

chicago manual of style 17th edition capitalization

Mastering Chicago Manual of Style 17th Edition Capitalization: A Comprehensive Guide

chicago manual of style 17th edition capitalization rules can seem intricate, but understanding them is crucial for producing polished, professional prose in academic, journalistic, and publishing contexts. This guide delves deep into the nuanced principles governing capitalization according to the latest edition of the CMOS, offering clarity on common dilemmas. We will explore the fundamental principles of when to capitalize proper nouns versus common nouns, address specific categories like titles of works, historical periods, and organizations, and clarify the often-confusing distinctions in academic and journalistic styles. By dissecting these key areas, you will gain the confidence to apply CMOS capitalization with precision.

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Core Principles of Capitalization in CMOS 17th Edition

The foundation of capitalization in the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) 17th edition rests on a fundamental distinction: proper nouns are capitalized, while common nouns are not. A proper noun refers to a specific, unique entity—a particular person, place, organization, or thing. In contrast, a common noun names a general class or category of entity. This core principle guides many of the subsequent rules, but its application often requires careful consideration of context and convention.

For instance, "river" is a common noun, but "Mississippi River" is a proper noun because it designates a specific river. Similarly, "president" is a common noun when referring to the office or role generally, but "President Abraham Lincoln" capitalizes "President" when it precedes the name as part of a formal title. The CMOS emphasizes clarity and consistency, aiming to avoid ambiguity and to signal the unique identity of the entity being named. Writers are encouraged to consult dictionaries and style guides for specific cases, as capitalization can sometimes be conventional rather than strictly logical.

Capitalizing Titles of Works

One of the most frequently encountered areas of capitalization involves titles of books, articles, films, music, and other creative works. The CMOS 17th edition primarily employs what is known as "title case," where major words in a title are capitalized, while minor words are generally left in lowercase. This approach aims for a balanced readability and a clear visual hierarchy.

Major Words and Minor Words in Titles

Major words in titles, which are always capitalized, include nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and subordinate conjunctions. Minor words, which are typically lowercase unless they are the first or last word of the title or subtitle, include articles (a, an, the), prepositions (of, in, on, to, for, with, by, from), and coordinating conjunctions (and, but, or, nor, for, so, yet).

For example, in the title "The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire," "The," "Rise," "Fall," "Roman," and "Empire" are capitalized. "and" and "of" are lowercase because they are minor words. However, if "of" were the first or last word of the title or subtitle, it would be capitalized.

Specific Rules for Subtitles and First/Last Words

The first and last words of any title or subtitle are always capitalized, regardless of their grammatical function. This rule ensures that the beginning and end of a title are clearly marked. For instance, in the title "A History of Art: From Antiquity to Modernity," both "A" (the first word) and "Antiquity" (the first word of the subtitle) are capitalized. Likewise, "Modernity" (the last word of the subtitle) is capitalized.

When a title includes a colon, the word following the colon (the beginning of the subtitle) is capitalized. For example, "Hamlet: Prince of Denmark" would capitalize "Hamlet" and "Prince." This convention helps to visually separate the main title from its explanatory subtitle.

Capitalizing Names of Organizations and Institutions

The capitalization of names for organizations, institutions, and companies follows the principle of capitalizing proper nouns. This means that the specific, official name of an entity is capitalized, but general terms referring to the type of entity are not.

Official Names vs. General References

When referring to the full, official name of an organization, all significant words are capitalized. For instance, "The Coca-Cola Company" is capitalized. However, when referring to the company in a more general sense, such as "the beverage company," the term "company" would not be capitalized unless it is part of a proper name.

Similarly, "Harvard University" is a proper noun and is fully capitalized. When speaking generally, one might refer to "the university's research programs." In this case, "university" is a common noun and remains lowercase. This distinction is critical for maintaining accuracy and adherence to stylistic conventions.

Governmental and Educational Bodies

Names of government departments, agencies, and legislative bodies are capitalized. For example, "the Department of Justice," "the Environmental Protection Agency," and "the United States Senate" are all capitalized. When referring to these bodies in a general way, however, the terms may be lowercased, such as "the justice department's initiatives" or "the agency's regulations."

Educational institutions follow similar rules. "Stanford University" is capitalized. However, terms like "the university's admissions office" would typically see "university" and "admissions office" in lowercase unless "Admissions Office" is part of an official department name and used as such consistently.

Capitalizing Historical Periods and Events

Historical periods, eras, and significant events are generally capitalized in CMOS 17th edition because they are considered proper nouns, referring to unique and identifiable spans of time or occurrences.

Named Historical Eras

Specific named historical periods are capitalized. This includes epochs like the "Renaissance," the "Middle Ages," the "Victorian Era," and the "Roaring Twenties." These terms denote distinct cultural, social, and political characteristics that define those times. The CMOS advocates for capitalizing these to distinguish them as specific historical classifications.

Significant Historical Events

Major historical events that are widely recognized and have significant impact are also capitalized. Examples include the "French Revolution," the "American Civil War," "World War II," and the "Industrial Revolution." These are not merely generic occurrences but specific, defining moments in history.

However, a caution is necessary: terms that are descriptive of historical periods or events but not specific names are often lowercased. For instance, while the "Stone Age" is capitalized, terms like "a prehistoric period" or "an ancient civilization" would not be capitalized as they refer to general categories rather than specific, named entities.

Capitalizing Academic Subjects and Degrees

The rules for capitalizing academic subjects and degrees can be a point of confusion, as CMOS has specific guidelines that differ from some other style guides.

Academic Subjects

In general, academic subjects are treated as common nouns and are not capitalized unless they are part of a formal course title or are proper nouns themselves. For example, "She is studying history," "He majored in chemistry," and "The lecture covered modern literature" are all correct. Here, "history," "chemistry," and "literature" are common nouns.

However, when these subjects are part of a specific course name, they are capitalized. For instance, "She is enrolled in HIST 101: Introduction to World History," or "The course is called Advanced Organic Chemistry." In these cases, "World History" and "Organic Chemistry" are capitalized because they form part of a formal title.

Academic Degrees

Formal names of academic degrees are typically capitalized when they refer to a specific degree, such as a "Bachelor of Arts" or a "Master of Science." However, when referring to the degree in a general sense, or when using abbreviations, they are often lowercased. For example, "She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree." But when referring to the field generally: "She earned a bachelor's degree in sociology."

Abbreviations of degrees are typically lowercase: "Ph.D.," "M.A.," "B.S." The CMOS allows for some flexibility here, but consistency is key. The trend is towards lowercasing when referring to the degree itself rather than the formal title of the qualification.

Capitalizing Titles of Persons

Capitalizing titles of persons in CMOS 17th edition depends significantly on whether the title is used before a name, as part of a formal title, or when referring to the office in general.

Titles Preceding Names

When a title directly precedes a person's name, it is typically capitalized as part of the formal designation. For example, "President Biden," "Senator Smith," "Dr. Jones," and "Professor Lee" are all capitalized. This usage treats the title as an integral part of the name or formal identification.

Titles Used Generically or After a Name

Conversely, when a title is used generically, in the plural, or after a person's name, it is usually lowercased. For instance, "She spoke with the president," "Several senators attended the hearing," and "He is a professor of mathematics." In these instances, "president," "senators," and "professor" are functioning as common nouns, referring to the role or position rather than being a direct part of a specific person's formal title.

There are exceptions for certain very high-ranking or uniquely held offices, such as "the Pope" or "the Dalai Lama," which are often capitalized even when used generically, due to their singular and iconic nature. However, for most positions, the rule of thumb is: capitalize when it's part of a formal, direct address or identification; lowercase when it's generic or descriptive.

Capitalizing Geographic Locations

Geographic names are a prime example of proper nouns and are consistently capitalized in the Chicago Manual of Style 17th edition.

Specific Names of Places

All specific names of continents, countries, states, provinces, cities, towns, oceans, seas, rivers, mountains, and other defined geographic entities are capitalized. Examples include "North America," "Japan," "California," "New York City," "the Pacific Ocean," "the Amazon River," and "Mount Everest."

Compound Geographic Names

Compound geographic names are also fully capitalized. This includes names that combine a descriptive term with a specific place, such as "Death Valley," "Yellowstone National Park," or "Golden Gate Bridge." The key is that the entire phrase functions as the unique name of the location.

However, descriptive terms that are not part of the official name are not capitalized. For example, while "the Rocky Mountains" is capitalized, one might refer to "the mountain range" generally, which would not be capitalized. Similarly, "the city of Chicago" would capitalize "Chicago" but not "city" if it's being used descriptively rather than as part of an official name.

Specific Cases and Tricky Situations

Beyond the broad categories, CMOS 17th edition addresses numerous specific instances where

capitalization can be a point of contention.

Brand Names and Trademarks

Brand names and trademarks are proper nouns and should be capitalized as they are officially presented. For example, "Kleenex," "Google," and "iPhone" are always capitalized. Consistency with the manufacturer's or trademark holder's preferred capitalization is generally advised.

Names of Religions and Deities

Names of religions, deities, and religious texts are capitalized. Examples include "Christianity," "Buddhism," "God," "Allah," "Jesus Christ," "the Bible," and "the Quran." This is because these are specific, proper names within their respective belief systems.

Days of the Week, Months, and Holidays

Days of the week ("Monday," "Tuesday"), months of the year ("January," "February"), and holidays ("Christmas," "Easter," "Independence Day") are always capitalized. These are considered proper nouns designating specific temporal units or celebrated events.

Seasons, however, are generally not capitalized unless they are personified or part of a specific named event. For example, "winter" and "summer" are usually lowercase, but "the harsh winter of 1947" or "Winter Olympics" would be capitalized in those specific contexts. The critical distinction remains whether the term refers to a specific, unique entity or a general category.

Mastering the nuances of Chicago Manual of Style 17th edition capitalization requires attention to detail and a clear understanding of the underlying principles. By consistently applying the rules for proper nouns versus common nouns, and by carefully considering the context and conventions for titles, organizations, historical periods, and personal titles, writers can ensure their work adheres to professional standards. The goal is always clarity, precision, and a polished presentation that enhances the readability and authority of the text. Continued practice and consultation of the CMOS itself will further solidify this essential skill for any writer.

FAQ: Chicago Manual of Style 17th Edition Capitalization

Q: When should I capitalize the word "internet" according to CMOS 17th edition?

A: In the Chicago Manual of Style 17th edition, the term "internet" is generally treated as a proper noun and is capitalized. This reflects its status as a unique, global network. However, for stylistic

consistency and ease of reading, some publishers may opt to lowercase it. It's best to check specific editorial guidelines, but the default in CMOS 17th edition is capitalization.

Q: How does CMOS 17th edition handle capitalization of job titles when they are not used with a name?

A: When job titles are used generally or in the plural, they are typically lowercased according to CMOS 17th edition. For example, "The company hired several managers." However, if the title refers to a unique, specific office (like "the President of the United States" when referring to the specific role) or is part of an official departmental name used formally, capitalization may be warranted. The key is the context and whether it functions as a proper noun or a common noun.

Q: What is the rule for capitalizing the names of languages in CMOS 17th edition?

A: The names of languages are always capitalized in CMOS 17th edition. Examples include "English," "Spanish," "French," and "Mandarin." This is because language names are proper nouns referring to specific linguistic systems.

Q: How do I capitalize the names of diseases or medical conditions in CMOS 17th edition?

A: Generally, names of diseases and medical conditions are not capitalized unless they are derived from a proper noun (e.g., "Parkinson's disease") or are part of a formal, specific diagnosis that functions as a proper name. Common names for illnesses like "influenza," "cancer," or "diabetes" are lowercased.

Q: What is the CMOS 17th edition's stance on capitalizing "website" or "web" itself?

A: In CMOS 17th edition, the terms "website" and "web" (when referring to the World Wide Web) are generally treated as common nouns and are lowercased. For example, "They visited the website," or "The information is available on the web." This reflects a shift from earlier conventions where "Web" might have been capitalized as a distinct entity.

Q: How should I capitalize the names of bylaws or specific regulations in CMOS 17th edition?

A: The capitalization of bylaws and regulations depends on whether they are referred to by their official, specific title or generally. If referring to a specific document like "Bylaws of the XYZ Corporation," the full title is capitalized. However, general references like "company bylaws" or "federal regulations" are lowercased.

Q: What are the guidelines for capitalizing terms like "north," "south," "east," and "west" in CMOS 17th edition?

A: Cardinal directions like "north," "south," "east," and "west" are lowercased when used as general directions (e.g., "The wind blew from the north"). They are capitalized when they refer to specific regions or are part of a proper noun (e.g., "the South," "Northern California," "the East Coast").

Q: How does CMOS 17th edition handle capitalization for the names of stars, planets, and constellations?

A: Astronomical bodies that are specific proper names are capitalized. This includes names of planets ("Earth," "Mars," "Jupiter"), stars ("Sirius," "Polaris"), and constellations ("Ursa Major," "Orion"). However, general terms like "planet," "star," or "galaxy" are lowercased unless they are part of a specific name.

Q: What is the rule for capitalizing brand names that are also common nouns, like "Band-Aid"?

A: Brand names are generally capitalized even if they have become generic in common usage, to respect trademark status. So, "Band-Aid" would be capitalized. However, in some contexts, if the brand name is used solely as a generic term and without regard to its specific product origin, lowercase might be acceptable for stylistic reasons, but it's safer to capitalize.

Q: How should I capitalize terms related to federal government branches in CMOS 17th edition?

A: The names of specific federal government branches, departments, and agencies are capitalized, such as "the Congress," "the Department of State," or "the Supreme Court." However, general references to these branches or their functions are typically lowercased, for example, "the legislative branch" or "the judicial system."

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