

The
GREGG
REFERENCE
MANUAL

NINTH EDITION

William A. Sabin

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DEDICATION

The ninth edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual* is dedicated to my dear friend, Helen Green, a teacher and an author who has touched the lives of many people.

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The Gregg Reference Manual, Ninth Edition

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The Gregg Reference Manual is intended for anyone who writes, edits, or prepares material for distribution or publication. It addresses the concerns of experienced professionals, especially those who no longer enjoy the help of trained assistants to ensure the quality of the documents that these professionals must produce. Moreover, the manual serves the needs of students who are preparing to become experienced professionals in their chosen field of work.

To accommodate this wide range of readers, *The Gregg Reference Manual* presents the *basic rules* that apply in virtually every piece of writing, as well as the *fine points* that occur less often but cause no less trouble when they do. This manual offers an abundance of examples and computer-generated illustrations so that you can quickly find models on which to pattern a solution to the various problems you encounter in your communications—from e-mail messages to formal reports. It also provides the rationale underlying specific rules so that you can manipulate the principles of style with intelligence and taste.

Features of the New Edition. The ninth edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual* has been revised and enhanced in many ways to span the stylistic demands of business and academic writing.

1. The most significant changes in the ninth edition reflect the enormous impact that *computer technology* has had on the way written communications are created and produced.
 - The easy access to *word processing templates* has greatly simplified the way in which letters, memos, reports, and other documents can be prepared. Yet the formats provided by these templates may, for a variety of reasons, not be suitable for your purposes. To help you cope with this situation, Section 13 (dealing with letters and memos) and Section 14 (dealing with reports) illustrate sample templates provided by Microsoft Word for Windows and then provide guidelines showing you how to modify these templates or create your own for more effective results.
 - The ninth edition discusses the *special features of word processing software* that make it easier for you to create and format various elements in business documents—for example, footnotes, endnotes, and tables (including a table of contents for a formal report). The manual also discusses the problems that may be created by these time-saving features. Thus Section 16 (on tables) provides an all-new 8-page sequence of illustrations that shows how a table created with the table feature of Microsoft Word for Windows can be progressively modified to achieve more readable and more attractive results. Similarly, Section 15 (on notes) shows how you can enhance the formats created by the footnote and endnote features of Microsoft Word for Windows.
 - Paragraphs ¶¶1532–1546 provide completely new coverage on dealing with *online source material*. These paragraphs will not only show you how to construct footnotes, endnotes, and bibliographic entries based on online sources; they will suggest sensible precautions to observe when you are citing electronic material, which—as we all know—can rapidly change, move to a new location, or completely disappear.
 - For those new to the Internet, ¶¶1532–1533 will show how to decode *Web site addresses* (URLs) and *e-mail addresses*. Moreover, ¶¶1538–1539 will show how to divide these addresses (if necessary) at the end of a line.
 - Anyone looking for a job these days needs to be aware of the impact of computer technology on the way job applicants are now being screened. Paragraphs ¶¶1714–1717 provide all-new format guidelines for preparing a *scannable résumé* (scannable by an optical character reader) that will help you survive the initial winnowing process.

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- The *glossary of computer terms* in Appendix B has been expanded to 20 pages to accommodate the rapidly evolving vocabulary of this new technology. If you are puzzled by terms like *bandwidth*, *cybrarian*, *dot*, *firewall*, *intranet*, *mouse potato*, *spider*, and *userid*, turn to pages 562–581.
 - Is it *e-mail*, *E-mail*, or *email*? Is it *Web site*, *Website*, or *website*? Consult ¶847 for help in resolving the confusion caused by the various ways in which computer terms are being spelled and styled.
 - As the *standards of desktop publishing* increasingly supplant the older standards reflected in typewritten documents, new stylistic issues have to be addressed. Thus ¶102 confronts the surprisingly vigorous debate over 1 versus 2 spaces following punctuation at the end of a sentence. Section 2 deals with different styles of dashes (¶¶216–217), different styles of quotation marks (page 59), and different guidelines for the use of italics and underlining (¶1290).
2. Questions and suggestions from readers of the previous edition have also had a major impact on what has been added to the ninth edition.* For example:
 - How do you pronounce words like *affluent*, *chaise longue*, and *forte*? And how about place names like *Cairo* (in Illinois), *Mackinac* (in Michigan), and *Natchitoches* (in Louisiana)? See pages 582–591 for an all-new, 10-page appendix that will offer some reassuring guidance on pronunciation problems like these.
 - How do you refer to a resident of Arkansas? For that matter, what do you call the residents of the other 49 states? See ¶336.
 - What is the proper way to refer to the class of 2000 and the first decade of the twenty-first century? See ¶¶412c, 439b.
 - What does a plus sign mean when it precedes a phone number? See ¶454f.
 - Why do dictionaries treat similar compound words differently (for example, *payoff/play-off*, *skydiving/skin diving*)? Is there some sensible way to resolve these inconsistencies in style? See ¶801b-c.
 - Do you use *a* or *an* before a phrase like *NBC poll*? *NATO strategy*? See pages 281–282.
 - How do you format a news release? See ¶1707 and page 512.
 - How do you format a one-page résumé if you're just out of school and don't have much work experience to cite? See ¶1713 and pages 526–527.
 - For once and for all, is it okay to end a sentence with a preposition? See ¶1080.
 3. The text and illustrations have been changed throughout the ninth edition to reflect the new words, phrases, acronyms, and initialisms that are continually entering the language. If you don't know the meaning of *PONA*, *WOMBAT*, or *PEBCAK*, turn at once to ¶522a. If you are unfamiliar with *Parkinson's Law of Data* or a proverb called *Hanlon's Razor*, consult ¶346c.
 4. The use of a larger page size and a new design gives the ninth edition a more open look and makes the text and the illustrations easier to read. Also note that certain rule numbers in Sections 1–11 appear in white within a blue panel. This graphic device serves to call attention to the *basic rules* of grammar, usage, and style—those dealing with problems

*Because of the immense value that readers' comments have in ensuring that each new edition is truly responsive to users' needs, I invite you to submit your questions and suggestions to me through the publisher's office in Columbus, Ohio. Please see the copyright page for the address.

that will frequently arise in your work. If you want to reduce the number of things you need to look up, these highlighted rules are the ones you need to master.

An Overview of the Organization of the Ninth Edition. This edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual* consists of 18 sections and 3 appendixes, organized in three parts:

Part 1 (Sections 1–11) deals with grammar, usage, and the chief aspects of style—punctuation, capitalization, numbers, abbreviations, plurals and possessives, spelling, compound words, and word division.

Part 2 (Sections 12–18) deals with the techniques and procedures for creating and formatting all kinds of written communications—letters, memos, reports, manuscripts, tables, agendas, minutes, itineraries, fax cover sheets, news releases, e-mail, outlines, and résumés and other employment communications. It also provides detailed guidelines on forms of address.

Part 3 (Appendixes A, B, and C) provides a glossary of grammatical terms, a glossary of computer terms, and a new appendix dealing with troublesome pronunciation problems.

Other Components of the Ninth Edition. Accompanying the ninth edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual* are the following components:

Basic Worksheets on Grammar, Usage, and Style. This set of worksheets focuses on the basic rules presented in Sections 1–11. These worksheets have been designed to build three critical skills. First, they will familiarize you with the potential problems that frequently occur in any material that you create or produce. Second, these worksheets will direct you to the appropriate rules in Sections 1–11 so that later on, when you encounter similar problems in your own work, you will know where to look. Third, they will sharpen your ability to apply the rules correctly under many different circumstances.

This set of worksheets begins with a diagnostic survey of your editing skills at the outset. Then, after you complete a series of 21 worksheets, you will encounter a parallel survey at the end that will show you how much your editing skills have improved. In most of the intervening worksheets, rule numbers are provided alongside the answer blanks so that you can quickly locate the answer you need to solve the problem at hand. At the end of each of these worksheets is an editing exercise that requires you to identify and correct the implanted errors on your own, without the help of rule numbers alongside. Interspersed within this sequence of worksheets are three editing surveys that will help you integrate all the things you have been learning in the preceding worksheets.

Comprehensive Worksheets. This set of worksheets has been designed to build the same three skills as the worksheets described above. However, this comprehensive set draws on material from the entire manual and not simply from Sections 1–11. Moreover, these worksheets deal with problems of formatting letters, memos, and other business documents. This program begins with a diagnostic survey and then, after a series of 31 worksheets, concludes with a parallel survey that allows you to demonstrate how much your editing skills have increased. Interspersed within this sequence of worksheets are four editing surveys that will help you integrate all the things you have been learning up to that point.

Instructor's Resource Manual. The *Instructor's Resource Manual* provides strategies showing how to make the best use of the two sets of worksheets. This guide also provides full-size

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keys to the *Basic Worksheets* and the *Comprehensive Worksheets*. A new *Classroom Presentations* component includes a CD-ROM containing a comprehensive set of the grammar, usage, and style rules found in Sections 1–11 of *The Gregg Reference Manual*. The rules are formatted as PowerPoint slides for instructors to use during classroom presentations and discussions. Also included are a series of transparency masters showing sample documents. The *Classroom Presentations* booklet replaces the *Transparency Masters* booklet, which was available in previous editions.

As you make your own survey of the ninth edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual*, you will want to give special attention to the basic rules that deserve further study; these are the rules that you will encounter in everyday situations, the rules you need to have at your command. You will also want to develop a passing acquaintance with the fine points of style. It is sufficient simply to know that such rules exist. Then, when you need them, you will know where to find them. Finally, you will want to take note of special word lists, sentence patterns, and illustrations that could be useful to you later on. If you find out now what the manual provides, you will know what kind of help you can count on in the future. And what is more important, you will be able to find what you are looking for faster.

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A book of this type cannot be put together without the help and support of many people. To my colleagues in Glencoe/McGraw-Hill, to my many good friends in business and office education, and to the teachers and professional business training consultants who allowed me to observe their classes and their training programs, I want to express a deep feeling of gratitude. I also need to thank the countless teachers, administrators, students, and professionals who all helped me—by their questions and suggestions—to see how things could be made better in this new edition.

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And to my family—to my mother, who gave me my first sense of what language could accomplish (and a good deal more); to Margaret, John, Kate, Chris, and Jim, from whom I have gained much wisdom; and ultimately to my wife Marie, who has made the journey worth the struggle—my thanks and my love.

William A. Sabin

Suppose you were writing to someone in another department:

I understand you are doing a confidential study of the Bronson matter. May I please get an advance copy of your report [At this point you hesitate. Should this sentence end with a period or a question mark?]

This is the kind of problem that continually comes up in any type of written communication. How do you find a fast answer to such questions? In this manual there are several ways to proceed.

Use the Index. The surest approach, perhaps, is to check the detailed index at the back of the manual (19 pages, with over 2500 entries). For example, any of the following entries will lead you to the right punctuation for the problem sentence above:

Periods, **101–109**

Question marks, **110–118**

Request, **103, 113, 124a**

...

...

at end of requests, **103**

at end of requests, **103, 113**

In each entry a **boldface number** refers to the proper rule, ¶**103**. (If you look up ¶103, you will find that a question mark is the right punctuation for the sentence in question.)

In almost all the index entries, references are made to specific rule numbers so that you can find what you are looking for fast. In a few cases, where a page reference will provide a more precise location (for example, when a rule runs on for several pages), a page number is given in lightface type. Suppose you were confronted with this problem:

If you compare the performance records of Catano, Harris, and Williams, you won't find much difference (*between/among*) them.

The index will show the following entries:

among (see *between*, 287) **OR** *between–among*, 287

The entry on page 287 indicates that *between* is correct in this situation.

Use a Fast-Skim Approach. Many users of reference manuals have little patience with detailed indexes. They would rather open the book and skim through the pages until they find what they are looking for. If you prefer this approach, you will find several features of this manual especially helpful.

- The brief topical index on the inside front cover indicates the key paragraphs for each major topic.
- At the start of each section except the appendixes, you will find a detailed list of all the topics covered in that section. This list will help you quickly focus on the rule or rules that pertain to your problem. Suppose the following problem came up:

The only point still at issue is whether or not new *Federal* [or is it *federal*?] legislation is required.

The index on the inside front cover indicates that ¶¶301–366 deal with the topic of capitalization. A fast skim of the outline preceding ¶301 (on page 86) will turn up the entry *Names of Government Bodies* (¶¶325–330). If you turn to that set of rules, you will find in ¶328 that *federal* is the proper form.

- Extensive cross-references have also been provided throughout the manual so that you can quickly locate related rules that could prove helpful. Some cross-references take this form: *See* ¶324; others may read *See also* ¶324. The form *See* ¶324 indicates that ¶324 contains significant information that adds to or qualifies the rule you are currently reading; the word *See* suggests that you really ought to pursue the cross-reference

before making a decision. The form *See also* ¶324 carries a good deal less urgency. It indicates that you will find some additional examples in ¶324 and perhaps a restatement of the rule you are currently reading but nothing altogether new. In effect, *See also* suggests that you don't have to pursue the cross-reference if you don't want to—but it couldn't hurt.

Play the Numbers. There is still a third way to find the answer to a specific problem—and this is an approach that will grow in appeal as you become familiar with the organization and the content of the manual. From a fast inspection of the rule numbers, you will observe that they all carry a section number as a prefix. Thus Section 3 (on capitalization) has a “300” series of rules—from 301 to 366; Section 4 (on number style) has a “400” series—from 401 to 470; and so on. Once you become familiar with the section numbers and the section titles, you can find your way around fairly quickly, without reference to either index, by using the section number tabs. For example, you are about to write the following sentence:

43 percent of the questionnaires have now been returned. [Or should it be “*Forty-three* percent of the questionnaires . . .”?]

If you know that matters of number style are treated in Section 4, you can quickly turn to the pages tabbed for Section 4, where a fast skim of the outline of topics at the start of the section will lead you to the answer in ¶421. (*Forty-three percent* is the right answer in this instance.)

A familiarity with the section numbers and section titles can also save you time when you are using the index. If your index entry lists several different paragraph numbers, you can often anticipate what the paragraphs will deal with. For example, if you want to know whether to write *5 lb* or *5 lbs* on a purchase order, you might encounter the following entry in the index:

Weights, **429–431, 535–538, 620**

If you know that Section 6 deals with plurals, you will try ¶620 first.

Look Up Specific Words. Many of the problems that arise deal with specific words. For this reason the index provides as many entries for such words as space will permit. For example, in the following sentence, should *therefore* be set off by commas or not?

It is(.) *therefore*(.) essential that operations be curtailed.

A check of the index will show the following entry:

therefore, **122, 124b, 138–142, 178**

A reading of the rules in ¶141 will indicate that no commas should be used in this sentence. If you ask the same question about another specific word and do not find it listed as a separate entry in the index, your best approach will be to check the index under “Comma” and investigate the most promising references or make a direct scan of the comma rules in Section 1 until you find the answer you are looking for.

If you are having difficulty with words that look alike and sound alike—*gibe* and *jibe* or *affect* and *effect*—turn directly to ¶719. For other troublesome words, consult Section 11.

The six brief essays which follow deal with a number of points of style that cause great difficulty for those who work with words. Out of this consideration of specific problems, these essays attempt to draw broader conclusions about the nature of style and the art of tailoring one's use of language to fit the needs of each situation.

Mastering Number Style: One (or 1?) Approach

A number of years ago, while making a presentation on the subject of style, I asked the audience to select the preferable form in each of the following pairs of examples:

\$87,525	OR	eighty-seven thousand five hundred and twenty-five dollars
\$5.6 trillion	OR	\$5,600,000,000,000
4:30 p.m., January 19	OR	half after four o'clock, on the nineteenth of January

No one could see any use for the forms in the second column. Those in the first column were far easier to read and simpler to write and were clearly to be preferred in business writing. However, after some discussion, we tended to agree that Tiffany's had had the right idea in a recent ad, where beneath a picture of an elegant diamond necklace was the legend "Eighty-seven thousand five hundred and twenty-five dollars." Somehow, we felt, if they were going to charge that elegant a price, the least they could do was spell it out. Moreover, we tended to agree that a liberal in fiscal matters might dismiss the federal debt as "only \$5.6 trillion," whereas a fiscal conservative who wanted to emphasize the enormity of the amount might well have written "The federal debt now stands at \$5,600,000,000,000" and thereby have forced upon us a sense of the magnitude of the amount by making us calculate it for ourselves. Finally, we agreed that we would much rather be married at "half after four o'clock, on the nineteenth of January" than at "4:30 p.m., January 19."*

These, admittedly, are extreme examples of occasions on which an unusual number style could be justified, but they tend to throw light on the more customary style for expressing numbers and on the notion of style in general. At the very least, these examples suggest that style should not be thought of as a rigid set of rules but rather as a set of principles for adjusting one's means of expression to fit a particular set of circumstances. We express our style in clothes through a varied wardrobe that suits the needs not only of everyday situations but of formal and informal occasions as well. It is the impoverished person who meets every situation with the same set of clothes. By the same token, it is an impoverished writer who meets all situations with a rigid set of rules. The writer of the Tiffany ad, who chose words instead of figures to express an amount of money, in this instance had some true sense of how to vary style for best effect.

*One dissenter indicated that she simply wanted to get married and didn't much care how the invitations read.

Essays

Manipulating principles of style for specific effect ought not to be a random, hit-or-miss exercise but should proceed from some coherent notion about style itself. In the case of numbers, an intelligent control of number style proceeds from an awareness of the difference in effect that results from using figures or words to express numbers.

Figures are big (like capital letters); when used in a sentence, they stand out clearly from the surrounding tissue of words. As a result, they are easier to grasp on first reading, and they are easier to locate for subsequent reference. Thus whenever quick comprehension and fast reference are important (and this is true of most business writing), figures are to be preferred to words.

But the very characteristics of figures that make them preferable to words can be disadvantageous in certain circumstances. Figures stand out so sharply against a background of words that they achieve a special prominence and obtain a special emphasis. Not all numbers warrant that kind of emphasis, however, and in such cases words are preferable to figures. Keep in mind, too, that figures have the conciseness and the informality of an abbreviation. Thus the more formal the occasion, the more likely one is to spell numbers out (as in the wedding announcement cited on page xiii).

Given these basic differences between using figures and using words, it is quite clear why figures are preferred in ordinary business letters. These are typically straightforward communications that pass between business firms and their suppliers or their customers, containing frequent references to price quotations, quantities, shipping dates, credit terms, and the like. Frequently, these numbers represent data that has to be extracted from the letter and processed in some way; they may have to be checked against other numbers or included in some computation or simply transferred to another document. The advantage of figures over words in these ordinary cases is so clear that the point does not need to be argued.

But there is another kind of business writing in which the writer is not dealing with the workaday transactions of the business. It may be a special promotion campaign with an air of elegance and formality; it may be a carefully constructed letter with special stylistic objectives in mind; or it may be a special report which involves community relations and will have a wider distribution than the normal technical business report. This kind of writing tends to occur more often at the executive level, and it tends to occur in the more creative departments of a business (such as sales promotion, advertising, public relations, and customer relations). In this kind of writing, numbers don't occur very frequently; when they do, they are usually expressed in words.

As a response to the different needs posed by these two kinds of writing, there are two basic number styles in use today. Both use figures and words but in different proportions. The *figure style* uses figures for all numbers above 10, whether exact or approximate; the *word style* spells out all numbers up through 100 and all numbers above 100 that can be expressed in one or two words (such as *twenty-five hundred*).

As a practical matter, your immediate job may require you to use only the figure style. However, your next job may call for the use of the word style. And if you are working and going to school at the same time (as more and more people are these days), you will probably find yourself following one style for office work and another for your academic work.

Under these circumstances, if you grasp the basic difference between using words and figures to express numbers, you will be better able to decide how to proceed in specific situations without having to consult a style manual each time. In any case, keep the following ideas in mind:

1. There are no absolute rights and wrongs in number style—only varying sets of stylistic conventions that people follow in one set of circumstances or another. There are, however, effective differences in using words or figures, and you should take these differences into account.
2. Before deciding on which number style to follow for a given piece of writing, first determine the basic objective of the material. If the material is intended to communicate information as simply and as briefly as possible, use the *figure style*. If the material is of a formal nature or aspires to a certain level of literary elegance, use the *word style*.
3. Having decided on a basic style, *be consistent in context*. When related numbers occur together in the same context and according to the rules some should go in figures and some should go in words, treat these related numbers all the same way.
4. Treat an approximate number exactly the same way you would treat an exact number. If you would write *50 orders*, then you should also write *about 50 orders*. (If the figure 50 looks too emphatic to you when used in an approximation, the chances are that you should be using the word style—and not just for approximate numbers but throughout.)
5. In areas where the style could go either way (for example, *the 4th of June* vs. *the fourth of June* or *9 o'clock* vs. *nine o'clock*), decide in accordance with your basic style. Thus if you are following the figure style, you will automatically choose the *4th of June* and *9 o'clock*.
6. In expressions involving ages, periods of time, and measurements, use figures whenever these numbers have technical significance or serve as measurements or deserve special emphasis; otherwise, use words. (For example, *you receive these benefits at 65*, *the note will be due in 3 months*, *the parcel weighs over 2 pounds*; but *my father will be sixty-five next week*, *that happened three months ago*, *I hope to lose another two pounds this week*.)
7. Use figures in dates (*June 6*) and in expressions of money (*\$6*), except for reasons of formality or special effect (as in the wedding announcement or the Tiffany ad). Also use figures with abbreviations and symbols and in percentages, proportions, ratios, and scores.
8. Use words for numbers at the beginning of a sentence, for most ordinals (*the third time*, *the twentieth anniversary*), and for fractions standing alone (*one-third of our sales*).

All manuals of style (including this one) include many more than eight rules. They give exceptions and fine points beyond those just summarized. Yet for all practical purposes these eight rules—and the philosophy that underlies them—will cover almost every common situation. Just remember that the conventions of number style were meant to be applied, not as an absolute set of dogmas, but as a flexible set of principles that help to fit the form to the occasion. When manipulated with intelligence and taste, these principles of style can enhance and support your broader purposes in writing.

➤ *For a further discussion of number style, see Section 4, pages 110–131.*

A Fresh Look at Capitalization

The rules on capitalization give most people fits. First of all, there are a seemingly endless number of rules to master; second, the authorities themselves don't agree on the rules; and third, the actual practices of writers often don't agree with any of the contradictory recommendations of the authorities.

A frequent solution is to pretend that disagreements on capitalization style don't exist; instead, people are given one fixed set of rules to be applied under all circumstances. Yet all too many people never do remember the full complement of rules, and those they do remember they apply mechanically without comprehension. As a result, they never get to see that capitalization can be a powerful instrument of style if it is shrewdly and knowingly used.

To understand the basic function of capitalization, you should know that capitalization gives importance, emphasis, and distinction to everything it touches. That's why we capitalize the first word of every sentence—to signify emphatically that a new sentence has begun.* That's why we capitalize proper nouns like *Marianne* and *California* and *April*—to indicate distinctively that these are the official names of particular people, places, or things. Moreover, when we take a word that normally occurs as a common noun and capitalize it, we are loading into that word the special significance that a proper noun possesses. The *fourth of July*, for example, is just another day in the year; when it signifies a national holiday, it becomes the *Fourth of July*. In exactly the same way, the *white house* that stands at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue becomes the *White House* when we think of it, not as one of many white houses, but as the residence of the *President*, who is himself something special compared to the *president* of a business organization.

This process of giving special significance to a common noun and transforming it into a proper noun explains why we capitalize names coined from common nouns—for example, the *Windy City*, the *First Lady*, the *Sunflower State*, the *Stars and Stripes*, *Mother's Day*, and the *Industrial Revolution*. And it also explains why manufacturers who coin trade names try to register them whenever possible. As long as they can get legal protection for these names, they are entitled to capitalize them. The owners of such trade names as *Coke*, *Kleenex*, *Frisbee*, *Dacron*, *Levi's*, and *Xerox* are likely to take legal action against anyone who uses such words generically. They are determined to protect their rights zealously because they don't want to lose the distinctive forcefulness that a capitalized noun possesses. In this respect they demonstrate an understanding of the function of capitalization that few of us can compete with.

Once it becomes clear that capitalization is a process of loading special significance into words, it's easier to understand why capitalization practices vary so widely. Individual writers will assign importance to words from their own vantage points. The closer they are to the term in question, the more inclined they will be to capitalize it. Thus it is quite possible that what is important to me (and therefore worthy of capitalization) may not be important to you and thus will not be capitalized.

*Several years ago a group of students at Williams College objected to capitalizing the first letter of the first word of a sentence on the grounds that it "unfairly prioritizes that letter at the expense of the other underprivileged letters that follow."

One could cite any number of examples to prove the point. A retail merchant will take out full-page ads so that he can exclaim in print about his *Year-End Clearance Sale*. The rest of us can respect his right to capitalize the phrase, but we are under no obligation to share his enthusiasm for what is, after all, just another *year-end clearance sale*. In legal agreements, as another example, it's customary to load such terms as *buyer* and *seller* with the significance of proper nouns and thus write, "The *Buyer* agrees to pay the *Seller* . . ."; in all other contexts, however, this kind of emphasis would not be warranted.

When it is understood that it is appropriate to capitalize a given term in some contexts but not necessarily in all contexts, a lot of the agony about capitalization disappears. Instead of trying to decide whether *Federal Government* or *federal government* is correct, you should recognize that both forms are valid and that depending on the context and the importance you want to attach to the term, one form will be more appropriate to your purpose than another. If you are a federal employee, you are very likely to write *Federal Government* under all circumstances, out of respect for the organization that employs you. If you are not a government employee, you are more likely to write *federal government* under ordinary circumstances. If, however, you are writing to someone connected with the federal government or you are writing a report or document in which the federal government is strongly personified, you will probably choose the capitalized form.

By the same token, you need not agonize over the proper way to treat terms like *advertising department*, *finance committee*, and *board of directors*. These are well-established generic terms as well as the official names of actual units within an organization. Thus you are likely to capitalize these terms if they refer to units within your own organization, because you would be expected to assign a good deal of importance to such things. But you wouldn't have to capitalize these terms when referring to someone else's organization unless for reasons of courtesy or flattery you wanted to indicate that you considered that organization important. (For example, "I would like to apply for a job as copywriter in your Advertising Department.") Moreover, when writing to outsiders, you should keep in mind whether or not they would assign the same importance you do to units within your organization. In an interoffice memo you would no doubt write, "David Walsh has been appointed to the Board of Directors"; in a news release intended for a general audience, you would more likely write, "David Walsh has been appointed to the board of directors of the Wilmington Corporation."

This switch in form from one context to another will appear surprising only to those who assume that one form is intrinsically right and the other intrinsically wrong. Actually, there are many more familiar instances of this kind of flexibility. We normally write the names of seasons in lowercase (for example, *spring*), but when the season is meant to be personified, we switch to uppercase (*Spring*). The words *earth*, *sun*, and *moon* are normally expressed in lowercase, but when these terms are used in the same context with proper names like *Mars* and *Venus*, they also become capitalized. Or we write that we are taking courses in *history* and *art*, but once these terms become part of the official names of college courses, we write *History 101* and *Art 5C*.

Once you come to view capitalization as a flexible instrument of style, you should be able to cope more easily with ambiguous or conflicting rules. For example, one of the most troublesome rules concerns whether or not to capitalize titles when they follow a person's name or are used in place of the name. According to a number of authorities, only the titles of

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“high-ranking” officials and dignitaries should be capitalized when they follow or replace a person’s name. But how high is high? Where does one draw the line? You can easily become confused at this point because the authorities as well as individual writers have drawn the line at various places. So it helps to understand that the answer to how high is high will depend on where you stand in relation to the person named. At the international level, a lot of us would be willing to bestow initial caps on the *Queen of England*, the *Pope*, the *Secretary General of the United Nations*, and people of similar eminence. At the national level in this country, many of us would agree on honoring with caps the *President*, the *Vice President*, Cabinet members (such as the *Attorney General* and the *Secretary of Defense*), the heads of federal agencies and bureaus (such as the *Director* or the *Commissioner*), but probably not lower-ranking officials in the national government. (However, if you worked in Washington and were closer to those lower-ranking people, you might very well draw the line so as to include at least some of them.) At the state level, we would probably all agree to honor the *Governor* and even the *Lieutenant Governor*, but most of us would probably refer to the *attorney general* of the state in lowercase (unless, of course, we worked for the state government or had dealings with the official in question, in which case we would write the *Attorney General*). Because most people who write style manuals are removed from the local levels of government, they rarely sanction the use of caps for the titles of local officials; but anyone who works for the local government or on the local newspaper or has direct dealings with these officials will assign to the titles of these officials a good deal more importance than the writers of style manuals typically do. Indeed, if I were writing to the mayor of my town or to someone in the mayor’s office, I would refer to the *Mayor*. But if I discuss this official with you in writing, I would refer to the *mayor*; in this context it would be bestowing excessive importance on this person to capitalize the title.

What about titles of high-ranking officials in your own organization? They certainly are important to you, even if not to the outside world. Such titles are usually capped in formal minutes of a meeting or in formal documents (such as a company charter or a set of bylaws). In ordinary written communications, however, these titles are not—as a matter of taste—usually capitalized, for capitalization would confer an excessive importance on a person who is neither a public official nor a prominent dignitary. But those who insist on paying this gesture of respect and honor to their top executives have the right to do it if they want to. (And in some companies this gesture is demanded.)

In the final analysis, the important thing is for you to establish an appropriate capitalization style for a given context—and having established that style, to follow it consistently within that context, even though you might well adopt a different style in another context. Though others may disagree with your specific applications of the rules, no one can fault you if you have brought both sense and sensitivity to your use of capitalization.

➤ *For a further discussion of capitalization style, see Section 3, pages 86–109.*