

The Case of the Capital Letter

Alexander Coleman

In English we take for granted that there is a proper use for Upper Case letters in formal writing. As children, we learn capital letters first when studying the alphabet. Despite the minimal use of upper, as opposed to lower, case letters in typed documents, our laptop keyboards invariably are stamped with the Capital counterparts to the far more frequently used lowercase letters. In the academic world it is rarely questioned why this is the case, or even what purpose is served by having two equivalent alphabets.

To answer this question, we must first define the purpose of grammar. In essence, teachers, editors, parents, and peers enforce grammatical rules and conventions so that there can be universal understanding. Sentence structure, parts of speech, and spelling are standardized so that anyone, anywhere, with enough knowledge of the English language can be understood. But what do capital letters add to that understanding that punctuation doesn't? The Chicago Manual of Style, the go-to reference guide for all things English Grammar, is constantly updating its grammatical rules. It makes note that "There are many schools of grammatical thought—and differing vocabularies for describing grammar. Grammatical theories have been in great flux in recent years."

It is worth noting that the Chicago Manual of Style considers capital letters at the beginning of sentences to be such a basic and well-known rule, that it does not even discuss the issue. It only mentions capital letters at the beginning of sentences when there is an exception. If the goal of grammar is to allow common and correct understanding, then Capital letters at the start of sentences are nothing more than the vestigial remains of an ancient world without punctuation. The origin of our modern English alphabet is largely Latin, although it has evolved. Lowercase letters evolved during the Middle Ages, along with the popularization of punctuation. But somehow, the capital letter did not die out with it. This system was largely standardized after the invention of the printing press. However, the two standards, Capital letter to mark the beginning of a sentence and punctuation to mark the end of a sentence, ought to have made one or the other obsolete. And yet, we hold onto both for the sake of convention.

This is not to say that capital letters don't have their uses. In English, they are most usefully applied to proper nouns. When you stumble across a capital letter in the middle of a sentence you think to yourself "Ah, this must be someone's name or a specific place or company." The German language capitalizes all nouns. While not entirely necessary for understanding, this mid-sentence capitalization is still a useful tool. When you see a capital letter at the beginning of a sentence, however, it isn't telling you anything that the punctuation before it did not already indicate. When quickly scanning a large document it is easier to find the beginning of a sentence if there is a capital letter, but once you get used to it, it is just as easy to look for a punctuation mark. A less formally accepted use of the capital letter is emphasis. Useful in texts, emails, and blog posts, but rarely acceptable in an essay or article. Having most words uncapitalized also leaves room for creativity. In his bestselling novel, "Wicked," Gregory Maguire differentiated between normal animals and Animals with a human level of intelligence by capitalizing the first letter of Animal. Capitals make you take notice. Except at the beginning of sentences, when they are only noted if

absent. The purpose of capital letters in general is to draw attention to Important Things, but they are used less and less in common communication.

the digital age may be bringing about the unfortunately unanticipated demise of the Upper Case. while computer keyboards still display only capital letters, most smartphones default to lowercase, with the exception of the iPhone which is stubbornly holding on to the Old Ways. it is not unusual to ignore rules of grammar in casual textual conversation, but it is also no longer uncommon to see capitalization rules ignored or forgotten in short school or work-related emails.

capitalizing letters has taken on a life of its own in certain online environments. passionate young adults who micro-blog on Tumblr, Twitter, or Facebook have developed their own conventions for when capital letters are useful. it is generally expected that people will use all lowercase, to indicate the casual tone of their writing. sentence case is reserved for the most serious of announcements, such as “My seventh grade English teacher passed away last night. Rest in Peace, Mrs. Johnson.” but there is another phenomenon that is much more interesting as an accepted convention in certain spheres of influence. People are unable to indicate volume, intensity, anger, excitement, or other vocal cues through purely text-based conversation, so escalating and random capitalization arose. escalating capitalization is when a sentence starts in lowercase and then SWITCHES TO UPPER CASE! this differs from normal emphasis in that the switch is most frequently made in the middle of the word, indicating that the levels of excitement or anger are increasing. random capital letters scattered throughout a word most frequently iNdicAtE CoNFusIoN. another common occurrence, though often less deliberate than these other examples, is turning on the caps lock key for an intensely enthusiastic message, but still pressing the shift key at the beginning of the message out of habit. the result of this is, ironically, that all letters except the first in the sentence are capitalized, directly contrary to the rules of grammar.

in online communication, the Upper Case is used as a tool for emphasis, and the lowercase is used both for convenience and to lower the pressure and formality of conversations. the brevity and frequency of online discussions is leading towards a less arbitrary and illogical system of capitalization conventions. the 16th version of The Chicago Manual of Style declares, “Brand names or names of companies that are spelled with a lowercase initial letter followed by a capital letter (eBay, iPod, iPhone, etc.) need not be capitalized at the beginning of a sentence or heading.” already, the rules are changing. it is the beginning of a shift towards eliminating the redundancy of the Starting Capital, and an acknowledgement of the changing nature of grammar and its modern practicality. the Starting Capital evolved naturally, and it will fall out of use naturally as soon as grammar books stop holding back the evolution of our language. medieval Latin bibles do not need to be our standard of capitalization anymore. as we keep a critical eye on whether our rules of grammar are meeting their intended purpose, we must let our language advance down its natural course towards meaningful conventions of communication.