

06.6 Capitalization

Capital, or “upper case” letters are visual markers of importance in a sentence; contrasted with “lower case” letters, capitals often mark something as unique or important.

But there are many rules that govern what should and should not be capitalized in a given sentence.

Below are some of the basic rules for capitalization in English.

Starting a Sentence

Capital letters are one way that readers are cued to the beginning of a new sentence. The first word in a new sentence is always capitalized, no matter what.

John and Stacy went to the movies last night.

Cacao beans are an important ingredient in chocolate.

I enjoy bananas immensely.

There is something about a Maryland tomato in July that is unique and wonderful.

In the film, Leroy was the one to find the missing girl.

Capitals are *not* needed at the start of every independent thought, just at the beginning of a sentence; so clauses that begin after a semicolon or colon, but in the middle of a sentence, are not capitalized.

An exception to this rule governs quoted sentences—within the larger sentence, the quotation’s initial word is also capitalized.

Proper Nouns

Capital letters are used in English to differentiate proper nouns—very specific, unique, *people, places, things, or ideas*—from everyday nouns, those people, places, things, or ideas that are more general.

Proper Names of People or Organizations

Note in the passages below, that the names of specific people or organizations are capitalized. This indicates that they are a unique entity.

John and Stacy went to the movies last night, along with Peter, Jasmine, and Gabriella.

The Sloan Consortium is an online teaching association.

The University of Missouri's basketball team is 24-3 this season; they were very successful.

Students Against the Treacherous Use of Fur is an active organization on Balon College's campus.

My cousin Juliet just signed a contract with Polyphone Records; her album, *Crosshairs and Spindles*, should be released in June.

The Personal Pronoun "I"

The pronoun "I," when used as a word by itself, is always capitalized. There are no acceptable uses in formal writing for the lower-case "i" by itself. Ever.

I am tired of driving; can you take over for a while?

My mother was impressed by my performance, but I thought I could have done better.

Cordelia and I went to the theatre last night; we saw *The King and I*.

Countries, Cities, States, Counties and other Specific Geographical Locations or Features

As specific, unique places, these things get capitalized. If the word form changes, such as becoming an adjective or a possessive, it still needs capitalization.

The United States of America is the most powerful country in the world. [American, America's]

Mexico sits to the south of the United States. [Mexican, Mexico's]

The Democratic Republic of Viet Nam's capital is Ha Noi. [Vietnamese]

South America is an area rich in history and resources, and it still struggles to overcome the legacy of European colonialism. [South American]

Asia is a fascinating continent; nowhere else on the planet is there such a stunning diversity of cultures. [Asian, Asiatic, Asia's]

Maryland is the state in which I was born. [Marylander, Maryland's]

Baltimore City last year had tax revenues of almost one billion dollars.

Pierre, South Dakota is rather isolated—no major airlines feature direct routes to the city's airport. [South Dakotan, South Dakota's]

Washington D.C. is known in foodie circles for its excellent Ethiopian restaurants. [Washingtonian, Washington D.C.'s]

The Mekong River Delta in Viet Nam produces more rice in a month than some countries produce in a year.

Mount Rainier is a dangerous climb for inexperienced climbers; the nearby Mount Styles is an easier climb.

Prince George's County is just north of Washington, DC.

Harlan County, Kentucky is the setting for the F/X drama series *Justified*.

The Colorado River is one of the longest in the United States.

The City of Burlington, Vermont, is really beautiful in the fall.

Stone Mountain in Georgia is so tall that its peaks are snow-covered, even throughout most of the hot southern summer.

Note, though, that *generic references to places or geographic features* are not capitalized—only for specific references. Here are some examples.

Situations where the wording does not require capitalization:

We went down to the river yesterday, and caught a couple of really nice catfish for dinner. [river is a generic river, not specifically named]

My brother forgot to pay his county taxes last month, so he had to pay a penalty. [county is not specifically named]

There were four or five cabins up on that mountain before last winter's blizzard; I doubt anyone is going up there now. [mountain is not specifically named]

This city really needs to get its fiscal house in order. [city is not specifically named]

I would like to go to college someday. [college is not specifically named]

Situations where the wording requires capitalization:

We went down to the Delaware River yesterday and caught a couple of really nice catfish for dinner. [river is specifically named]

My brother forgot to pay his Anne Arundel County taxes last month, so he had to pay a penalty. [county is specifically named]

There were four or five cabins up on Hard Luck Mountain before last winter's blizzard; I doubt anyone is going up there now. [mountain is specifically named]

The City of Boston really needs to get its fiscal house in order. [city is specifically named]

I would like to go to Barton College someday. [college is specifically named]

References to “God,” specific religions, or other specific divine entities

God said, “Let there be light.”

Jesus transformed water into wine at the wedding in Cana, according to the New Testament.

Roman Catholic priests take vows of celibacy.

Protestantism started, effectively, when Martin Luther posted his famous 95 theses on a church wall in Germany.

There are hundreds of Baptist churches in Tennessee; I was surprised when I traveled there to see so many.

Buddhists seek the way to enlightenment by finding a “middle way” between hedonism and asceticism.

The population of India is largely Hindu, but there is a considerable Muslim minority, particularly in the northwest of the country.

Generic references to a “god” need not be capitalized, such as the following:

Zeus was the ancient Greek god of lightning and storms.

In the book, the human space traveler was worshipped as a god on the primitive planet on which she crashed.

Languages / Nationalities, Holidays, Days of the Week

My grandmother did not speak any English when she arrived in America in 1922; she learned quickly, however.

The Inuit tribes of Alaska are some of the oldest civilizations in North America.

Many Filipinos speak the aboriginal language of the Philippines, Tagalog, along with Spanish and English.

Halloween is my daughter's favorite time of year; last Halloween she dressed up as an owl.

My youngest son woke up on Christmas with a sore throat, but that didn't stop him from opening his presents.

Single people sometimes have ironic Valentine's Day parties, in which they decorate with black streamers and hearts.

My brother had a bit too much champagne on New Year's Eve, and we had to drive him home.

Are you free on Wednesday? We could meet on Thursday, if you are not.

Titles—Literary / Cultural Works and Specific Job Titles

Jamie's favorite book when she was in college was *The Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro.

Mira and Kendall went to see *The Artist* at the Bethesda Art Cinema on Wednesday.

Overall, I thought that the television show *The Event* was a bit disappointing.

Marcel DuChamp's famous *Nude Descending a Staircase* was a landmark painting in the Cubist movement.

Barack Obama is the President of the United States; John Boehner is the current Speaker of the House of Representatives.

Mayor Kari Stinson promised not to raise River City's taxes until she could bring more business back to the city.

Professor Hill was just named Associate Dean of Academic Affairs at Point Park University; he used to be Assistant Dean.

My father was Director of Logistics and Transportation for a large grocery-store chain for twenty years.

“Title Case”

For literary and cultural works, the initial and key words in the title—generally the nouns—are capitalized.

Days of Thunder was an almost laughably bad movie about NASCAR.

“Walking Through the Woods on a Snowy Evening” is my cousin’s favorite Robert Frost poem; I prefer “Design.”

Some people argue that Bob Dylan’s *Blood on the Tracks* is the best folk-rock album ever made.

Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* is a really compelling play about a family that is tearing itself apart.

Exercise: Capitalization

In each of the passages below, identify and correct any incorrect uses of capital letters.

1. Janet, in a fit of rage, Demanded that Alexandra stop seeing her boyfriend.
2. Did you see my copy of *A Hundred Years OF Solitude*?
3. Bob was elected vice-president of the Astronomy club, but he turned down the job.
4. Joshua is fluent in French, german, Russian, english, Japanese, and hindi.
5. My mom lives in Hazelton county in North Carolina.
6. Battlestar galactica was the best show on television for the four years it ran; or at least the best show on the sci-fi network.

7. My grandfather left me a thousand shares of apple when he passed away.
8. Bethany was worried that her Toyota rav-4 would not do well in the snow, but it was fine.
9. Gary is a devout catholic.
10. Mary and her boyfriend went down to the River, but they knew the river was dry.