

Capital letters help readers recognize the beginnings of complete sentences and distinguish between proper and common nouns. The rules around capitalization bring consistency to your writing and make the paper easier to read. Since capitalization is so common in writing, following these simple guidelines will help to emphasize consistency and clarity in your own writing; however, always write with your audience and assignment in mind.

## Sentence Structure

Capitalize words that begin complete sentences. Words that follow semicolons or colons are generally lowercased—unless they are proper nouns.

**Period:** The runner crossed the finish line. She smiled and waved at the cheering crowd.

**Semicolon:** Dogs make great pets; you just have to be careful when handling them.

**Colon:** Joe had only one thing on his mind: he wanted to go out with Linda.

## Quotes

Capitalize the first word of a direct quote if it begins a **complete sentence** in the original text.

**Example:** Li writes, “Potatoes can be part of a healthy diet when eaten in moderation” (11).

Do not capitalize the first word of a direct quote when it begins **mid-sentence**.

**Example:** Li argues that potatoes are healthy “when eaten in moderation” (11).

## Acronyms

Capitalize acronyms created from capitalized words.

**Example:** FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation)

**Example:** MA (master’s degree)

## Proper and Common Nouns

**Proper nouns** are names of *specific* people, places, organizations, things, and ideas and should always be capitalized. **Common nouns** name *general* people, places, things, and ideas and are not capitalized.

**Proper:** The Beatles, The Sahara Desert, Red Cross

**Common:** a band, desert, relief organization

## Titles

People’s names and titles are proper nouns and should be capitalized; however, when used as common nouns, titles should not be capitalized.

**Proper:** Professor Ann Chen, President George Washington

**Common:** a professor, a president

## Regional Names

Most geographic names, including those of specific regions or sections of a country, are proper nouns and should be capitalized. Compass directions, however, are common nouns and are not capitalized.

**Proper:** I visited the **Middle East** last spring for vacation.

**Common:** Drive **south** on Highway 15 for 10 miles, then go **east** on University Street.

### ***Brand Names***

Brand names are proper names, so they should be capitalized; however, general product names should not be capitalized.

**Proper:** Coke, Nike, Google

**Common:** soda, shoe, search engine

### ***Units of Time***

Capitalize days of the week, months, and holidays. Do not capitalize seasons, academic years, or centuries.

**Proper:** Monday, January, Christmas

**Common:** spring, senior year, the tenth century

### ***Academic Subjects***

Capitalize course titles as proper nouns. Lowercase academic subjects as common nouns.

**Proper:** Philosophy 1010, History 4980, Engineering 1000

**Common:** philosophy, history, engineering

### ***Languages***

Capitalize languages, no matter the context.

**Example:** English 1010, English biscuits, English textbook

**Example:** They speak English.

### ***Titles of Works***

Titles of works are considered proper nouns and should be capitalized. Capitalize all words in titles of books, articles, films, and songs except for conjunctions (*and, or, etc.*), prepositions under five letters (*in, on, of, etc.*), and articles (*a, an, the*). However, the first word is capitalized even if it is one of the previous exceptions. The first word of each title should also be capitalized.

**Proper:** *The Great Gatsby, To Kill a Mockingbird, The Art of War, Invisible Man*