

# Capitalization Guidelines

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Source: M. McCaskill 1998. Grammar, punctuation, and capitalization: A handbook for technical writers and editors.

## Sentence Style Capitalization

- The first word in a sentence is ordinarily capitalized.
- A sentence enclosed in parentheses within another sentence does not begin with a capital.
- In the rare instances that fragment sentences may appear in a document, they should begin with a capital.
  - *Example:* Can system identification procedures be applied to statically unstable aircraft? If so, to which aircraft?
- The first word after a colon may be capitalized when the capital begins a complete sentence; however, capitalization of a complete sentence after a colon is optional.

## Acronyms

- Acronyms are always formed with capital letters. A few words have crept into our language which were initially acronyms, for example, laser and radar. But generally acronyms remain in full caps.

## Proper Nouns and Adjectives

- Proper nouns are defined as "the name of a particular person, place, or thing." Thus, the names of such things as organizations, political divisions, calendar divisions, and historic events and holidays are capitalized just as personal names and geographic names are.
- In general, proper nouns and derivatives of proper nouns used in a proper sense are capitalized.
  - *Example:* Italy – Italian, Alps – Alpine, Newton - Newtonian
- However, derivatives of proper nouns that have acquired an independent meaning are not capitalized.
  - *Example:* roman (numeral)
- A common noun in a proper name is capitalized, but not when used alone:
  - *Example:* The experimental investigation was conducted in the Langley 16-Foot Transonic *Tunnel*. This single-return *tunnel* has continuous air exchange.
- However, when a common noun alone becomes a well-known short form for the proper name, it is capitalized:
  - United States, the States
  - U.S. Army, the Army
  - President of the United States, the President

## Personal Names and Titles

- In foreign names, particles such as *d'*, *de*, *du*, and *von* are capitalized unless preceded by a forename or title
  - *Example:* Theodore von Karman & Von Karman Institute
- Civil and professional titles are capitalized when they precede a personal name as part of the name:
  - President Reagan
  - Director Petersen
  - Chief Scientist Barnwell
  - Engineer-in-Charge Reid
- Such titles are not capitalized in apposition however:
  - the chief scientist, Richard Barnwell
  - the chief of Materials Division, Darrel Tenney

## Geographic Names

- The names of particular regions, localities, countries, and geographic features are capitalized:
- Names of geographic features
  - Northern Hemisphere Southern Hemisphere Arctic Circle
  - North Pole
  - Equator Tropic of Cancer
- Names of regions and localities
  - Middle East Southeast Asia Gulf States
  - North Atlantic States
  - Great Plains
  - Corn Belt
  - North and South (Civil War Period)

### *But*

- western Virginia
- northern manufacturers eastern Gulf states northern Michigan
- Directions of the compass are capitalized only as a part of a name that has been established by usage to designate particular regions.
- Names of rivers, mountains, bays, and cities
  - James River
  - San Francisco Bay
  - Mount Everest
  - Del Marva Peninsula
  - New York City
  - Lake Michigan

## Administrative Names

- Official designations of political divisions and of other organized bodies are capitalized:
  - Names of political divisions
    - Canada United States New York State Ontario Province
    - Northwest Territories
    - Virgin Islands
  - Names of governmental units
    - U.S. Government Executive Department U.S. Congress
    - Environmental Protection Agency
    - U.S. Army
    - U.S. Navy
    - Technical Editing Branch

*But*

  - naval power
  - the government congressional committee

## Names of Organizations and Their Members

- The names of organizations and the members of organizations are capitalized:
  - Democratic Party, Catholic Church
  - a Democrat, a Catholic (members)
  - Democratic administration, Catholic doctrine Society of Automotive Engineers

*But*

  - democratic government (a democracy)
  - catholicity (character of being liberal)

## Names of Public Places and Institutions

- The proper names of public places, facilities, and structures are capitalized:
  - White House
  - Langley Research Center
  - National Transonic Facility
  - H.J. E. Reid Auditorium

## Calendar and Time Designations

- Various holidays, historic events, and other time designations are capitalized:
  - Names of months and days of the week
    - January            December
    - Sunday            Thursday
- But* seasons are not capitalized:
- fall                spring

- Holidays
  - Veterans Day      Memorial Day
  - Thanksgiving      Presidents' Day
- Historic events
  - Revolutionary War      Sputnik Crisis
  - Renaissance      Louisiana Purchase

## Scientific Names

- In several scientific disciplines, there are conventions for capitalization of names, for example, the names of celestial bodies in astronomy and the names of soil groups in geology.
- Geologic names
  - Upper Cambrian Period, Bronze Age (geologic periods)
  - Laterite, Tundra (soil groups)
- Names of celestial bodies
  - North Star, Halley's Comet
  - Venus, Earth (the planet)
  - The Sun, the Moon (Earth's)

*But*

  - moons of Jupiter
- Biological names
  - Arthropoda (phylum)
  - Crustacea (class)
  - Hypoparia (order)
  - Agnostidae (family)
  - *Agnostus* (genus)

## Miscellaneous Names

- The following are additional types of proper names:
  - Races and tribes
    - Asian      Caucasian
    - Nordic      Cherokee

## Chemical Elements

- Capitalize the first letter:
  - Beryllium (Be), Calcium (Ca), Water (H<sub>2</sub>O)