

chicago manual of style capitalization rules for proper nouns

The chicago manual of style capitalization rules for proper nouns are essential for writers and editors aiming for clarity and adherence to a widely respected citation style. This comprehensive guide will delve into the intricacies of capitalizing proper nouns according to the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS), covering everything from the fundamental principles to specific exceptions and nuanced applications. Understanding these rules is paramount for academic papers, professional documents, and published works, ensuring consistency and correctness in language. We will explore the general guidelines for identifying and capitalizing proper nouns, then break down specific categories such as people, places, organizations, and even abstract concepts, providing clear examples and actionable advice.

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Understanding the Foundation: What is a Proper Noun in Chicago Style?

At its core, the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) defines a proper noun as a specific name of a person, place, organization, or thing. Unlike common nouns, which refer to a general class of entities (e.g., 'city,' 'river,' 'company'), proper nouns are unique identifiers. The primary function of capitalization for these specific names is to distinguish them from their common counterparts, thereby enhancing readability and precision in written communication. CMOS generally advocates for a conservative approach to capitalization, aiming to avoid unnecessary capital letters while ensuring that clarity is not sacrificed. This means that if a word can function as both a common and a proper noun, context will dictate whether capitalization is warranted.

The principle of specificity is key. When a noun is used to denote a particular, unique entity, it becomes a proper noun and generally requires capitalization. For instance, while 'president' is a common noun referring to an office, 'President Lincoln' refers to a specific individual. Similarly, 'university' is a common noun, but 'University of Chicago' is the proper name of a specific institution. This distinction is fundamental to applying Chicago style capitalization rules correctly, ensuring that readers can easily differentiate between general categories and specific examples.

The Nuances of Capitalizing People and Personal Titles in Chicago Style

Personal Names

Capitalizing personal names is generally straightforward in Chicago style. The full name of an individual, including first names, middle names or initials, and last names, is always capitalized. This applies regardless of whether the person is well-known or an individual mentioned in a less prominent context. Examples include 'Jane Austen,' 'Martin Luther King Jr.,' and 'Marie Curie.' Even abbreviations of given names, such as 'J.K. Rowling,' follow the same rule.

Titles Preceding or Following Names

The treatment of titles associated with personal names can be more complex. Titles that directly precede a name are typically capitalized. For example, 'Professor Smith,' 'Dr. Jones,' 'Senator Adams,' and 'Queen Elizabeth II.' This indicates a formal address or identification of the individual in their professional or official capacity. However, when a title follows a name or is used generically without referring to a specific individual, it is usually not capitalized. For instance, 'She is a professor at the university,' or 'He was elected president of the club.'

There are some exceptions and variations, especially with religious titles or those used in very formal contexts. CMOS advises careful consideration of the specific role and context. For instance, 'the Pope' is capitalized when referring to the current pontiff, but 'a pope' might not be. Similarly, religious figures like 'the Apostle Paul' are capitalized due to their unique historical and religious significance.

Geographical Capitalization: Places and Their Designations

Continents, Countries, States, and Cities

All proper names of geographical locations are capitalized. This includes continents ('Asia,' 'Africa'), countries ('Canada,' 'Brazil'), states ('California,' 'Texas'), provinces ('Ontario,' 'Quebec'), and cities ('New York City,' 'London'). The rule is consistent: if it's the specific name of a place, capitalize it.

Bodies of Water and Landforms

Proper nouns for bodies of water such as oceans, seas, lakes, and rivers are capitalized

('Pacific Ocean,' 'Mediterranean Sea,' 'Lake Michigan,' 'Mississippi River'). Likewise, specific landforms like mountains, deserts, and valleys are capitalized ('Mount Everest,' 'Sahara Desert,' 'Death Valley'). When these terms are used as part of a proper name, capitalization is essential.

Directions and Regions

The capitalization of compass directions and regions can be tricky. Cardinal directions (north, south, east, west) are capitalized when they refer to specific regions or are part of a formal name. For example, 'the Midwest,' 'the South,' 'Western Europe.' However, when used to indicate direction rather than a region, they are not capitalized. So, 'He traveled north' is lowercase, but 'He lived in the North' is capitalized because it refers to a specific region. Similarly, informal names of regions are capitalized if they have achieved a degree of formality and are widely recognized as distinct areas.

Organizations, Institutions, and Corporate Names

Formal Names of Organizations

The official, formal names of organizations, companies, government bodies, and institutions are always capitalized. This includes entities like 'the United Nations,' 'Google Corporation,' 'the Department of Justice,' and 'Harvard University.' This ensures that the specific identity of the organization is clear.

Generic Terms Used as Part of a Formal Name

When generic terms like 'company,' 'corporation,' 'university,' 'department,' or 'association' are part of the formal, legal name of an organization, they are capitalized. For instance, 'Ford Motor Company,' 'University of Pennsylvania,' 'National Geographic Society.' However, if these terms are used in a general sense, they are not capitalized. For example, 'He works for a large technology company,' or 'She attended several universities during her studies.'

Subdivisions and Departments

Internal divisions, departments, or committees within a larger organization are capitalized if they are treated as proper nouns within that organization or are part of a formal designation. For example, 'the Human Resources Department' at a specific company might be capitalized if that's its official name. However, CMOS often advises lowercase for less formal or generic departmental names unless they are clearly acting as specific identifiers.

Historical Periods, Events, and Eras

Major Historical Periods and Epochs

Significant historical periods and epochs that are widely recognized and have distinct characteristics are capitalized. Examples include 'the Renaissance,' 'the Middle Ages,' 'the Enlightenment,' 'the Victorian Era,' and 'the Stone Age.' These terms denote specific, defined periods in history.

Named Historical Events

Specific, named historical events are also capitalized. This includes wars, battles, revolutions, and significant movements. Examples are 'World War II,' 'the Battle of Gettysburg,' 'the French Revolution,' and 'the Civil Rights Movement.' The capitalization signals that these are singular, historically significant occurrences.

It is important to note that generic terms used to describe historical periods or events are not capitalized. For instance, 'a medieval castle' is lowercase because 'medieval' is an adjective describing a time period, not the name of the period itself. Similarly, 'a great battle' would not be capitalized unless it referred to a specific, named battle like 'the Battle of Waterloo.'

Capitalizing Titles of Works: Books, Articles, and More

General Rule for Titles

In Chicago style, titles of books, articles, chapters, essays, poems, plays, films, television programs, and musical compositions are generally capitalized using title case. This means that the first and last words of the title are capitalized, and all other significant words (nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and some prepositions and conjunctions) are also capitalized. Minor words like articles (a, an, the), short prepositions (of, in, on, at, to), and short conjunctions (and, but, or, nor) are typically lowercase, unless they are the first or last word of the title.

Exceptions and Style Variations

While title case is the standard for most works, there are nuances. For instance, some journals or style guides within academic disciplines might prefer sentence case for titles of articles, meaning only the first word and any proper nouns within the title are capitalized. However, when following CMOS for book titles or general headings, title case is the norm. It is crucial to be consistent within a single document. For instance, a book title might appear

as 'The Lord of the Rings,' while an article title might be 'An analysis of symbolism in Tolkien's work.'

Navigating Exceptions and Special Cases in Chicago Style Capitalization

Brand Names and Trademarks

Brand names and trademarks are proper nouns and should be capitalized as the owning company styles them. However, if a trademarked term becomes generic through common usage (e.g., 'aspirin' was once a trademark), it may be lowercased. CMOS advises checking current usage and trademark status. For instance, 'Kleenex' (trademarked tissue) is capitalized, but if used to mean any facial tissue, it might be considered generic in some contexts, though it's safer to capitalize to avoid infringement.

Awards and Prizes

Named awards and prizes are capitalized. Examples include 'the Nobel Prize,' 'the Pulitzer Prize,' and 'the Academy Award.' The categories within these awards, however, are usually not capitalized unless they form part of the official award name. For instance, 'an Oscar for Best Picture' might have 'Best Picture' capitalized as it's a specific category title.

Government Agencies and Departments

Formal names of government agencies, departments, and branches of government are capitalized. This includes 'the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI),' 'the Department of State,' and 'the Supreme Court.' When referring to them in a general sense, like 'a government agency,' lowercase is used.

Religious Terms and Deities

The names of deities, religious figures, specific religions, and sacred texts are capitalized. Examples include 'God,' 'Allah,' 'Buddha,' 'Jesus Christ,' 'Christianity,' 'Islam,' and 'the Bible.' Adjectives derived from proper nouns, such as 'Christian' or 'Buddhist,' are also capitalized.

However, generic terms related to religion are not capitalized. For instance, 'a god,' 'heaven,' 'hell,' 'saints' (when used generically), and 'prayer' are typically lowercase unless part of a specific, capitalized name or title.

Common Pitfalls and Best Practices for CMOS Proper Noun Capitalization

One of the most frequent errors in applying CMOS capitalization rules for proper nouns is overcapitalization. Writers often capitalize words that are not truly proper nouns, especially when they appear in titles or headings. For example, capitalizing every noun in a sentence simply because it seems important is incorrect. Stick to the principle of specificity: if it names a particular entity, capitalize it; if it names a general category, leave it lowercase unless it's part of a formal, capitalized name.

Another common issue is inconsistent capitalization of titles and positions. Remember the rule: capitalize titles when they immediately precede a name and are used as part of that person's formal identification. Lowercase them when they follow the name or are used generically. For instance, 'President Obama' is correct, but 'Barack Obama, the former president,' is also correct with lowercase 'president.'

When in doubt, consulting the latest edition of The Chicago Manual of Style is the definitive recourse. The manual provides extensive examples and clear guidance on borderline cases. Additionally, maintaining a style sheet for recurring proper nouns within a long document or project can ensure consistency. Proofreading specifically for capitalization errors is also a vital step in the editing process. Remember that the goal is clarity and adherence to established convention, not to make every word stand out through excessive capitalization.

Frequently Asked Questions about Chicago Manual of Style Capitalization Rules for Proper Nouns

Q: When should I capitalize the names of specific diseases or medical conditions according to CMOS?

A: Generally, specific disease names are not capitalized unless they are named after a person (e.g., Parkinson's disease) or are part of a proper noun (e.g., acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, AIDS). Common medical conditions are usually lowercase.

Q: How do I capitalize the names of legal acts or legislation in Chicago style?

A: The official, formal names of laws, acts, and statutes are capitalized. For example, 'the Clean Air Act' or 'the Americans with Disabilities Act.' However, generic references to types of legislation are not capitalized, such as 'a new tax law.'

Q: What is the rule for capitalizing common nouns that are part of a proper name of a place?

A: When a common noun is an integral part of a specific place name, it is capitalized. For example, 'the Rocky Mountains' (mountains), 'the Amazon River' (river), 'the Golden Gate Bridge' (bridge).

Q: How should I capitalize titles of honor or rank when they are not used with a name?

A: Titles of honor or rank are generally not capitalized when used without a specific name or when referring to the office generically. For instance, 'she is the senator' is lowercase, but 'Senator Smith' is capitalized. However, some exceptions exist for very high offices or when referring to a specific, current officeholder in a formal context, where CMOS might advise capitalization.

Q: Are academic degrees capitalized in Chicago style?

A: Formal names of degrees are usually not capitalized unless they are part of a specific course title or department name. For example, 'a bachelor of arts degree' is lowercase, but 'a Bachelor of Fine Arts' might be capitalized as part of a formal degree program name.

Q: What are the capitalization rules for brand names that have become generic?

A: If a brand name has become so commonly used that it refers to the product category itself (e.g., aspirin, escalator), CMOS often suggests they be lowercased. However, it's wise to check current usage and consider the context, as companies may still wish to protect their trademarks.

Q: How do I capitalize the names of languages and nationalities in Chicago style?

A: The names of languages and nationalities are always capitalized. Examples include 'English,' 'French,' 'Japanese,' 'American,' 'Hispanic.'

Q: What is the proper capitalization for names of celestial bodies?

A: The names of planets, stars, constellations, and specific celestial bodies are capitalized. Examples include 'Earth' (when referring to the planet), 'Mars,' 'the Sun,' 'the Moon' (when used in an astronomical context), 'the Big Dipper,' 'Orion.'

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