

# Capitalization

A large, black, serif font showing the capital letter 'A' and the lowercase letter 'a' side-by-side.

Capitalization: The action of writing or printing in capital letters or with an initial capital.

**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 mythological 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

- 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

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: EBay 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.

