

Capitals

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 2 min read

Capital letters

Some directions to my students on capitals:

?I would ask that you don't write in ALL CAPITALS.

First of all it looks awful.

Second it makes the reader think you are SHOUTING !!!

Third readability tests show that being forced to read something written in all-capitals slows down the reader's speed and comprehension. But more importantly, no publication publishes in all-capitals, so what's the point?

You must present every written document in the style that all professional journalists use and that is normal upper case (capitals) and lower case ("little letters") as you see in any magazine or newspaper. Or as you see in this paragraph you are reading now.

And as an experienced editor, I must be able to assist you by making sure you use capitalisation correctly. That is, an initial capital letter on names like Melbourne or Harry or the two capitals in the brandname McDonald's.

Also, no initial capital letter on words like cricket hero, or former prime minister. If you write Elle's surname in capitals (MACPHERSON) how would I (or your editor) know whether you thought her surname was spelt MacPherson or Macpherson? (It's spelled Macpherson.)

You simply CANNOT spell well-known names in all capital letters.

Computer change: To change material written in all-capitals to "sentence case" on your computer, is simple. Select (block) the material to be changed. Click on "Format", click on "Change case", click on "Sentence case". Bingo! It's all changed to what it should be. Please! Never use all capitals.

?Do not use a capital letter as the first (initial) letter of a word unless you absolutely have to. Modern journalism requires as few initial capitals as possible. Write: "Woy Woy Public Hospital", but "the public hospital at Woy Woy". Generally you use initial capitals only on proper names, place names and brand names only. There are many words that custom demands a capital initial letter, such as Olympics, Order of Australia, Christian and Jew (but not atheist). Some words used to have initial capitals, but now don't, such as: rugby league, east vs west, a former prime minister.

?Do you ever notice that you have a capital letter at the beginning of every line?

This is because when you get to the right-hand end of a line, you are pressing the "ENTER" key on your computer keyboard.

The computer assumes you are starting a new paragraph and automatically makes the first letter a capital letter. YOU DO NOT NEED TO PRESS THE "ENTER" KEY.

Your computer works differently to a typewriter. Your computer automatically "wraps", that is, goes to the next line without you having to do anything. Follow what I've told you, and you won't have these annoying and unprofessional-looking capital letters starting each line.

Reprinted from The Wonderful World of Journalism. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.