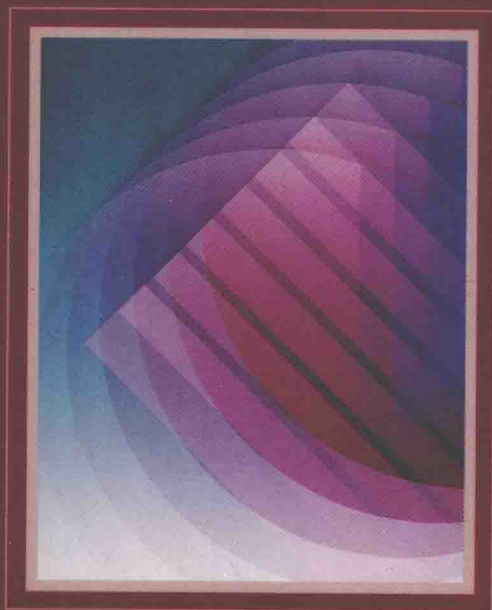


# THE GREGG REFERENCE MANUAL

EIGHTH EDITION



WILLIAM A. SABIN

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WILLIAM A. SABIN

***GLENCOE***

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## DEDICATION

The eighth edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual* is dedicated to the memory of Roy Poe—an outstanding editor, publisher, author, educator, mentor, and friend.

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### The Gregg Reference Manual, Eighth Edition

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# PREFACE

*The Gregg Reference Manual* is intended for anyone who writes, edits, or prepares final copy for distribution or publication. It 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 eighth 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 *basic rules* of grammar, usage, and style—those rules dealing with problems that will arise frequently in your work—have been highlighted in Sections 1–11 with a bold bar beneath certain rule numbers. If you want to reduce the number of things you need to look up, these basic rules are the ones you need to master.
2. The most significant changes in the eighth 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* (built-in formats for a variety of documents) greatly simplifies the way in which letters, memos, reports, and other documents may be prepared. Section 13 (dealing with letters and memos) and Section 14 (dealing with reports) provide sample templates along with guidelines showing how to modify these templates for more effective results. Section 13 also discusses the use of *macros* as an efficient way to repeat identical material in various documents (for example, the closing of the letters you write).
  - The eighth edition discusses the special features of word processing software that make it easier for you to create and format 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 timesaving features. For example, Section 16 (on tables) provides a sequence of six illustrations (see ¶1601f) that shows how a table created with the table feature of WordPerfect 6 for Windows can be progressively modified to achieve more readable and more attractive results. Similarly, Section 15 (on notes) shows how you can modify the formats created by the footnote and endnote features of word processing software. Section 14 (on reports) shows how you can use the outline feature to generate a table of contents. Section 13 (on letters and memos) discusses the use of the date feature and the date code feature (¶1314c), the envelope feature (¶¶1388b, 1389g), the label feature (¶1397), and the use of a file name notation to permit quick access to documents stored on disk (¶1372).

- The dramatic increase in the use of e-mail has prompted a detailed discussion of how to create and format e-mail messages (see ¶¶1708–1711). These paragraphs also provide a list of abbreviations often used in e-mail messages. (If you do not know the meaning of ROTFL, turn to ¶1711g at once.)
  - Word processing software has made various typeface characteristics readily available. As a result, ¶¶285–290 have been revised to reflect the ways in which you can use italics in place of underlining. Many format guidelines in Part 2 of the manual indicate where boldface type may be used in various documents. Moreover, ¶¶1357e and 1424g show how bullets (for example, ▪ and •) can serve as an attractive alternative to the use of numbers and letters in displayed lists. Finally, the eighth edition discusses the use of special character sets that offer ready access to symbols not provided on a type-writer keyboard. (See ¶¶413 and 1502f for examples.)
  - Section 7 (on spelling) now discusses the use of electronic dictionaries and the need to expand them with your own list of frequently used words, expressions, and names. Both Section 7 and Section 12 discuss the use of spell checkers and alert readers to the dangers of relying excessively on this electronic tool to detect all spelling errors. (See ¶1202b for examples of the kinds of spelling mistakes no spell checker will catch.) In addition, Section 9 (on word division) discusses the use of automatic hyphenation and the use of a justified right margin.
  - The discussion of editing and proofreading in Section 12 has been expanded to deal with a new phenomenon in many offices. Executives who used to have assistants produce the documents they had drafted or dictated increasingly have to handle these functions themselves. Accordingly, Section 12 now discusses how editing and proofreading have become an integral part of the overall writing process. Section 12 also provides an expanded discussion of editing and proofreading at the computer.
  - Section 12 now includes notes on how to prepare alphabetized lists of names on a computer in accordance with the latest rules from ARMA (the Association of Records Managers and Administrators). (See ¶¶1209, 1210, 1213, and 1218.)
3. Many people today inhabit two worlds—the business world and the academic—either as full-time students who are also working or as full-time employees who are going to school to upgrade their skills or train for a new career or enrich their personal lives. Such people are bound to encounter different requirements, different formats, and different styles in whatever written work they produce. The eighth edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual* acknowledges this situation in a number of ways.
- Section 17 expands the existing coverage of résumés (¶¶1712–1713) by providing new guidelines and illustrations on how to write and format letters to apply for a job, follow up on a job interview, and accept a job. (See ¶¶1714–1717.)
  - Sections 14 and 15 provide guidelines for academic reports, notes, and bibliographies wherever they differ from what is done in business writing. (See, for example, ¶¶1412–1414, 1508b, 1534c.)
  - New to this edition is the treatment of outlines, whether you use the outline feature of a word processing program to produce them or you format the outlines yourself. (See ¶¶1718–1723.)

4. The text and illustrations have been changed throughout the eighth edition to reflect the new words, phrases, and acronyms that are continually entering the language. (If you do not understand why certain high-level decisions were made in your organization, you may need to consult ¶1522 for the acronym BOGSAT.) Computer technology is the major source of new words and phrases these days. The glossary of computer terms in Appendix B has been expanded and updated to include state-of-the-art terms such as *cyberspace*, *file transfer protocol* (an Internet term), *hypertext*, *motherboard*, *mouse elbow*, *newbie*, and *SYSOP*. The glossary also includes terms that reflect the wacky humor of computer users. If you do not know the meaning of *Easter egg*, *notwork*, *sneaker-net*, or *smiley* [for example, :-)], turn at once to Appendix B.
5. Questions and suggestions from users of the previous edition have had a major impact on what has been added to the eighth edition.\* For example:
  - How do you address a married couple when the wife does not wish to have her identity submerged in her husband's name? (See ¶1323d.)
  - When do you use such terms as *Hispanic*, *Latino*, and *Chicano*? (See the entry on ethnic references in Section 11.)
  - How do you construct a footnote or endnote for a quotation taken from a CD-ROM source? (See ¶1519.)
  - What is a *mailstop code* and where does it go in an inside address? (See ¶1338d.)

**AN OVERVIEW OF THE ORGANIZATION OF THE EIGHTH EDITION.** This edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual* consists of 18 sections and 2 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, e-mail, outlines, and résumés and other employment communications. It also provides detailed guidelines on forms of address.

**Part 3** (Appendixes A and B) provides a glossary of grammatical terms and a glossary of computer terms.

**OTHER COMPONENTS OF THE EIGHTH EDITION.** Accompanying the eighth edition of *The Gregg Reference Manual* are the following components:

- **Two sets of worksheets.** The availability of two sets of worksheets now affords more flexibility in meeting users' needs.

*Worksheets on Grammar, Usage, and Style.* This all-new set of worksheets focuses on the basic rules presented in Sections 1–11. These worksheets have been

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\*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 Westerville, Ohio. Please see the copyright page for the full address.

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 twenty-one 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. *Comprehensive Worksheets* begins with a diagnostic survey and then, after a series of thirty-one 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 Guide to the Worksheets.** The *Instructor's Guide to the Worksheets for The Gregg Reference Manual* provides strategies showing how to make the best use of the two sets of worksheets. This guide also provides full-size keys to the *Worksheets on Grammar, Usage, and Style* and to the *Comprehensive Worksheets*.
- **Transparency Masters.** This new component provides over 120 transparency masters designed to reinforce the basic rules of grammar, usage, and style as well as models for formatting letters, memos, reports, and other documents.

As you make your own survey of the eighth 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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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**

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# HOW TO LOOK THINGS UP

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 (16 pages, with over 2000 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, punctuation of, 103

...  
at end of requests, 103

...  
at end of requests, 103, 113

In each entry the **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 of 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*, 257–258) or *between–among*, 257–258

The rule beginning on page 257 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 glossaries, 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 ¶¶301–365 deal with the topic of capitalization. A fast skim of the outline preceding ¶301 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 365; 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 “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, 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 and phrases, consult Section 11.

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# ESSAYS

*The six brief essays that 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

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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
\$4.8 trillion	OR	\$4,800,000,000,000
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 readily dismiss the federal debt as "only \$4.8 trillion," whereas a fiscal conservative who wanted to emphasize the enormity of the amount might well have written "The federal debt now stands at \$4,800,000,000,000" 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

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

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.

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.

**F**igures 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 xv).

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 to 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 typically 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.

# A FRESH LOOK AT CAPITALIZATION

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**T**he 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 firm.

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.

**O**nce 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.

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 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