

chicago manual of style capitalization rules for american english

The Chicago Manual of Style capitalization rules for American English provide a comprehensive framework for writers, editors, and publishers aiming for clarity and consistency. Navigating these guidelines can seem daunting, but understanding the core principles empowers you to make informed decisions across various contexts, from academic papers to professional publications. This article will delve deeply into the intricacies of Chicago-style capitalization, covering everything from general principles to specific applications for titles, proper nouns, and stylistic choices. We will explore how to effectively apply these rules to ensure your writing adheres to the high standards set by one of the most respected style guides in the publishing world. Mastering these capitalization nuances is crucial for professional communication and will enhance the credibility of your written work.

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General Principles of Chicago Manual of Style Capitalization

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) approaches capitalization with an emphasis on clarity, tradition, and the avoidance of unnecessary capitalization. The fundamental principle is to capitalize words that are inherently proper nouns or are used as such in specific contexts, while defaulting to lowercase for most other words. This approach aims to prevent visual clutter and ensure that capitalization serves its purpose of identifying specific entities, rather than being used arbitrarily. CMOS generally favors a more conservative approach to capitalization, meaning it's often better to err on the side of lowercase unless a specific rule dictates otherwise. This careful consideration ensures that capitalized words stand out and convey their intended meaning effectively.

One of the core tenets is the distinction between common nouns and proper nouns. A common noun refers to a general class of people, places, or things (e.g., city, river, president), whereas a proper noun names a specific instance of these (e.g., Chicago, Mississippi River, President Biden). While this distinction seems straightforward, its application can become complex, especially in cases where words can function as both. CMOS provides detailed guidance to help writers navigate these gray areas, ensuring consistency across different types of writing. The goal is always to enhance readability and ensure that readers can readily distinguish between general concepts and specific references.

CMOS also recognizes that capitalization can be used for stylistic emphasis, particularly in titles and headings. However, even in these instances, specific rules apply to maintain a degree of uniformity. The style manual offers two primary approaches for titles: title case and sentence case. Understanding when to employ each is crucial for adhering to Chicago style. The overarching philosophy is that capitalization should serve a logical purpose, whether it's identifying a unique entity or signaling the importance of a word within a title or heading.

Capitalization in Titles and Headings

When it comes to capitalizing words in titles and headings, the Chicago Manual of Style offers two distinct methods: title case and sentence case. The choice between these often depends on the context and the publisher's preference, though CMOS provides guidelines for each. Title case capitalizes the first and last words of a title, along with all major words in between, typically excluding articles, prepositions, and conjunctions unless they are the first or last word. Sentence case, on the other hand, capitalizes only the first word of the title and any proper nouns or words that are always capitalized.

Title Case Guidelines

Using title case, as outlined by CMOS, involves a more comprehensive capitalization strategy. The first and last words are always capitalized. All nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are also capitalized. Minor words, such as articles (a, an, the), short prepositions (of, in, on, at, to, for, with, by), and short conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet), are generally not capitalized unless they are the first or last word of the title or heading, or if they are part of a compound word where the second element is capitalized.

For example, a title like "The History of the American Revolution" would be capitalized using title case. The article "The" is capitalized because it's the first word. "History," "American," and "Revolution" are capitalized because they are considered major words (noun, adjective, noun). The preposition "of" is not capitalized as it is a minor word and not the first or last word. Another example might be "A Study in Scarlet," where "A" is capitalized as the first word, "Study" and "Scarlet" are capitalized as major words, and "in" is a preposition that is not capitalized.

Sentence Case Guidelines

Sentence case, the alternative provided by CMOS, is generally considered simpler and more akin to how sentences are capitalized. In this method, only the first word of the title or heading, along with any proper nouns or words that are always capitalized (regardless of their position), are capitalized. All other words are lowercase, unless they fall into these specific categories. This approach is often favored for its straightforwardness and its similarity to standard sentence structure, making it less visually dense.

An example of sentence case would be: "The history of the American Revolution." Here, only "The" and "American" (as a proper adjective) are capitalized. "History" and "Revolution" remain lowercase because they are common nouns. Similarly, "A study in scarlet" would be rendered as "A study in scarlet," with only "A" capitalized. This style is frequently used in headings within articles or chapters, while title case might be reserved for the main title of a book or a major section heading.

Capitalizing Proper Nouns

The realm of proper nouns is where much of the complexity in Chicago manual of style capitalization rules for American English arises. Proper nouns name specific entities, and their capitalization serves to distinguish them from common nouns. This category includes names of people, places, organizations, specific events, deities, and even specific brands. CMOS provides extensive lists and guidelines to ensure accurate identification and consistent application of capitalization for these terms.

People and Places

Names of people are always capitalized, such as "Jane Austen" or "Martin Luther King Jr." Similarly, specific geographical locations are capitalized. This includes cities ("New York"), states ("California"), countries ("Canada"), continents ("Asia"), bodies of water ("Pacific Ocean"), mountain ranges ("Rocky Mountains"), and celestial bodies ("Earth," when referring to the planet, but not in phrases like "earthy tones"). Proper adjectives derived from proper nouns are also capitalized, such as "American," "French," or "Victorian."

However, there are nuances. For instance, generic terms for places become proper nouns when part of a specific name (e.g., "the Mississippi River," but not "a river"). Similarly, terms like "president" are lowercase when used generically but capitalized when referring to a specific person holding that office in a formal title (e.g., "the president" versus "President Lincoln"). The same applies to titles of nobility or positions when used in conjunction with a name.

Organizations and Institutions

Names of specific organizations, companies, governmental bodies, and educational institutions are always capitalized. This includes entities like "the United Nations," "Microsoft Corporation," "the Department of Justice," and "Harvard University." When referring to these entities generically, the terms are typically lowercase (e.g., "a university," "a corporation"). However, the line can blur when abbreviations or common names are used.

For example, "the federal government" is typically lowercase unless referring to a specific governmental body like "the Federal Bureau of Investigation." Similarly, "the company" is

lowercase, but "Apple Inc." is capitalized. CMOS advises consulting specific style guides for particular industries or organizations if there is ambiguity. The key is to identify whether the term refers to a unique, named entity.

Historical Periods, Events, and Documents

Specific historical periods and eras are generally capitalized, such as "the Renaissance," "the Middle Ages," or "the Stone Age." Major historical events are also capitalized, including "World War II," "the French Revolution," and "the Civil Rights Movement." Similarly, the titles of significant historical documents are capitalized, such as "the Declaration of Independence" or "the Constitution."

However, generic references to historical periods or events are not capitalized. For example, "a period of economic growth" or "a revolution in technology" would remain in lowercase. The capitalization here is reserved for names that specifically denote a recognized epoch or a singular, defining historical occurrence. This distinction helps to differentiate between general historical concepts and named historical moments.

Specific Cases in Chicago Manual of Style Capitalization

Beyond the general principles and categories of proper nouns, Chicago Manual of Style capitalization rules for American English address a multitude of specific situations. These include religious terms, brand names, common nouns used as proper nouns, and even stylistic considerations in specific contexts like legal or scientific writing.

Religious Terms and Deities

CMOS mandates the capitalization of the names of deities, prophets, and religious figures, as well as pronouns referring to them when used in a religious context. For example, "God," "Allah," "Yahweh," "Jesus Christ," and "Buddha" are capitalized. Pronouns like "He," "Him," and "His" are capitalized when referring to God. Sacred texts and their specific divisions are also capitalized, such as "the Bible," "the Quran," "the Torah," and "the Gospels."

However, generic terms for religious figures or concepts are not capitalized. For instance, "a god," "a prophet," or "the holy spirit" (when referring to the abstract concept rather than the third person of the Trinity) would be lowercase. The capitalization of religious terms hinges on whether they refer to a specific divine being or a formally recognized religious concept.

Brand Names and Trademarks

Brand names and registered trademarks are capitalized as they are specific proper nouns. This includes names like "Kleenex," "Google," "Coca-Cola," and "iPhone." Even when a brand name becomes so common that it's used generically (e.g., "kleenex" for facial tissue), CMOS advises capitalizing the original brand name. If a company changes the capitalization of its own brand (e.g., "iPhone" versus "iphone"), the original capitalization should be maintained.

When a brand name is used as an adjective, it is still capitalized. For example, "a Xerox machine" or "a Nike shoe." This ensures that the origin of the product is clearly identified. The aim is to maintain the integrity of the trademark and avoid confusion with generic products.

Common Nouns Used as Proper Nouns

Sometimes, common nouns are capitalized when they are used as part of a specific name or title, essentially functioning as proper nouns in that context. Examples include "the White House" (referring to the specific building), "Central Park" (referring to the specific park), or "the Golden Gate Bridge" (the specific bridge). In these instances, the common noun becomes capitalized because it is integral to the unique designation of the place.

Conversely, if the common noun is used generically, it remains lowercase. For instance, "a white house" (any house painted white) or "a park in the city" would be lowercase. The capitalization is dependent on whether the term is being used to identify a specific, named entity or a general category.

Stylistic Choices and Exceptions in Chicago Manual of Style Capitalization

While CMOS provides extensive rules, it also acknowledges that stylistic choices and exceptions exist, particularly in areas like the capitalization of the first word after a colon, stylistic preferences in certain fields, and the use of internal capitalization for emphasis or specific branding. Understanding these nuances is key to a complete mastery of Chicago style.

Capitalization After a Colon

The rules for capitalizing the first word after a colon are somewhat flexible in CMOS, depending on the nature of the clause following the colon. If the word following the colon begins a complete independent clause and is closely related to the preceding clause, it is

generally capitalized. For example: "He had one goal: to succeed." Here, "to succeed" is an infinitive phrase, and capitalizing "To" would be optional, but CMOS often prefers lowercase for such phrases. However, if it introduces a complete sentence that amplifies or explains the preceding clause, capitalization is more common.

For instance: "She listed her priorities: First, she needed to secure funding; second, she had to assemble her team; and third, she would begin the project." In this case, each item in the list is an independent clause, and capitalizing the first word of each is appropriate. CMOS advises that if the material following the colon is a quotation, it should be capitalized as it would be if it stood alone. The primary consideration is the grammatical completeness and logical connection of the material after the colon.

Stylistic Considerations and Industry Variations

Certain fields and industries have their own established capitalization conventions that may differ from or supplement CMOS. For example, legal documents, scientific terminology, and specific academic disciplines might employ capitalization in ways that are unique to their contexts. CMOS often defers to these established practices within specialized fields when they are clearly defined and consistently applied.

For example, scientific names of species are often capitalized in a specific manner (e.g., genus capitalized, species lowercase). Similarly, legal titles or specific legislative acts might have their own capitalization rules. Writers working in these specialized areas should consult relevant style guides or industry standards in conjunction with CMOS. This ensures accuracy and adherence to the expected norms within their professional domain.

Internal Capitalization and Specific Names

CMOS generally advises against excessive internal capitalization for emphasis, preferring to rely on other methods like italics or bolding. However, there are exceptions, particularly with the names of specific entities or products that have their own established internal capitalization. For instance, if a company uses "eBay" or "MySpace" in its branding, those specific capitalizations should be retained when referring to the entity.

The manual also touches upon the capitalization of names of gods or specific theological concepts within different religions. While general terms might be lowercase, specific named deities or personified concepts are typically capitalized. This underscores the principle that capitalization is a tool for precise identification, and when an entity is named specifically, its name warrants capitalization.

FAQs on Chicago Manual of Style Capitalization Rules

Q: When should I capitalize the word "Internet" according to the Chicago Manual of Style?

A: According to the Chicago Manual of Style, the term "Internet" has transitioned from being capitalized to typically being lowercase ("internet"). While older editions might have capitalized it, the current trend and recommendation within CMOS is to use lowercase unless it is part of a specific proper noun where its capitalization is mandated. This reflects the evolving understanding and use of the term as a general utility rather than a singular proper noun.

Q: How does the Chicago Manual of Style handle the capitalization of job titles?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style capitalizes job titles when they are used as part of a person's formal name or title (e.g., President Lincoln, Prime Minister Trudeau). However, when used generically or to refer to the position itself without a specific name attached, job titles are generally kept in lowercase (e.g., "the president of the company," "a prime minister"). This distinction is crucial for maintaining clarity between specific individuals and general roles.

Q: What are the rules for capitalizing the first word after a colon in Chicago style?

A: In Chicago style, the first word after a colon is capitalized if it begins a complete independent clause that amplifies or explains the preceding clause. If the material following the colon is a short phrase, a list item, or an infinitive phrase, it is typically kept lowercase. For instance, "He had one purpose: to finish the marathon." versus "She had three goals: secure funding, assemble the team, and begin the project."

Q: How does CMOS handle capitalization of company names that use internal capitalization, like "eBay"?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style generally advises maintaining the capitalization as used by the company itself for specific brand names and company names. Therefore, if a company consistently uses "eBay," it should be capitalized as "eBay" in your writing, even though "e" is typically lowercase. This principle applies to any company or product name that employs unconventional internal capitalization.

Q: Should I capitalize common nouns when they are part of a specific landmark or place name in Chicago style?

A: Yes, according to the Chicago Manual of Style, common nouns are capitalized when they are part of a specific, official name of a landmark, place, or institution. For example, "Central Park," "the Grand Canyon," or "the Empire State Building" all capitalize the

common noun component because it forms an integral part of the unique name. However, if used generically, such as "a park" or "a canyon," they would be lowercase.

Q: What is the difference between title case and sentence case for headings in Chicago style?

A: In Chicago style, title case capitalizes the first and last words of a title or heading, as well as all major words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs). Sentence case, on the other hand, capitalizes only the first word of the title or heading and any proper nouns or words that are always capitalized. Sentence case is often preferred for headings within text for its simplicity, while title case might be used for main titles.

Q: Are there any exceptions to capitalizing the names of deities and pronouns referring to them in CMOS?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style mandates capitalizing the names of deities (e.g., God, Allah, Zeus) and pronouns referring to them when used in a religious context (e.g., "God sent His Son"). However, generic terms for divine beings (e.g., "a god," "demigod") are typically not capitalized unless they are part of a specific proper name. The rule aims to respect religious traditions and identify specific divine entities.

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