

**"the committee"?**  
**or**  
**"the Committee"?**

## **CAPITAL LETTERS**

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*If in doubt use lower case  
unless it looks absurd.*

*The Economist Style Guide*

## INTRODUCTION

We often overuse capitals — sometimes out of fear of offending important people, sometimes to show that a certain word is important to us. However, overuse of capitals, particularly when addressing outside readers, can convey the image of a bureaucracy that is overawed by its own concepts and processes.

The rules on capitals can be bewildering, and they often vary over time and from one organization to another. For example, *The Constitution Act, 1867* is full of passages such as this:

*The Constitution Act, 1867*

95. In each Province the Legislature may make Laws in relation to Agriculture in the Province, and to Immigration into the Province; and it is hereby declared that the Parliament of Canada may from Time to Time make laws in relation to Agriculture . . .

Today, words such as "province", "laws", "agriculture", "immigration" and "time" would not be capitalized.

If the styles found in legal documents are confusing, those found in popular press can be equally so. For example, for many years *Time* magazine capitalized modifiers preceding people's names — thus giving them the appearance of formal titles. Here's a gem from the January 13, 1975 edition:

*Time*

Among those on skiing holidays were the Aga Khan, Audrey Hepburn, Roman Polanski and Jack Nicholson. . . . In Gstaad, Novice Nicholson was struggling with the subtleties of *wedeling*. "He loves zooming downhill," sighed Temporary Instructor Polanski.

Fortunately for the English language, *Time* has now abandoned that practice.

In government, we are tempted to capitalize concepts that are enshrined in law. Yet it is often surprising to find that the very law in which those concepts are enshrined does not capitalize them. Here are some examples from *The Income Tax Act*:

*The Income Tax Act*

6(8) . . . and a particular amount is paid to the taxpayer in a particular taxation year as a rebate under the *Excise Tax Act* in respect of any goods and services tax included in the amount of the expense, or the capital cost of the property . . .

13(22)(b)(i) . . . the amount of its 1975-76 excess capital cost allowance with respect to property of the particular prescribed class of the insurer . . .

66(15) . . . “flow-through share” means a share (other than a prescribed share) of the capital stock of a principal-business corporation that is issued to a person under an agreement in writing . . .

66.4(5) . . . “Canadian oil and gas property expense” of a taxpayer means any cost or expense incurred after December 11, 1979 that is . . .

The *Canadian Environmental Assessment Act* follows a similar practice:

*The Canadian Environmental Assessment Act*

14. The environmental assessment process includes, where applicable,  
 (a) a screening or comprehensive study and the preparation of a screening report or a comprehensive study report;  
 (b) a mediation or assessment by a review panel as provided in section 29 and the preparation of a report; and  
 (c) the design and implementation of a follow-up program.

Given so many conflicting styles, it is not surprising that there is confusion over when to use capitals.

I hope the guidelines on the following pages will help to reduce the confusion for briefing notes and memos to your minister. But if you remain bewildered, don't despair. Capitals can be one of the most vexing issues, even for editors.

# PROPER NOUNS AND COMMON NOUNS

Proper nouns take capital letters. "Canada", for example, is a proper noun and is always capitalized. Common nouns take lower-case letters. For instance, "country" is a common noun and is not capitalized, even when it is used as a synonym for a proper noun such as "Canada":

I enjoy vacationing in Canada. This country has many beautiful lakes and rivers.

The above examples are black and white. However, in many other cases context determines whether a word is a common noun or a proper noun. For example, a proper noun may become a common noun when preceded by a modifier. Placing a modifier before the noun can indicate that the noun is just one of a number of such entities and is therefore not a proper noun. Similarly, many plurals are not proper nouns.

## Proper Nouns

William asked his sister, "Will Father and Mother visit us this weekend?"

## Common Nouns

Will your father and your mother visit us this weekend? [The nouns are preceded by the modifier "your".]

We hope that fathers and mothers will encourage their children to participate in sports at school. [The nouns are plural.]

There are, of course, exceptions. (This is English, after all.) For example, trade names, personal names and nationalities are always capitalized, even when they are plural or preceded by a modifier:

First aid kits should contain Aspirins and Band-Aids.

There have been many Alexanders in history, but only one Alexander the Great.

Sir John A. Macdonald was a great Canadian.

## TITLES OF OFFICE

Important though government leaders and senior officials may be, their titles are not always capitalized. We distinguish between formal, specific titles (which we capitalize) and descriptive or generic titles (which we do not capitalize). Here are some examples:

### Upper Case

On May 5, 1995, the Prime Minister of Canada will meet with the President of the United States and the King of Jordan.

The Prime Minister will attend the meeting on May 5, 1995.

Prime Minister Brown will attend the meeting on May 5, 1995.

The Honourable John Doe, Newfoundland's Minister of Natural Resources, will attend the conference.

The Minister of Natural Resources will accompany the Minister of the Environment on the tour of the mine.

### Lower Case

On May 5, 1995, there will be a meeting of kings, presidents and prime ministers from around the world.

On May 5, 1995, ministers of energy and the environment will meet in Paris.

In Newfoundland, the minister responsible for forestry is the Minister of Natural Resources.

The Honourable John Doe, Newfoundland's minister responsible for forestry, will attend the conference.

A minister of the Crown will be invited to attend the conference.

Our minister will accompany your minister on the tour of the mine.

The two ministers will tour the mine together.

The Assistant Deputy Minister of the Corporate Services Sector and the Assistant Deputy Minister of the Energy Sector have expressed concern about this issue.

We have received letters on this subject from Ms. Jane Doe, Member of Parliament for East Westgate, and Senator Jack Smith.

The assistant deputy ministers of the Corporate Services Sector and the Energy Sector have expressed concern about this issue.

We have received letters on this subject from a member of Parliament and a senator.

We have received letters on this subject from many members of Parliament and senators.

A Liberal member of Parliament will be asked to represent you at the ceremony.

# ORGANIZATIONS

Our practice for capitalizing the names of organizations is similar to that for titles of office:

## Upper Case

The Government of Canada and the Government of the United States support sustainable forestry.

The Government of Ontario is working to reduce acid mine drainage.

The Department of Natural Resources is working to streamline the regulatory process in the mining industry.

Natural Resources Canada is working to streamline the regulatory process in the mining industry.

Newfoundland's Department of Natural Resources is working to streamline the regulatory process in the mining industry.

## Lower Case

The governments of Canada and the United States support sustainable forestry.

The federal government supports sustainable forestry.

The Liberal government supports sustainable forestry.

The Ontario government is working to reduce acid mine drainage.

The provincial government is working to reduce acid mine drainage.

Federal and provincial departments of natural resources are working to streamline the regulatory process in the mining industry.

The federal natural resources department is working to streamline the regulatory process in the mining industry.

## DOCUMENTS

The titles of publications and other formal documents take capitals (except for minor words such as "to", "in", "and", etc.). When you cite such a title in a text, set it in italics.

Do not upper-case or italicize synonyms for such documents:

On November 22, 1995, *The Globe and Mail* carried an article on federal spending for regional economic development. The newspaper noted that the federal government has spent nearly \$4.2 billion on regional economic development since 1988.

*The Canadian Style* contains detailed guidance on many aspects of grammar and style for government writing. This book should be made available to everyone who writes executive documents.

In September 1995, we released an issues paper, *Sustainable Development and Minerals and Metals*, to serve as a basis for dialogue with Canadians who have a stake in the future of mining. This paper explores a range of environmental, economic and social issues within federal jurisdiction.

The Information Highway Advisory Council has released its final report, *Connection, Community Content: The Challenge of the Information Highway*. The report recommends ways for Canada to remain competitive in an information-based global economy.

Do not capitalize the names of types of formal documents unless they are accompanied by a specific identifier. Here are some examples:

### Generic Formal Document

a memorandum to the Minister

a memorandum to Cabinet

an act of Parliament

### Specified Formal Document

Memorandum N01-23086

the Memorandum to Cabinet on  
Innovation in the Widget Sector.

the *Income Tax Act*



## AD HOC DOCUMENTS

The titles of ad hoc documents generally don't warrant capitals when cited in the body of a text:

The agenda for the meeting is attached for your approval.

The scenario note for your meeting is attached.

The November 12, 1995 progress report on implementation of the new policy indicates that there are no major causes for concern.

The attached cost-benefit analysis shows that Option 1 is ideally suited to our needs.

## NICKNAMES

Sometimes documents acquire widely accepted nicknames. When this happens, the nickname should be capitalized, but not set in italics. Here are two examples:

### Formal Name

During the 1993 election campaign, the Liberal Party released *Creating Opportunity: The Liberal Plan for Canada*.

Such circumstances were foreseen in the *National Energy Board Act*.

### Nickname

During the 1993 election campaign, the Liberal Party released the Red Book.

Such circumstances were foreseen in the NEB Act.

## **ALL CAPITALS IN HEADINGS AND TITLES**

Headings and titles in all capitals are harder to read than those that use upper and lower case letters. Even so, there are times when it is useful to use all caps.

In titles, a mix of all caps and caps and lower case can be used to distinguish one part of the title from another. Here is an example:

**WIND AND STORM**  
**A History of the British Empire**

In addition, it is often helpful to use all caps in headings within a text. Caps and lower case can then be used in subheadings to show that one section is subordinate to another. The next page shows an example.

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## WHITE SPRUCE

### INSECTS

#### Ecological Impact

Ideo ego, Albertanus, brevem doctrinam super dicendo atque tacendo, uno versiculo comprehensam, tibi filio meo, Stephano, tradere curavi.

#### Preventive Measures

Versiculus hic est: Quis, quid, cui dicas, cur, quomodo, quando, requiras. Verum quia hæc verba, in hoc versiculo comprehensa, ponderosa sunt et generalia, et generalitas parit obscuritatem -- ut Digestis, De Jure Fiscis, L.

#### Remedial Measures

Ita fidei -- ideo illa exponere, ac pro modulo meæ scientiæ, licet non ad plenum, proposui delucidare.

Tu igitur, fili carissime, quum loqui desideras, a temet ipso incipere debes, ad exemplum galli, qui antequam cantet, ter se cum alis percutit in principio.

### LAND CONVERSION

#### Economic Impact

Itaque antequam spiritus ad os tuum verba producat, te ipsum et omnia verba in hoc versiculo posita requiras. Dico tibi, ut non solum quæras a te ipso, sed requiras, id est iterum quæras; nam istud reiterationem denotat, ut dicas requiras, id est iterum quæras.

# ACRONYMS

Do not capitalize terms represented by acronyms unless they are also proper nouns. For example:

<b>Full Term</b>	<b>Acronym</b>
small and medium-sized enterprises	SMEs
non-government organization	NGO
National Energy Board	NEB
special operating agency	SOA
volatile organic compounds	VOCs
memorandum to Cabinet	MC
memorandum of understanding	MOU
flow-through share	FTS
capital cost allowance	CCA
Natural Resources Canada	NRCan

## CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS

Many major conferences and meetings have names that take capitals. However, words such as "conference" and "meeting" should not be capitalized unless they are part of the formal name of the event. Thus:

We are making plans for the Investing in the Americas '96 conference.

The Joint Meeting of Ministers of Energy and the Environment was held in Edmonton.

In any event, do not capitalize such words when used by themselves as synonyms for events:

We are making plans for the 1996 Joint Conference on Sustainable Development. The conference will take place in Toronto, June 15-16, 1996.

# PROGRAMS

Similar principles apply to programs:

The Advanced Houses Program demonstrates how energy-efficient technology can be used in building homes. The program has supported the construction of 10 energy-efficient homes across Canada.

## GENERIC SHORT FORMS

To streamline our writing, we often use generic short forms (that is, with no descriptive identifiers) as synonyms for proper nouns. Such short forms usually do not take capitals:

<b>Proper Noun</b>	<b>Short Form</b>
Atomic Energy of Canada Limited	the corporation
the Advanced Houses Program	the program
Investing in the Americas '96	the conference
<i>Connection, Community Content: The Challenge of the Information Highway</i>	the report

Generic short forms are safe to use as long as the document you are writing mentions only one corporation, program, report, etc. Otherwise, you may need to use at least some descriptive identification with each use (e.g. "the information highway report").

## CAPITALIZING GENERIC SHORT FORMS

Some terms refer to concepts that lie at the centre of the universe in which we work. It is not unusual to see generic short forms of those terms capitalized:

<b>Full Term</b>	<b>Short Form</b>
the Government of Canada	the Government
Health Canada	the Department
the Prime Minister of Canada	the Prime Minister
the Minister of Health	the Minister

As long as you are addressing an audience that works in the same universe, there is little damage done by this practice and there are benefits to be gained. However, dangers arise when you address audiences that do not operate in the same universe. Depending on the context and audience of your writing, capitalizing generic short forms could lead to ambiguity or an appearance of condescension.

For example, officials of the Government of Ontario might use "the Government" to mean "the Government of Ontario", not "the Government of Canada". Similarly, officials of Environment Canada might use "the Department" to mean "Environment Canada", not "Health Canada", and "the Minister" to mean "the Minister of the Environment", not "the Minister of Health".