Chapter 1 Capitalization and Punctuation

Capitalization

Auto-correct is not the cure for capitalization and punctuation mistakes. It will not detect or solve all capitalization issues, although I have graded numerous papers typed by students who thought it would compensate for them not learning the rules. Some are even unfamiliar with the rules of capitalization that others of us grew up with as a way of school life and a normal part of writing.

I have edited works by students and even experienced writers where they used the symbol, &, instead of writing out the word *and*. One of the worst occurrences seems to be not upper-casing the personal pronoun I. And let's be honest, when we are texting or snapping or whatever we're doing, it is easier not to worry about remembering the capitalization rules.

Capitalization rules come in numerous and varied sizes and sometimes depend on the way a word is used in a sentence. As we will learn in the chapter on nouns, nouns come in two varieties: common and proper. A common noun is a general person, place, thing, or idea, whereas a proper noun is a specific person, place, or thing.

Proper nouns must be capitalized or upper cased. Example: store, Target.

We will also delve into a little about capitalization in the adjective chapter. Adjectives also come in the proper form. When they do, they, too, are capitalized. Example: Mexican.

The personal pronoun I is always capitalized, as is the first letter of the first word of any sentence.

Some words that we capitalize, we must also italicize.

The first and last words of book titles, magazines, newspapers, or names of things such as ships or statues are always capitalized.

Words in between the first and last are not capitalized if they are articles (a, an, the), prepositions (see chapter on prepositions), or coordinating conjunctions (and, for, nor, or, but, so, yet). Some styles make an exception with long prepositions, such as ones that are longer than five letters. *CMOS* (Chicago

Manual of Style), however, maintains all prepositions in these places be lowercased.

One exception to the title rule is when the name of a newspaper is written within a sentence. If preceded by the word "the," we do not capitalize the article, even if it is the first word. Example: I perused the *Index-Journal* when I got home.

Following is a general list of things that should be capitalized:

Personal names, continents, countries, states, counties, cities, geographical regions, islands, mountains, oceans, seas, parks, streets, highways, roads, special organizations, days of the week, holidays, historical periods, nationalities, races, languages, particular educational courses, brand names of products (but not the common noun associated with it), monuments, statues, bridges, buildings, planets (except earth, sun, and moon unless they are listed with other planets).

The seasons of the year are not capitalized unless applied to a person. Example: Her name was Autumn.

Titles of offices or positions are also capitalized when they precede the name of the office holder but not when they follow.

Some styles capitalize the word president when it refers to the leader of the United States, even if the president's name is not present, but *CMOS* does not follow this style. Example: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton but Hillary Clinton, secretary of state.

The exception is when the title is used as a Direct Address, which we will study in the noun lesson. Example: "Governor, it's good to see you today."

Punctuation

Commas

Commas are perhaps the most overused or most underused form of punctuation. What applied in the past does not necessarily apply now in all circumstances. Some commas once considered necessary are now optional. Some style guides differ in which comma rules they propose. This section on commas will reveal my philosophy: "Better to have it and not need it than to need it and not have it."

To separate sentences (clauses), phrases, and words.

If we did not use commas in the above, we would have to repeatedly use the coordinating conjunction *and*. Example: I went to the store and bought milk and juice and milk.

With commas, we can tighten the sentence to “I went to the store and bought milk, juice, and bread.”

The above sentence illustrates the use of the serial comma. The serial comma is the last in the list and precedes the conjunction. In the above example, the serial comma is behind “juice.”

Some style guides consider this comma, also called the Oxford comma, unnecessary. *CMOS* leaves it intact. The reason for the comma—even though “and” is present in the sentence—is to avoid confusion. While the last two items in a list may rarely be confused, the possibility remains, especially when items in the list contain *and*. Example: The flavors include roast beef and mustard, salt and vinegar, and sweet chili.

Without the serial comma, salt could be taken as one flavor, combining vinegar with sweet chili instead of with salt. The serial comma also clears things up when we have appositives, which will be addressed in the noun chapter. Example: I met the authors, John Steinbeck and William Shakespeare.

Without the comma, we could interpret authors as the first item in the list rather than seeing the named authors as appositives of the word authors. Even an editing tool might misinterpret this, as Microsoft Editor did when I typed the sentence.

Sometimes, to separate two adjectives that precede a noun.

Whether a comma should be placed between two adjectives can pose a dilemma. When two adjectives preceding a noun are coordinate (go together or are in the same category), we should insert a comma.

But how do we know if the adjectives are coordinate because sometimes knowing is difficult. An easy solution is to reverse the adjectives or place “and” between them. If they flow and the sentence does not sound awkward, they are coordinate. Example: “John is known as a kind, considerate person,” but not “We lifted the heavy steel beam with the crane.”

Perhaps after short introductory prepositional phrases.

This location is optional when the phrase is adverbial. We will address this again in the chapter on adverbs. *CMOS* allows the writer to choose to place or omit the comma. Often, it is omitted if doing so does not lead to confusion. In the following example, both are acceptable: In the morning, I went to the store. In the morning I went to the store.

Perhaps when used for emphasis.

Commas are also optional when using them for emphasis in places where we would not typically place them, such as in a simple sentence with compound verbs. We will examine this further in the chapter about sentence structure. Putting a comma in a simple sentence that has compound verbs is not the usual practice, but it is sometimes desired to give emphasis and effect. Example: She wanted to go to the conference, but doubted her financial ability.

To separate nonessential elements.

Another place we use commas is with nonessential elements—nonessential being any group of words that are not necessary for the sentence to make sense. This can include parenthetical expressions such as "in fact" and interjections such as "Oh."

When the nonessential element begins the sentence, we must follow it with a comma. If the element comes at the end of the sentence, we precede it with a comma. When the element comes somewhere in the middle of the sentence, we place a comma on either side.

As we move through the various parts of speech, we will specifically identify kinds of nonessential elements, but a general definition will suffice at this point. Types of nonessential elements include dependent clauses, verbal phrases, and prepositional phrases. Examples: In the morning, I went to the store. Have you tried the sauce, John? I went to the store, Meg, to get your shoes. Running too fast, John slipped and fell in the mud.

To separate independent clauses in compound sentences.

We will examine compound sentences at length in the chapter on sentence structure, but for now, we will define it only. A compound sentence is two

complete sentences (independent clauses) joined by one of the coordinating conjunctions: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so. (So is sometimes omitted as a coordinating conjunction. It can also be used as a subordinating conjunction, in which case, no comma is required.)

CMOS allows for omitting this comma if the sentences are short (five words or less is a good starting point) and will not be misunderstood if the comma is missing. Example: John ran to the store, and he bought milk. However, the comma can remain even when the sentences follow the short exception.

To separate a beginning dependent clause from the ending independent clause.

This rule applies to complex sentences when the dependent clause begins the sentence. If a dependent clause at the end of the sentence could cause confusion, be variously interpreted, or is nonessential, a comma may also precede it. Example: When I opened the present, I received a surprise (necessary comma). Example: I didn't email Susie because I was angry.

This could mean I did email Susie, but it wasn't because I was angry. Or it could mean I didn't email her because I was angry. A comma would clarify the meaning.

With dates, addresses, and salutations for friendly letters or emails.

With dates, a comma is placed between the day of the month and the year. If written within a sentence, a comma must also follow the year. Example: She visited Washington on October 29, 1980, and saw the president. If the year is omitted, no comma is needed.

When referencing an address, a comma is placed between the street address and the city and between the city and state. No comma is inserted between the state and zip code. Neither does a comma follow the zip code unless written in a sentence. Example: She visited her mother at 220 Winding Creek Dr., Sanders, South Carolina 29649.

In like manner, should the zip code be omitted but more sentence follows, we need a comma after the state. Example: She visited her mother at 220 Winding Creek Dr., Sanders, South Carolina, to check on her health.

Hyphens and Dashes

Three more common punctuation marks include the hyphen, the en dash, and the em dash. Of the three, the hyphen is the shortest and is found on keyboards beside the 0 or at the top of a numeric pad on a keyboard.

Use hyphens for hyphenated words.

If uncertain whether a word should be hyphenated, checking a dictionary is a good idea because some words that were hyphenated in the past no longer are.

Use en dashes for ranges.

En dashes are a little longer than the hyphen and are used for a range of numbers, such as page numbers or years. Example: pages 75 – 86.

Use em dashes to substitute for a colon, to show faltering speech, to show an abrupt change in thought, or to replace commas.

Em dashes are the most common we use in writing and encounter in reading. They are the longest of the three but can be overused when commas will suffice. Although *CMOS* has guidelines on how to space around em dashes (no space on either side), publishers have different style guides for punctuating them. Example: “Don’t go to the store—”

Semi-colons and Colons

Two forms of punctuation that are seen less frequently are the semi-colon and the colon.

Use semi-colons between two independent clauses.

Semi-colons are used between two independent clauses when they are closely related instead of a comma and coordinating conjunction. They are also used to separate a list of items when some or all the items in the list have commas. Example: I visited Washington, DC; Raleigh, North Carolina; and Asbury Park, New Jersey.

Like exclamation marks, semi-colons should be used sparingly in places where they substitute for a comma. A comma will do for most sentences.

Colons are used to introduce lists.

Example: On our vacation, we did the following: ate fish, rowed a boat, and swam in the ocean.

Other ways to use colons.

Colons are also used to separate chapters and verse(s) in Bible citations and to separate hours and minutes with time. Additionally, colons are used for the salutation of formal or business letters.

Quotation Marks

Perhaps, the greatest errors in punctuation occur with quotation marks. Although these are used to enclose chapter and article names within books and magazines—as well as other uses—the main place where errors occur involves dialogue. The error is not the mark itself, but the commas or other forms of punctuation associated with the quotation marks.

Periods and commas should always be placed inside the closing quotation marks.

Colons and semi-colons always reside outside the closing quotation mark.

With question and exclamation marks, the sentence determines the placement.

If the entire sentence is a question that needs quotation marks, the question mark would be placed outside the closing quotation mark. Otherwise, it comes inside the closing mark. The same applies with exclamation marks.

When using dialogue or quoting what someone said verbatim, always enclose that material in quotation marks.

Examples:

I loved the chapter entitled, “My Sorrow,” in the novel I recently read. (Commas are used here for illustration purposes only.)

I loved the chapter in the novel I just read, “My Sorrow.”

Did you read the article entitled, “My Sorrow,” in *Time* magazine (commas used here for illustration purposes only)?

Who said, “You cannot go to the conference”?

Was it John who asked, “Can I go to the theatre?”

Apostrophes

The apostrophe is also a common punctuation mark that is often misused but can be very useful if a writer needs to reduce word count.

Use apostrophes to make nouns singular and plural possessive.

Making nouns plural requires adding “s” or “es,” depending on the word’s spelling, but making them possessive requires an apostrophe. Pronouns do not operate this way, except for some indefinite pronouns—such as anybody, somebody, and everybody.

When something belongs to one person or thing, we add an apostrophe and then follow it with an “s.” Example: This is John’s chair. Or, “This is a boy’s chair.”

However, if we want to make the noun plural possessive—belonging to more than one person or thing—we add the apostrophe after the s. This helps the reader know whether one or more people are being referred to. Example: “This is the boys’ chair.”

The exception to this rule is for nouns that change spelling when we move them to the plural form. Examples would be child that becomes children, man that becomes men, and woman that changes to women. In these cases, we revert to placing the apostrophe before the s. Example: “This was the women’s room,” instead of “This is the womens’ room.”

Use apostrophes when letters or numbers have been omitted or when we use them to form plurals of numbers, letters, signs, and words used as words.

Examples: Tom’s for Tom is, *b’s, 4’s*.

Do not use apostrophes when referring to the plural of years.

Example: 1900s, not 1900’s.

Parentheses and Italics

Parentheses and italics will complete this section before we move on to end marks. Like exclamation marks, parentheses should be used sparingly.

Use parentheses to give additional information or to write confidential comments to the reader.

Example: They will visit Russia (formerly U.S.S.R.) as missionaries.

Example: My idea (what do you think about it) was rejected by the corporation.

Writers often confuse quotation marks and italics by using quotation marks with items that should be italicized.

Insert quotation marks around a book chapter title, but italicize the name of the book.

Place quotation marks around an article name in a magazine but italicize the name of the magazine.

Other italicized things are as follows:

Newspapers, plays, works of art, trains, ships, and spacecraft. We also italicize words, numbers, and letters when they are referred to as such. Example: Your *a's* look like *s's*.

Italicize foreign words or phrases that have not been included as a part of the English language.

End Marks

End marks are another form of punctuation, and each sentence must have one. The most overused end mark is the exclamation point.

The four types of sentences are declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamatory.

Use periods with declarative sentences.

This is the most common type of sentence we read, write, and hear. This sentence makes a statement. Example: John went to the store.

Use a period or exclamation mark with imperative sentences.

Imperative sentences make a strong suggestion or give a command. Example: Get out of the house! Please close your books.

The subject of an imperative sentence is always “you” understood, meaning we will not see this word in the sentence, but it is present grammatically. The first sentence above actually reads, (You) get out of the house!

Use a question mark with interrogative sentences.

The interrogative sentence poses a question. Example: Have you looked at today’s forecast?

Use an exclamation mark with exclamatory sentences.

Exclamatory sentences express surprise or excitement. Example: What a wonderful day!

This is an end mark that should be used sparingly but, as mentioned above, is often overused. Many of the sentences they are attached to do not meet the definition. Using a vivid verb that forms a mental picture in the reader’s mind eliminates the need for many exclamation marks and makes the writing better.