

chicago manual of style capitalization rules for authors

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) is a comprehensive guide for writing, editing, and styling published works, and its capitalization rules are particularly crucial for authors seeking clarity and professionalism. Understanding these specific guidelines ensures consistency across a manuscript, from titles and headings to proper nouns and the beginning of sentences. This article delves deeply into the Chicago Manual of Style capitalization rules for authors, exploring the nuances of capitalizing general words, specific entities, and the reasoning behind these stylistic choices. By mastering these rules, authors can enhance the readability and credibility of their work, making it more accessible and professional for editors and readers alike.

Table of Contents

- General Principles of Capitalization
- Capitalizing Titles and Headings
- Capitalizing Proper Nouns
- Capitalizing Specific Entities and Terms
- Capitalization in Dialogue and Quoted Material
- Capitalization in Specialized Contexts
- Common Pitfalls in Chicago Manual of Style Capitalization

General Principles of Capitalization in Chicago Style

The fundamental principle guiding capitalization in the Chicago Manual of Style is clarity and the avoidance of ambiguity. Generally, words are not capitalized unless there is a specific reason to do so. This means that common nouns remain lowercase unless they begin a sentence or are part of a proper noun. This editorial philosophy aims to create a clean, uncluttered visual presentation for the reader, allowing emphasized words to stand out more effectively.

When in doubt, the default stance in Chicago style is to lowercase. However, this is balanced by the need to clearly identify specific entities, titles, and elements that require distinct recognition. Authors should familiarize themselves with the established categories where capitalization is mandated or recommended, understanding that consistency is paramount throughout a manuscript. The CMOS provides detailed examples for various scenarios, which are invaluable resources for authors navigating these rules.

Capitalizing Titles and Headings in Chicago Style

One of the most frequently encountered areas of Chicago Manual of Style capitalization rules for authors pertains to titles and headings. Chicago offers two main approaches: title case and sentence case. The choice between these often depends on the context of the

work and publisher preference. Understanding the distinctions and applications of each is vital for maintaining stylistic integrity.

Title Case in Chicago Style

Title case, as defined by Chicago, involves capitalizing the first word, the last word, and all principal words in a title or heading. Principal words include nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Articles (a, an, the), short prepositions (of, in, on, at, for, with, etc.), 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.

For example, a title like "The Importance of Clear Writing" would be capitalized as such. Similarly, "A Study in Scarlet" follows this rule. Authors must carefully consider the part of speech for each word in a title or heading to apply title case accurately. The CMOS provides extensive lists of prepositions and conjunctions that are typically lowercased when they appear in the middle of a title.

Sentence Case in Chicago Style

Sentence case, conversely, capitalizes only the first word of the title or heading and any proper nouns or other words that would normally be capitalized in a sentence. This approach is often preferred for headings within a text that function more like introductory phrases than standalone titles. For instance, a heading might be "Chapter overview: Understanding capitalization."

This method can lend a more natural flow to prose and is frequently used in academic papers, articles, and online content where a less formal, more integrated heading style is desired. Authors should consult their publisher's guidelines, as sentence case is sometimes mandated for specific types of works or publications.

Subheads and Running Heads

The capitalization of subheads and running heads also falls under these rules. Subheads within a chapter typically follow the same title case or sentence case conventions as the main title. Running heads, which appear at the top of pages, usually employ title case for stylistic consistency. The key is to establish a pattern and adhere to it rigorously throughout the manuscript.

Capitalizing Proper Nouns in Chicago Style

Proper nouns are a cornerstone of capitalization, and Chicago Manual of Style capitalization rules for authors are quite detailed in this area. Proper nouns refer to unique persons, places, organizations, and specific things. They are capitalized to distinguish them from common nouns.

People and Personal Names

All personal names, including first names, middle names, last names, and titles when used with a name, are capitalized. For example, "Dr. Eleanor Vance" and "President Lincoln." Hyphenated names are capitalized according to their individual word capitalization rules, with both parts capitalized if they are significant components, such as "Mary-Anne."

Places and Geographic Names

Specific geographic locations are always capitalized. This includes continents, countries, states, provinces, cities, continents, oceans, rivers, mountains, and their political subdivisions. Examples include "North America," "France," "California," "New York City," "the Pacific Ocean," and "Mount Everest." Adjectives derived from proper nouns, such as "Californian" or "European," are also capitalized.

Organizations and Institutions

The names of specific organizations, companies, government bodies, educational institutions, and religious groups are capitalized. This includes entities like "the United Nations," "Microsoft Corporation," "the Department of Justice," "Harvard University," and "the Catholic Church." Trade names and brand names also fall under this category, such as "Coca-Cola" or "iPhone."

Specific Events and Historical Periods

Named historical events, eras, and periods are capitalized. This includes terms like "World War II," "the Renaissance," "the Industrial Revolution," and "the Civil Rights Movement." However, general terms referring to historical periods or events that are not specifically named are not capitalized, such as "an ancient civilization" or "a medieval festival."

Titles of Works

Titles of books, articles, films, songs, plays, and other creative works are capitalized according to the title case or sentence case rules discussed previously. This applies when referring to specific works, such as "To Kill a Mockingbird" or "The Star-Spangled Banner."

Capitalizing Specific Entities and Terms

Beyond general proper nouns, certain specific entities and terms have distinct capitalization rules within the Chicago Manual of Style. These often relate to established conventions in academic, scientific, or technical writing.

Religious and Spiritual Terms

Deities, religious texts, and specific religious groups are capitalized. This includes "God," "Allah," "the Bible," "the Quran," "Buddhism," and "Judaism." Pronouns referring to God are also capitalized when they refer specifically to the deity. However, general terms like "gods" or "religious practices" are not capitalized.

Scientific and Technical Terms

In scientific and technical writing, capitalization can be more nuanced. Generally, scientific terms are not capitalized unless they are part of a proper noun (e.g., "Newtonian physics," named after Isaac Newton) or a formal classification name (e.g., scientific names of species, genus capitalized, species lowercase, italicized, like *Homo sapiens*).

Specific laws, theories, and formulas are capitalized if they are named after individuals, such as "Einstein's theory of relativity" or "Ohm's law." Generic terms are not capitalized, for instance, "a law of physics" or "a chemical reaction."

Days, Months, and Holidays

Days of the week, months of the year, and specific holidays are always capitalized. This includes "Monday," "July," "Christmas," and "New Year's Day." Seasons are generally not capitalized unless they are used in a figurative or personified sense, or as part of a specific name, such as "the Winter Olympics."

Capitalization in Dialogue and Quoted Material

The Chicago Manual of Style capitalization rules for authors also address how capitalization should be handled within dialogue and when incorporating quoted material into a text.

Beginning of Sentences in Dialogue

Each new sentence within quoted dialogue should begin with a capital letter, regardless of its position within the larger sentence. For example: "She asked, 'Where are you going? I need to know.'" This rule ensures that each independent thought within the dialogue is presented clearly.

Proper Nouns within Quotations

Proper nouns that appear within quoted material should retain their original capitalization as found in the source. Authors should not alter the capitalization of proper nouns within a quotation unless it is absolutely necessary for clarity and is noted with brackets and an ellipsis, or if the quotation is being integrated into a sentence and the capitalization needs to conform.

Integrating Quotations

When integrating a quotation into your own sentence, if the quoted material begins a new sentence in the original source but appears mid-sentence in your prose, you may lowercase the first letter of the quotation if it is not a proper noun. However, it is often preferred to keep the original capitalization for clarity. If the quoted material is a full sentence within your text, it should begin with a capital letter. For example: "The report stated, 'The findings are conclusive.' This was a significant development."

Capitalization in Specialized Contexts

Certain fields and specific types of content have unique capitalization conventions that authors should be aware of, even if they fall slightly outside the most common grammar rules.

Brand Names and Trademarks

Brand names and trademarks are typically capitalized as they are registered. Companies often have specific guidelines on how their brand names should be capitalized (e.g., "eBay," "iPhone"). When in doubt, referring to the company's official style guide or a reliable dictionary is recommended. Generally, these follow proper noun capitalization rules.

Internet and Technology Terms

While many internet and technology terms have become common nouns and are thus lowercased (e.g., "internet," "email," "website"), specific platform names or unique product names are capitalized as proper nouns (e.g., "Google," "Facebook," "Twitter"). The capitalization of "Internet" itself has evolved, with CMOS now recommending lowercase unless it begins a sentence.

Acronyms and Initialisms

Acronyms and initialisms are generally capitalized. Examples include "NASA," "FBI," and "UNICEF." When an acronym becomes so common that it is effectively a word, it may be lowercased (e.g., "laser," "radar"). For stylistic consistency, it is best to write out the full term on its first use followed by the acronym in parentheses, and then use the acronym subsequently.

Common Pitfalls in Chicago Manual of Style Capitalization

Authors new to the Chicago Manual of Style capitalization rules for authors often stumble

over a few common areas. One frequent mistake is over-capitalization, applying capitals to words that are not proper nouns or do not begin a sentence or title where capitalization is required.

Another pitfall is inconsistent application of title case versus sentence case for headings and titles. It is crucial to decide on a style and maintain it throughout the manuscript. Furthermore, confusing common nouns with proper nouns, or vice versa, can lead to errors. For instance, capitalizing "Department" when referring to a generic department within a company versus capitalizing "Department of Defense" when referring to the specific governmental entity.

Finally, not consulting the most current edition of the Chicago Manual of Style or specific publisher guidelines can lead to outdated practices. The rules evolve, and staying informed is key to producing polished, professional work that adheres to accepted editorial standards.

FAQ

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

A: The Chicago Manual of Style now recommends that the term "internet" be treated as a common noun and therefore be lowercase, unless it begins a sentence or is part of a proper noun or title where capitalization is otherwise required.

Q: How do I capitalize titles of books and articles in Chicago style?

A: Chicago style offers two primary methods: title case and sentence case. Title case capitalizes the first word, last word, and all principal words (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs). Sentence case capitalizes only the first word and any proper nouns or words that would normally be capitalized in a sentence. The choice often depends on the context of your work and publisher preference.

Q: Are adjectives derived from proper nouns always capitalized in Chicago style?

A: Yes, adjectives derived from proper nouns are typically capitalized. For example, "American" (from America), "Victorian" (from Victoria), and "Shakespearean" (from Shakespeare) are all capitalized.

Q: What is the rule for capitalizing pronouns referring to God in Chicago style?

A: Pronouns referring to God are capitalized when they refer specifically to the deity. This includes words like "He," "Him," "His," "Thou," and "Thee" when used in reference to God. However, general terms like "gods" are not capitalized.

Q: How should I capitalize the names of scientific theories and laws in Chicago style?

A: Scientific theories and laws are capitalized if they are named after individuals, such as "Newton's laws of motion" or "Einstein's theory of relativity." Generic terms referring to scientific principles or laws are not capitalized (e.g., "a law of physics," "a theory of evolution").

Q: What is the correct capitalization for days of the week and months in Chicago style?

A: Days of the week (e.g., Monday, Tuesday) and months of the year (e.g., January, February) are always capitalized in Chicago style. Seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter) are generally lowercase unless they are part of a specific name (e.g., "the Winter Olympics").

Q: How do Chicago Manual of Style capitalization rules apply to company names and brand names?

A: Company names and brand names are capitalized as they appear in their official branding. This is often dictated by trademark laws and company style guides. Authors should strive for consistency and accuracy in representing these names. When in doubt, consult the company's official website or a reputable dictionary.

Q: Should I capitalize words in headings that are longer prepositions or conjunctions in Chicago style title case?

A: In Chicago style title case, short prepositions (four letters or fewer) and conjunctions are generally not capitalized unless they are the first or last word of the title or heading. Longer prepositions and conjunctions (e.g., "through," "concerning," "because") are usually capitalized as they are considered principal words.

Q: What is the general principle of capitalization in Chicago style?

A: The general principle of capitalization in Chicago style is to lowercase words unless there is a specific reason to capitalize them. This promotes clarity and avoids unnecessary emphasis. Capitalization is typically reserved for proper nouns, the beginning of sentences and titles, and other specific exceptions outlined in the Manual.

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