10 Rules of Capitalization

Some people may tell you that there are far more than just ten rules of capitalization in English, and with everything that you have to remember, that may be true. Others may say that there are only three rules, and they are also correct. The truth is that, depending on how you organize the rules, the rules of capitalization may be many or few.

Most of the things we capitalize in English are what we call proper nouns. They are the names of specific, unique things.

- If you are talking about one specific mountain (Mt. Fuji), state (Idaho) or street (Atlantic Ave.), use a capital letter for every word in the name.
- However, when you are talking about a common thing of which there are many - like a mountain, a state or a street - don’t use a capital letter for those words.

Capitals are not used for articles (a, an, the) or prepositions (of, on, for, in, to, with, etc.).

Key Rules

1. Names of people

This one may seem obvious, but there’s also a catch. Of course, you capitalize the first letters of a person’s first, middle and last names (John Quincy Adams), but you also capitalize suffixes (Jr., the Great, Princess of Power, etc.) and titles.

Titles can be as simple as Mr., Mrs. or Dr., but they also apply to situations wherein you address a person by his or her position as though it’s their first name. For example, when we talk about President Lincoln, we are using his role as though it were a part of his name. We don’t always capitalize the word president. Indeed, we could say, "During the Civil War, President Lincoln was the president of the United States."

2. Names of mountains, mountain ranges, hills and volcanoes

Again, we’re talking about specific places. The word ‘hill’ is not a proper noun, but Gellert Hill is because it’s the name of one specific hill. Use a capital letter to begin each word in the name of a mountain (Mt. Olympus), mountain range (the Appalachians), hill (San Juan Hill) or volcano (Mt. Vesuvius).

3. Names of bodies of water (rivers, lakes, oceans, seas, streams and creeks)

From here, it gets pretty easy. The same rules that apply to mountain names also apply to water names. A river is just a river, but the Mississippi River is a proper noun and must be capitalized, just like Lake Erie, the Indian Ocean and the Dead Sea.

4. Names of buildings, monuments, bridges and tunnels

Man-made structures also often have names. The White House, the Eiffel Tower, the Statue of Liberty, the Golden Gate Bridge and the Lincoln Tunnel are a few good examples.

5. Street names

Capitalize both the actual name part of the name (Capital) and the road part of the name (Boulevard); both are necessary for forming the entire name of the street (Capital Boulevard).

6. Schools, colleges and universities

All of the words in the name of the educational institution should be capitalized. For example, Harvard University, Wilkesboro Elementary School, Cape Fear Community College.

7. Political divisions (continents, regions, countries, states, counties, cities and towns)
As is the case with regions of a country, the divisions may not always be political, but you get the idea. When you refer to New England, the Midwest, the Pacific Northwest or the South as a region (as opposed to a compass direction), you capitalize it. Also, continents (South America), countries (Belgium), states (Wisconsin), counties (Prince William County), cities (London) and towns (Lizard Lick) get capitalized.

8. Titles of books, movies, magazines, newspapers, articles, songs, plays and works of art

This one’s a little tricky when ‘and,’ articles or prepositions are involved. If ‘the’ is the first word in the given name of a work, it must be capitalized (The Washington Post, The Glass Menagerie). If ‘a’ or ‘an’ is the first word, it too is capitalized (A Few Good Men), and if a preposition leads the way, you guessed it: Capitalized (Of Mice and Men). However, if any of these words come in the middle of the title, it is not capitalized.

9. The first letter in a sentence

The last two rules are easy. Always capitalize the first letter of a sentence. If the sentence is a quotation within a larger sentence, capitalize it, but only if it’s a complete sentence. If it’s merely a phrase that fits neatly into the larger sentence, it does not require capitalization. Study the following two examples for clarification:

- The waiter said, “My manager will be here shortly,” but he never came.
- The waiter told us that his manager would “be here shortly,” but he never came.

10. The pronoun I

It’s only necessary to capitalize other pronouns when they begin a sentence, but ‘I’ is always capitalized.

Remembering the Rules

How can you possibly remember all these rules? Well, first of all, you should ask yourself three questions:

- Is this the first letter in a sentence? If the answer is yes, capitalize.
- Is this the pronoun I? If yes, capitalize.
- Am I using a name that someone gave to this thing or person? If yes, capitalize.
And if you want to remember all the specific categories, try memorizing one of the following sentences.

- “For Bob Barker, the price is sometimes wrong,” mom says.
- Susan Sarandon bought my wife fancy toilet paper in Boston.

The first letter of each word stands for a category:

- F - First letter in a sentence
- B - Buildings (and other man-made structures)
- B - Borders (of regions, states, countries, etc.)
- T - Titles
- P - People
- I - I
- S - Schools
- W - Water
- M - Mountains
- S - Streets

And there you have it. Whether you think of English as having ten rules of capitalization, thirty, or just three, You should now be able to remember them all.