**Capital Letters**

Adapted from the Skills Team, University of Hull

**General principles**

As a rule, and in normal prose, capital letters should be avoided unless the word in question is:

* The first word of a sentence
* The first person singular pronoun, as a subject, ‘I’ – yes, even in texts/emails; otherwise, it’s a spelling error.
* A title (Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr.)
* A proper noun

**Proper nouns** are the names of *particular* examples of the more general classes named by *common* nouns. For example, ‘man’, ‘town’, ‘car’ and ‘country’ are all common nouns; ‘John’, ‘Barnsley’, ‘Volkswagen’, and ‘France’ are proper nouns.

Each of the four common nouns above names a class which contains many individuals. But if you say “point to the man”, you cannot do it, unless something in our conversation has already identified which man we are talking about. If I say “point to John”, it should be easier. Similarly, you can “go to France” with some accuracy; to “go to [a] country” is less sensible English.

In other words, *proper* nouns are more specific than *common* ones. It is the *proper* nouns, along with their associated adjectives, that should have capital letters.

Here are some examples:

* People’s first and family names; ‘father’, ‘wife’ and ‘manager’ are common nouns; ‘Idris Elba’, ‘Thor’ and ‘Kamala Khan’ are proper nouns.
* Countries, continents and other place names such as those of towns and cities or regions (Russia, Russian; Africa, African; Paris, Parisian; Andalusia, Andalusian…); ‘continent is a common noun; Asia is a proper noun.
* Those nouns and adjectives which designate nationalities or languages (Arab, Arabic…); ‘language’ and ‘nationality’ are common nouns; ‘Japanese’ is proper, both as noun and adjective.
* The days of the week and months of the year. Points of the compass may or may not be capitalized, according to their status as proper or common nouns. So someone might have a ‘north-facing garden’ in the ‘North of England’ and many people live in the ‘northern lands’ of many countries but only some in the ‘Northern Territories’ of Canada.
* Particular posts (jobs) in particular contexts. Most companies have a chairman (common noun); a particular company, such a Ford, has its own Chairman (proper noun). Many countries have presidents; their constitutions usually lay down how the President is to be elected (the word ‘the’ is an indication that here ‘President’ is a proper noun with a capital); and each has its own President. John F. Kennedy was, famously, President (proper noun) of the United States of America (and note how, although ‘state’ is a common noun, commonly used to mean roughly the same as ‘country’ or ‘nation’, that particular country, United States, is a proper noun and therefore has capital letters.
* Particular examples of institutions. Many cities have a university (common noun), but the University of Hull and Oxford College have capitals because here they are proper nouns, being the names for particular universities.

When whole words are capitalized, this is the equivalent of a loud voice in speech. It is usually used in direct speech: Suddenly, he noticed the thief running and shouted, “THAT’S HIM!”

**Capitals in titles**

Titles and subtitles of and within articles, essays or assignments are not totally capitalized unless you are specifically instructed to do so. Only the first letter is capitalized. For example:

Palmer, S. (2015). *Toxic childhood: how the modern world is damaging our children and what we can do about it.* Orion.

Originally written by Phil Farrar, edited by Jacqui Bartram, from the Skills Team, University of Hull. Updated by Helen Digman, Study Skills, Barnsley College. [studyskills@barnsley.ac.uk](mailto:studyskills@barnsley.ac.uk)