Description

Capital Compensation

When writers are looking to emphasize a word, but they're not sure if they should bold it, underline it, italicize it, or upper case it, the go-to action seems to be to capitalize its first letter. Unfortunately, the decision to do that is wrong more often than it is right.

Capitalization is supposed to do only two things: signal the beginning of a new sentence, or indicate a proper noun. When you choose to capitalize random words in a sentence, however well intended such actions may be, you create grammatical errors that can confuse your readers and impede their progress through your writing.

Depending on the objectives of your writing, you can follow a simple checklist (the analogy method) or a more complex one (rules of capitalization):

Analogy Method

Ask yourself one simple question—are you referencing a brand, or formal name, or a generic term? If the new car you're driving is a Chevrolet, it's a capital letter. If you refer to it as a "chevy," it's not. If you need Form 17HREXP to file your expenses, use a capital letter. If you just need an expense form, there's no need.

Rules of Capitalization

1. Capitalize the official names of people, places, trade names, and organizations. For example: *General Electric hires graduates from the University of Michigan*.
2. Capitalize titles and honorifics that come before a name (Dr., Mr., Mrs., Miss., Ms.). However, after a name, titles become lowercased (*Barack Obama is the president*).
3. Capitalize races and languages (Hindu, Russian, Spanish, Vietnamese)
4. Capitalize the days of the week, months, and special days (Monday, February, Valentine's Day).
5. Capitalize historical periods and events (the Great Depression, the Industrial Revolution, the Renaissance, the Middle Ages).
6. Capitalize trade names, company names, and agencies (Starbucks, General Motors, Homeland Security, Internal Revenue Service).
7. Seasons and relatives do not need to be capitalized (summer, winter, father, mother) unless it is a formal title (Mother Theresa).

When Your Software Works Against You

Using too much capitalization or using it incorrectly can undermine, clutter, and confuse your writing and your reader. However, even with your best efforts at careful use of capital letters, your word processing software can work against you, deciding to put words or phrases in "title case" or not for no

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apparent reason whenever you press the return key. This frustration can be managed if you remember the following:

- Capitalize the first, last and all principal words in headings and titles.
- Capitalizing the first word after a colon is a cultural guideline. British English only uses a capital for a proper noun or an acronym (IBM), whereas American English uses a capital letter as a commonly accepted convention.

The Case for Lowercase

The desire to be suitably respectful of rank, title, and position can lead you to use capital letters where none are needed. Just remember that missing the occasional capital letter is less of an error than incorrectly using one, and no disrespect will be inferred.

Category

1. Language & Grammar
2. Reporting Research

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