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## **Getting Started with Capitalization in Technical Writing**

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## Capitalization

Capitalization is often misused in technical documentation. Technical people and other nonprofessional writers tend to use capital letters to emphasize or highlight. This practice breaks all the standard capitalization rules and makes the text harder to read. In general, hold the line against capitalization. Capitalization does not confer prestige or importance. For emphasis, use a bold type or italics. To make vital information stand out, use special notes. Here are some guidelines.

## Definitions

Let's start with a few definitions we will be using when discussing capitalization:

<i>Full caps</i> means that every letter in an expression is capital.	LIKE THIS
<i>Caps &amp; lc</i> means that the principal letters in an expression are capitalized.	Like This

Elements in a document, such as headings, titles, and captions may be capitalized in either the sentence style or the headline style:

<i>Sentence style</i> calls for capitalization of the first letter and of proper nouns. This style is generally used in the main text of a document (or sentences). The rest of this paper will discuss sentence style capitalization.	<i>Sam and Suzie went on a long vacation to England.</i>
Headline style calls for capitalization of all principal words (also called caps & lc). This form is generally used for headings.	<i>Sam and Suzie's English Vacation</i>

## Nouns and Names

All proper nouns and the names of organizations, political divisions, calendar divisions, historic events, holidays, personal names and geographic names are capitalized.

### Proper Nouns

When to Use	Example
Proper nouns and derivatives of proper nouns used as adjectives are capitalized.	<i>Italy</i> <i>Italian</i> <i>Rome</i> <i>Roman (of Rome)</i> <i>Alps</i> <i>Alpine</i> <i>Newton</i> <i>Newtonian</i>
However, derivatives of proper nouns that have acquired an independent meaning are not capitalized.	<i>roman (numeral)</i> <i>pascal (the unit)</i> <i>pasteurize</i> <i>italicize</i>
Civil and professional titles are capitalized when they precede a personal name as part of the name.	<i>President Reagan</i> <i>Director Petersen</i> <i>Chief Scientist Barnwell</i>
A personal name with a common usage is no longer capitalized.	Units <i>curie, watt, newton, ohm, farad, coulomb, volt, ampere, hertz</i>  But the following are exceptions - <i>degree Celsius, Rankine and Fahrenheit</i>

### Names

When to Use	Example
The names of people, races, cities, regions, counties, states, nations, languages, and other such proper names are capitalized.	<i>The Early Bird satellite was launched by Intelsat, a consortium of Western countries including the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany.</i>
Use capital letters for formal names and official names of things and people.	<i>The class was taught by Professor Henry.</i>  <i>Tandem Corporation (proper name of a company)</i>

When to Use	Example
In technical writing, the impulse is often to capitalize the names of components—fight it off.	<i>The disk drive, the monitor, the modem, the mouse, and the printer of a computing system should not be capitalized.</i>
Capitalize components that you can actually see.	<i>the Submit button sends the data...</i>  <i>the User List screen displays...</i>

### Geographic Names

When to Use	Example
The names of particular regions, localities, countries, and geographic features are always capitalized.	<i>Northern Hemisphere</i> <i>Arctic Circle</i> <i>North Pole</i> <i>Equator</i> <i>Tropic of Cancer</i>
Region descriptors are not capitalized.	<i>equatorial</i> <i>the tropics</i> <i>polar region</i>

### Calendar Items

When to Use	Example
Use capital letters for the days of the week, months, special days, and holidays—but not for the names of the seasons.	<i>On Monday, July 24, 1978, they celebrated her birthday at a local restaurant.</i>  <i>Last fall they spent Thanksgiving in Denmark.</i>  <i>Veterans Day</i> <i>Memorial Day</i> <i>Fathers Day, etc.</i>

## Administrative Names

Official designations of political divisions and of other organized bodies are capitalized.

When to Use	Example
Names of political divisions	<i>Canada</i> <i>United States</i> <i>New York State</i> <i>Ontario Province</i> <i>Northwest Territories</i> <i>Virgin Islands</i>
Names of governmental units	<i>U.S. Government</i> <i>Executive Department</i> <i>Environmental Protection Agency</i> <i>U.S. Army</i> <i>Technical Editing Branch</i>

## Sentences

When to Use	Example
The first word in a sentence is always capitalized.	<i>This rule does not really need an example.</i>
Don't capitalize a sentence enclosed in parentheses within another sentence.	<i>In applying the foregoing approach to a tetrahedral grid (the tetrahedral grid was chosen because of its attractive features for space construction), a typical repeating element is first isolated from the grid.</i>
However, a parenthesized sentence that does not stand within another sentence begins with a capital.	<i>The foregoing approach is now applied to a tetrahedral grid. (The tetrahedral grid was chosen because of its attractive features for space construction.) A typical repeating element is first isolated from the grid.</i>

## Quotations

Quoted material is often capitalized incorrectly. There are two easy rules to follow:

When to Use	Example
<p>A direct quotation that is not syntactically joined to the rest of the sentence (often set off by commas) is capitalized, even if the initial letter is not capital in the source.</p>	<p><i>In the law establishing the NACA, Congress states: "It shall be the duty of the Advisory Committee for Aeronautics to supervise and direct the scientific study of the problems of flight with a view to their practical solution."</i></p>
<p>When the quote is syntactically dependent on the rest of the sentence, it begins with a lowercase letter, even if the initial letter is capital in the source.</p>	<p><i>Congress established the NACA in 1915 "to supervise and direct the scientific study of the problems of flight with a view to their practical solution."</i></p>

## Questions

When to Use	Example
<p>When a direct question occurs within a sentence, the author may or may not choose to capitalize the first word of the question.</p> <p>You are welcome to use either one of the above structure.</p>	<p>Correct: <i>The question addressed by this research project is, What system identification procedure should be used for a statically unstable aircraft?</i></p> <p>Equally correct: <i>The question addressed by this research project is, what system identification procedure should be used for a statically unstable aircraft?</i></p>
<p>An indirect question is never capitalized.</p>	<p><i>This research project addresses what system identification procedure should be used for statically unstable aircraft.</i></p>

## Lists

When to Use	Example
<p>Items in a list should begin with a capital whether they are complete sentences or not.</p>	<p><i>The purposes of this report are:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>To evaluate the performance of the instruments</i></li> <li>- <i>To expand the data base</i></li> </ul> <p><i>We can define the requirements of the power converter as follows:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <i>Energy conversion should be high</i></li> <li>- <i>Efficiency should be independent of laser wavelength</i></li> </ul>

## Table Entries, Figure Names, Captions and Footnotes

When to Use	Example
<p>The following elements are often capitalized as a matter of style:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Table entries</li> <li>• Captions</li> <li>• Footnotes</li> <li>• Table subtitles</li> <li>• Footnotes to either the text or a table</li> <li>• Figure captions</li> </ul>	<p><i>Figure 1. Three-view sketch of the research aircraft. Dimensions are in inches.</i></p> <p><i>Figure 2. Computing scheme for algorithm</i></p> <p><i>In Figure 3 a simple telegraph arrangement is shown.</i></p> <p><i>In this book, Chapter 6 discusses how to convert instructions written by engineers into instructions that can be read and understood by ordinary non-specialists.</i></p> <p><i>In Part I of this book, the basic patterns of technical writing are compared to those of traditional English composition.</i></p>

## Acronyms and Abbreviations

Before beginning a discussion on the capitalization of abbreviations and acronyms, the two must be clearly distinguished:

- Acronyms are words formed from the initial letters of successive parts of a term. Acronyms are often coined for a particular program or study and therefore require definition, the first time they appear in a document.
- An abbreviation is a shortened version of a word or phrase and is often followed by a period, for example, c.o.d., ft-lb., St., or publ. Abbreviations have become standard so that their form can be looked up in a reference book.

### Capitalization of Acronyms

When to Use	Example
Acronyms are almost always formed with capital letters	<i>Department of Defense (DOD) National Aeronautical and Space Agency (NASA)</i>
A few acronyms have crept into our language and have become acceptable words	<i>laser, radar, ac and dc</i>
The letters of the acronym are not capitalized in the definition unless the acronym stands for a proper name	<p><i>Wrong: The best electronic publishing systems combine What You See Is What You Get (WYSIWYG) features with the power of noninteractive text formatters.</i></p> <p><i>Correct: The best electronic publishing systems combine what you see is what you get (WYSIWYG) features with the power of noninteractive text formatters.</i></p>



## Capitalization of Abbreviations

When to Use	Example
<p>In general, an abbreviation follows the capitalization of the word or words abbreviated</p>	<p><i>The CEO of the company is ... (The abbreviated words signify a formal title and are therefore capitalized)</i></p> <p><i>This engine has a torque of 200 ft-lbs. (foot and pound wouldn't be ordinarily capitalized)</i></p>
<p>In titles or headings where the principal words are capitalized (caps &amp; lc), normally lowercase abbreviations should always be left lowercase, particularly abbreviations for units of measure</p>	<p><i>Toughness of 0.5 cm Thick Specimens</i></p> <p><i>Noise Exposure from 10:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m.</i></p>



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