

We use nouns all the time when we write e-mails to friends or papers for class. (For example, all these underlined words are nouns.) In the next few pages, we'll look at some mistakes that students frequently make with nouns—and I'll give you pointers on how to avoid making those mistakes when you write.

When to capitalize nouns

Names of specific people

CAPS:

Tucker, Lola, Juanita, Denzel, the Stevens family, the Joneses

NO CAPS:

family, boy, girl, sister, cousin

What about mom and dad? Capitalize them when you're calling your parent's name but not when you refer to "my mom" or "my dad."

CAPS:

Hi, Mom! Welcome home, Dad.

NO CAPS:

My father and my mother are busy. Could your mom or your dad drive us to the movie?

Days of the week, months, and holidays, but not seasons

CAPS:

Monday, December, Passover, Easter

NO CAPS:

autumn, fall, spring, winter, summer

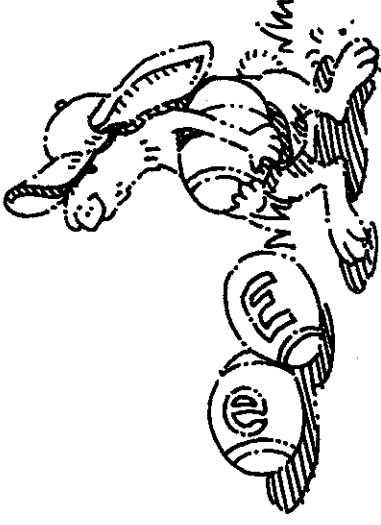
Ranks and titles, but only when used right before a particular person's name

CAPS:

This is Doctor Smith, this is Aunt Anne, and that man is General Bradshaw.

NO CAPS:

That man is my doctor, that woman is my aunt, and that man is a general in the army.



What about the president? Many people think the word *president* is so important that they capitalize it all the time. That is not correct. Use a capital *P* only when *president* is part of the person's name and comes right before the person's name.

CAPS:

Everybody greeted President Barack Obama warmly.

NO CAPS:

The president, Barack Obama, threw out the first ball of the World Series.

Geographic areas: cities, states, countries, counties, rivers, oceans, streets, parks, etc.

CAPS:

North Dakota, Ohio River, Atlantic Ocean, Franklin Street, Central Park, Lake Jordan, Rocky Mountains

NO CAPS:

The ocean is deep. The mountains are high.

Regions of the United States, but not simple directions

CAPS:

I was born in the Midwest, but I grew up in the North.

NO CAPS:

I live on the north side of town.

Historical periods

CAPS:

the Renaissance, World War II, the Middle Ages, the Civil War

NO CAPS:

It was a long war. We live in an age of computers.

Religions, nationalities, and races of people

CAPS:

Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, Asians, Africans, Chinese, African-Americans

NO CAPS:

There are many churches, temples, and mosques in our city, and they are attended by people of many different races.

Languages, countries, and adjectives related to those countries

CAPS:

Denmark, Danish art, Germany, German exchange student

NO CAPS:

french fries, venetian blinds, brussels sprouts, roman numerals
(Some phrases have become so common in our language that the cap is being used less often. It's not wrong to use a cap with these phrases, but ask yourself if you really need it. Are roman numerals just used in Rome? Are french fries unique to France? If you don't really need a cap, don't use it.)

The various names for God and the names of sacred books

CAPS:

God, Jehovah, Allah, the Bible, the Koran

NO CAPS:

There were many gods and goddesses in ancient myths.

Specific school courses, but not general subjects

CAPS:

I'm taking Algebra 101 and History of China.

NO CAPS:

I'm taking algebra and history.

Names of specific schools, businesses, buildings, organizations, etc.

CAPS:

Apple Computer, Phillips Middle School, the University of Vermont

NO CAPS:

I want a new computer. That building is a middle school. I plan to attend a university.

Brand names

CAPS:

Chevrolet Camaro, Nintendo, Cheerios, Nestle's Crunch

Names of planets, but not sun and moon and sometimes not earth

CAPS:

Saturn has 62 moons; Mars has two moons; Earth has only one lonely moon. (Earth is capitalized when you're referring to it as one of the planets or including it with other capitalized planets.)

NO CAPS:

The moon is full tonight, shining down on the more than six billion people who live on the earth. (The word *earth* is not capitalized when you use the word *the* and talk about *the earth*.)

Names of specific teams and clubs and their members

CAPS:

the Atlanta Braves, the Republican Party, Republicans

NO CAPS:

I play on a baseball team. I am a member of a political party.

Titles of movies, books, chapters, and articles


CAPS:

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone, "Tar Heels Beat Duke 102-96," *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*

NO CAPS:

Capitalize every word in a title except for these:
• the articles *a*, *an*, and *the*

- the conjunctions *and*, *but*, *for*, *or*, and *nor*
- the words *to* and *as*
- all prepositions (short ones such as *in* and *with* as well as long ones such as *throughout* and *without*); see page 59 for more information about words that look like prepositions but are not
- Do capitalize any word that is the first or last word of the title or that is the first word after a dash or colon. I love the book The Best Treat of All: A New Friend to Play With.



BEWARE OF THE CAP TRAP

Some students get Carried Away with Caps. They seem to think that every Word they capitalize suddenly becomes Exciting or Important. Don't fall into the Cap Trap. CRAZY CAPS make your work look Very, Very Bad.

Making nouns possessive

When we want to show that someone owns something, we use possessive nouns.

The nose of Mary = Mary's nose
 The toes of Gary = Gary's toes

To make a noun possessive, usually add an apostrophe and an s.

Noun	Possessive
Sofia	Sofia's cat
cat	the cat's tail
Boris	Boris's mustache

In the past, exceptions to this rule were old-fashioned or historical names, or names that end with an *iz* or *eez* sound:

RIGHT:

- Moses' tablets
- Achilles' heel
- Jesus' parables

ALSO RIGHT:

Jesus's parables (In modern writing, this is considered also correct because we pronounce the word with the extra s—Jesus-es—so it is correct if you wish to add the apostrophe and s. Achilles ends with an eez sound and Moses ends with an iz sound, so we don't pronounce the es and we don't add the apostrophe and s to those names.)

If two people own the same thing, use an apostrophe and s for only the second person.

Syman and Mimi's marriage (they share one marriage)
 Kate and Meg's father (they share one father)

If the two people don't own the same thing, use an apostrophe and s for both people.

Syman's and Mimi's toes (they don't share the same toes)
 Kate's and Meg's teeth (they don't share the same teeth)

Showing possession when the noun is plural

If the plural ends in s (for example, *boys*) just add an apostrophe. If the plural does not end in s (for example, *women*) add an apostrophe and an s.

One person, one item	Two people, two items
the boy's jacket	the boys' jackets
my parent's car	my parents' cars
my boss's hat	my bosses' hats
the woman's dress	the women's dresses
the child's toy	the children's toys