

camelCasing or snake_casing; Which one is easier
to read?

Johannes Almroth

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to replicate the results of two earlier studies, Binkley *et al.* (2009) as well as Sharif *et al.* (2010), where the aim was to determine if the identifier naming conventions affected code comprehension. The two styles that were examined are camelCasing as well as the snake_case style.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Naming identifiers in a effective and efficient way is important for code comprehension. Variables such as x and y are not enough to convey context as well as meaning, and to write code that encapsulates complex mental models of thinking that need to be understood by multiple people in a development team, appropriate identifier names need to be chosen[4; 3; 7]. Good identifiers increases code readability, and that in turn is critical for the abstraction of concepts, collaboration and code maintainability[1; 7]. This is put into perspective when reading a paper by Deissenboeck *et al.* [5] which states that 70% of the source code for a given release of the popular Java IDE program *Eclipse* consisted solely of identifiers (measured in characters). Given the importance of identifiers, the question remains of *how* they can be written to further aid in code comprehension.

The two main styles of writing identifiers today are camelCasing (*e.g.*, coolBeans) and underscore casing (*e.g.*, cool_beans). Deciding which one to use is often a matter of the given convention within the programming language that the code is written in. As noted in a previous study on the subject [8], early programming languages such as Basic, Cobol, Fortran and Ada were case-insensitive, and thus encouraged the use of either the underscore or hyphens to write variables. When languages such as C and Java were introduced, camel casing became more common, and the argument can be made that it requires less effort to type, and thus improves writing speed. A paper by Epelboim *et al.* [6] found that un-spaced text (*i.e.*, hellothere) lead to a 10–20% slower reading speed in subjects, and would thus suggest that camel cased identifiers should be harder to read than snake cased identifiers.

As of today there's been two studies aimed at answering the question which one of camel casing or underscore casing affects reading comprehension the most. These are papers by Binkley *et al.* [2] and Bonita *et al.* [8] conducted in 2009 and 2010 respectively. The findings of these studies will be presented in [...]

1.1 Purpose and Goals

The study will primarily replicate the 2010 paper. This study aims to provide additional data to the questions posed in the 2009 and 2010 papers, *e.g.*, how does camelCasing and snake_casing affect code comprehension. The data gathering equipment used will be in the form of an eye-tracker. Another goal of the study is to achieve a solid statistical significance through a high enough subject count. Additionally, a few extra variables about the subjects will be gathered pertaining to previous programming experiences as well as their identifier style of choice, as to expand the

given research and to contribute additional data to the [...] (research area?)

1.2 Delimitations

This study will only use the same test format as presented in the 2010 paper.

Chapter 2

Background

So far there's been two studies aiming to determine if there is a significant difference between camel casing and underscore casing. The first study conducted by Binkley *et al.* in 2009 [2] with 135 subjects concluded that the camel casing style leads to a better all round performance, at least when the subject is trained on the style, despite taking on average 0.42 seconds longer to read. The second study conducted by Sharif *et al.* in 2010 [8] with the help of eye-tracking equipment found that camel cased words took on average 0.932 seconds longer to read, and concludes that the underscore style leads to an improvement in both reading time and lessens the amount of visual effort required by the subjects. Visual effort is denoted by how long a subject stares at a given part of the screen, and how often this gaze wanders and switches focus. Even though the two studies differ in their conclusions, the eye-tracking study suffers from a small sample size, with a meagre 15 subjects compared to the 135 subjects in the 2009 study. However, the eye-tracking equipment used in the 2010 study lends a lot of credibility to the data presented, in contrast to the 2009 study where some subjects participated via an online interface in a non-controlled environment that could potentially obfuscate data.

Chapter 3

Methodology

- 3.1 Research questions
- 3.2 Eye-tracking Equipment
- 3.3 Material and Stimuli
- 3.4 Visual Effort and Areas of Interest
- 3.5 Study Variables
- 3.6 Hypotheses
- 3.7 Participants
- 3.8 Instrumentation

Chapter 4

Results

- 4.1 Correctness and Find Time
- 4.2 Visual Effort
- 4.3 Similarities and Differences

Chapter 5

Discussion

Chapter 6

Threats to Validity

Chapter 7

Conclusions & Future Work

7.1 Future Work

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