalize the names of specific awards and prizes:
   Purple Heart
   Pulitzer Prize
   Grammy Award
   Congressional Medal of Honor
23. Capitalize the names of specific trains, planes, ships, satellites, and submarines (italicize them as well):
   *USS Constitution*  
   *Nautilus*  
   *Air Force One*  
   *Sputnik*

24. Capitalize the names of stars, planets, constellations, and other astronomical designations:
   *Orion*  
   *Aries*  
   *Andromeda Galaxy*  
   *Milky Way*  
   *Earth*  
   *North Star*

   But don’t capitalize sun, moon, or earth if it is used in general terms:
   The sun isn’t shining.  
   Tonight will be a full moon.  
   He has traveled all over the earth.

25. Capitalize the days of the week, months of the year, and holidays:
   *Friday*  
   *April*  
   *Father’s Day*  
   *Veteran’s Day*  

   Don’t capitalize the seasons: spring, summer, fall, autumn, winter

26. Capitalize the first word of a sentence and any word or phrase that has the force of a sentence:
   The grass is green.  
   Really?  
   Wait!  
   Twist and shout.

27. Capitalize the first word of a direct quotation:
   “Have a great day,” said John.  
   The weatherman said, “It’s going to rain.”

28. Capitalize the first word following a colon if it introduces two or more related sentences:
   The decision is final: You are fired. Please turn in your keys and badge immediately.

29. Capitalize the first word in the salutation and the first word of the close of a letter:
   Dear friends  
   Best wishes

30. Capitalize the first and last words and all important words in the titles of works of art, books, magazines, newspapers, poems, songs, articles, television shows, plays, reports, and other writing:
   *Denver Post*  
   *Time Magazine*  
   “Hawaii Five-O”  
   “How to Write a Novel”  
   “Who Is Kris Kringle?”  
   “It’s Something to Be Proud Of”
Don’t capitalize the, a, an, and, as, but, if, or, nor, at, by, for, in, off, on, out, to, or up unless it is the first or last word or is actually part of the title:
“Williams Gets an Easy Win”
From The New York Times

Also, in, out, off, and up will be capitalized if they are adverbs (not prepositions), but in and up will be capitalized if they are used with another preposition that has more than four letters:
“Stocks Went Up for the Third Consecutive Quarter”
“Going Up and Down the Staircase”

These rules should keep you out of trouble, and keep the big and small letters in their place.