

Plain English Campaign: Capital letters

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Capital letters

This is only a basic guide. If you have any suggestions, corrections or improvements, please contact us. You can contact us at:

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Capital letters

We use capital letters as follows.

At the start of sentences, direct quotations and direct questions

For example:

- The ceremony went without a hitch. It appeared to be a huge success.
- At the end of the day, he said, 'Tomorrow will be better' and smiled to himself.
- She told me, 'Sometimes that happens, sometimes it doesn't.'
- The question 'Why should we?' is often asked.
- Puzzled, he asked, 'Are you sure?'

At the start of titles and subtitles

For proper nouns

Proper nouns refer to a particular person, organisation, place or thing. Proper nouns include the following.

- People's names
- Organisation names
- Place names – street names, towns, counties, countries and so on
- Some well-known landmarks (Big Ben, the Pyramids)
- Some significant days (New Year's Eve, Mother's Day)
- Specific titles and ranks (Miss Scarlet, Professor Plum, Colonel Mustard)
- Months and days of the week
- Religions and religious holidays
- The points of the compass (NW) and specific regions (the North West, South Manchester) but not general areas (north-west England, the south of Manchester)
- The pronoun 'I'
- The names of languages and nationalities
- Trade names

Most adjectives derived from proper nouns

For example:

- Freudian significance
- British people

But, take care with the following.

Titles

There is no need to capitalise the main words in a document title. However, if, in your writing, you are quoting the title of a document, you should quote it precisely, using capitals where appropriate.

Subtitles

There is no need to capitalise every main word.

Abbreviations

We often use capital letters in abbreviations such as BBC, TV, USA, GMC and PEC. Don't put full stops after any of the letters.

Acronyms

These are words formed from the initial letters of other words. Most acronyms are in block capitals (for example, OPEC, NASA and SPECTRE). But some acronyms only have an initial capital letter (for example, Aids) and others, normally scientific words, are so well accepted that they have no capital letter at all (for example, laser).

Government

If we are referring specifically to 'the Government' (for example, 'when the Government decides its policy'), we would use a capital 'G'. However, if we are referring to government in general (for example, 'national and local government'), or as an adjective (for example, 'many government departments'), we would use a lower case 'g'.

The council, the association and so on

If we are referring to an organisation by quoting their full name, we would use capitals where they are used in that name.

For example:

- 'Westshire Borough Council has...'
- 'Home Housing Association will...'

However, when we are referring to an organisation in a general way without giving its full name, we would use a lower case letter.

For example:

- 'The council has...'
- 'The association will...'

If an organisation insisted on using an initial capital when it referred to itself in a general way, we would (reluctantly) accept it.