

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	the Empire State Building
Boise, Idaho	the University of South Dakota
Kentucky Derby	Saturday, June 30

But do not capitalize common nouns. A common noun is a general classification:

any man	the building
the city	the college
the horse race	a day

2. Capitalize proper adjectives. A proper adjective is derived from a proper noun:

Japanese tourist	Texas ranchers
Southern states	Machiavellian

3. Do not capitalize common words: some nouns and adjectives have become so common they aren't capitalized:

french fries	danish pastry
dutch oven	roman numeral
china (dishes)	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	the Presidential Palace
A-Rod	Hell's Angels
JLo	the Bronze Age

6. Capitalize titles when they immediately precede a personal name as a title:

Mayor John Smith	President Wilma Day
Senator Jane Jones	Ms. Abigail Wood
General Eisenhower	Dr. Evan Jameson

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 Central Park
 Route 66 Statue of Liberty
15. Capitalize the names of organizations, business firms, and institutions:
 Roosevelt High School General Mills
 American Red Cross Harvard University
16. Capitalize the names of political parties and religious denominations and their members:
 Democrats Methodist
 Tea Party Buddhism
17. Capitalize the names of sacred writings and specific creeds, confessions of faith, and prayers:
 King James Bible Lord's Prayer
 Koran the Resurrection
18. Capitalize nouns and pronouns that refer to a specific Supreme Being:
 God Lord
 Allah Yahweh
19. Capitalize specific cultural and historical events, wars, treaties, laws, and documents:
 Declaration of Independence Geneva Convention
 Revolutionary War the Fifth Amendment
20. Capitalize the names of historical and cultural periods:
 Golden Ages Dust Bowl
 Prohibition Elizabethan Era
- But don't capitalize decades or centuries:
 the sixties the seventeen hundreds
 the nineteenth century the nineteen-seventies
21. Capitalize the names of international organizations, and specific branches, departments, and other divisions of government:
 the Supreme Court the Kansas Legislature
 the Armstrong Commission the Obama Administration
 Department of Defense the United Arab Emirates
22. Capitalize the names of specific awards and prizes:
 Purple Heart Grammy Award
 Pulitzer Prize Congressional Medal of Honor

23. Capitalize the names of specific trains, planes, ships, satellites, and submarines (italicize them as well):

USS Constitution

Air Force One

Nautilus

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

Father's Day

April

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

"How to Write a Novel"

Time Magazine

"Who Is Kris Kringle?"

"Hawaii Five-O"

"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.