The Proper Way to Use Capitalization

Purpose: Like all punctuation, capitalization is a key element to proper writing but it best when not overused. Capitalization is used less than lowercase letters, making the capitalized words stand out more. It is also used to distinguish proper nouns from non-specific nouns.
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

NOTE: 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 ancient-Greek hero Hercules)
  ● quixotic (from the hero of the classic novel Don Quixote)
  ● draconian (from the ancient- Athenian lawgiver Draco)

NOTE: 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.

Rule 3:
  ● There aren’t always easy formulas or logical explanations to capitalizing. If you have any doubt as to whether or not a word should be capitalized, do some research to make sure you’re distinguishing the right word.
**NOTE:** Be aware that many experts advise that if you are to use a brand name that starts with a lowercase letter, (eBay or iPhone) to capitalize it at the beginning of 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.

**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 Stevens

NOTE: 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* as a job description rather than a title, and recommends using lowercase even before the full name: professor Robert Ames.

**Rule 6a:**
• Capitalize a formal title when it is used as a direct address.

**Example:**
• Will you take my temperature, Doctor?

**Rule 6b:**
• Capitalize relatives’ family names (kinship names) when they immediately precede a personal name, or when they are used alone in place of a personal name.

**Examples:**
• I found out that Mom is here.
• You look good, Grandpa.
• Andy and David loved Aunt Bee’s apple pies.

**NOTE:** These monikers are not capitalized with possessive nouns or pronouns, when they follow the personal name, or when they are not referencing a specific person.

**Examples:**
• My mom is here.
• Joe’s grandpa looks good.
• The James brothers were notorious robbers
• There’s not one mother I know who would allow that.

**Rule 6c:**
• Capitalize nicknames in all cases and situations.

**Examples:**
• Meet my brothers, Junior and Scooter.
• I just met two guys named Junior and Scooter.

**Rule 7:**
• Capitalize specific geographical regions. Do not capitalize points of the compass.

**Examples:**
• We had three relatives visit from the West.
• Go west three blocks and then turn left.
• We left Florida and drove north.
• We live in the Southeast.
• We live in the southeast section of town.
• Most of the West Coast is rainy this time of year.
• The west coast of Scotland is hot this time of year.

**NOTE:** Some areas have to be capitalized for their fame or notoriety.

**Examples:**
• I’m from New York’s Upper West Side.
• I’m from the South Side of Chicago.
• You live in Northern California; he lives in Southern California.

**Rule 8:**
• In general, do not capitalize the word *the* before proper nouns.

**Examples:**
• I’m reading the London Times.
• They’re fans of the Grateful Dead.
**NOTE:** In special cases, if the word *the* is an inseparable part of the something’s official title, it may be capitalized.

**Example:**
- We visited The Hague.

**Rule 9:**
- Do not capitalize *city, town, country, etc.*, if it comes before the proper name.

**Example:**
- the city of New York
- New York City
- the county of Marin
- Marin County

**Rule 10:**
- Always capitalize the first word in a complete quotation, even midsentence.

**Example:**
- Bill said, “That job we started last April is done.”

**Rule 11:**
- For emphasis, writers sometimes capitalize a midsentence independent clause or questions.

**Examples:**
- One of her cardinal rules was, Never betray a friend.
- It made me wonder, What is mankind’s destiny?

**Rule 12:**
- Capitalize the names of specific course titles, but not general academic subjects.

**Examples:**
- I must take history and Algebra 101
Has a double major in European economics and philosophy.

Rule 13:
- Capitalize art movements.

Example:
- I like Surrealism, but I never understood Abstract Expressionism.

Rule 14:
- Do not capitalize the first item in a list that follows a colon.

Example:
- Bring the following: paper, pencil, and a snack.

NOTE: For more information about capitalization after a colon, ask one of the writing mentors at the SST Writing Mentorship Center for a packet about colons.

Rule 15:
- Do not capitalize “the national anthem.”

Rule 16a:

The following rules for capitalizing composition titles are universal.
- Capitalize the title’s first and last word.
- Capitalize verbs, including all forms of the verb to be (is, are, was, etc.)
- Capitalize all pronouns, including it, he, who, that, etc.
- Capitalize not.
- Do not capitalize a, an, or the unless it is first or last in the title.
- Do not capitalize the word to, with or without an infinitive, unless it is the first or last word in the title.
NOTE: Styles, methods and opinions may vary. Make sure to check APA or MLA formatting for correct title capitalization.

Rule 16b:
- Many books have subtitles. When including these, put a colon after the work’s title and follow the same rules of composition capitalization for the subtitle.

Example:
- The King’s English: A Guide to Modern Usage

NOTE: The A is capitalized because it is the first word of the subtitle.

Resource:
- The Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation by Jane Straus