GRAMMAR 101

Instructor: Erin K. Brown

LESSON #3

Spelling, Capitalization, and Italics

Introduction

An editor and proofreader must be knowledgeable in all areas of English grammar. Now that we've covered punctuation, it's time to tackle the mechanics of spelling, capitalization, and italics.

Spelling

You don't have to know how to spell every word in the dictionary to be a good editor; however, you need to have knowledge of spelling rules—and their exceptions—as well as a good eye to detect when a word doesn't look right. That's when you grab your dictionary and look up the word. We'll use *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition (*MW*) as our primary dictionary since it is the industry standard

I'm sure you've heard this at one time or another, but it bears repeating: do not rely on computer spellcheckers. It's okay to use them as an aid to spotting possible errors, but *all* spellcheckers contain deficiencies. Remember, *MW* is the standard. The only source that trumps it is *CMOS* (*The Chicago Manual of Style*) or a publisher's house style.

Improve Your Skill

If some words consistently give you trouble—you have to look them up every time you need to spell them—make a list and post these words where you'll see them every day. Review them and it won't be long before you'll remember how to spell them.

When reading for pleasure or work, keep a list of words you encounter that you don't know or aren't sure what they mean. Then look up the words and learn their meanings.

Go to eBay or Amazon and search "spelling" in the Books category. Filter the results by "high school," and you'll have thousands of choices of spelling books/programs you can buy and use to improve your spelling.

Visit http://www.merriam-webster.com/ and sign up for their Word of the Day. First thing in the morning you'll receive an email with a word, its definition, and something interesting about the

word. You can also go to the Quizzes & Games tab. It offers four games. Spell It is designed to improve spelling skills.

Homophones

Homophones are words that sound alike or almost alike but have different meanings and are spelled differently. The first that come to mind are *to*, *too*, and *two*; *there*, *they're*, and *their*. Homophones can perplex even the best writers and editors, so familiarize yourself with them so you can spot a misused one and correct it. The English language has numerous homophone pairs and triplets—some rather simple, others more complex. Following is just a small sampling of homophones:

acclimation	acclamation	
adherence	adherents	
aught	ought	
eminent	immanent	imminent
billed	build	
gaze	gays	
gored	gourd	
palate	palette	pallet
penance	pennants	
phlox	flocks	
rain	rein	reign
Sioux	sue	
you'll	yule	

Nonstandard and Variant Spelling

Some fields, such as medicine, journalism, or law, use specific style manuals. Likewise, some fields adhere to nonstandard spelling and capitalization. If you're editing a government piece, you'll use the *GPO Style Manual* and consult it for its distinctive spelling and capitalization. If you're working with a publisher, check with the project manager to know which style manual(s) to use. Many publishers have a house style guide, which they provide to writers and editors.

In some cases, an author will have a strong preference for treating certain terms. For example, *Quran* is spelled a variety of ways: Quran, Koran, Qur'an, and Qu'ran. An author may prefer one of those spellings, so make sure to spell it (and any other acceptable variants) consistently throughout the manuscript.

MW includes variants, two different spellings that are equally acceptable. If you see the main entry in bold followed by *or* and another spelling of the entry in bold, either spelling is acceptable. Whichever spelling you choose (or the author/project manager chooses), make sure that word is spelled consistently throughout the manuscript. (I typically spell according to the first entry spelling.) On the following page are just a few words that *MW* considers equal variants:

ocher	*or*	ochre
*judgment	*or*	judgement

fulfill	*or*	fulfil
carline	*or*	carlin
duffel	*or*	duffle
entrée	*or*	entree

*American publishers want *judgment*, while British publishers want *judgement*.

British Spelling

Chances are good that you will at some time edit a manuscript intended for UK, Canadian, or Australian audiences. These three countries usually adhere to British spelling (though some authors may want their manuscripts Americanized). You must be able to spot British spelling (as well as terminology)—do not let those words slip by. Rather than try to list every word that is spelled differently from the American spelling, go here for a "Comprehensive List of American and British Spelling Differences" at http://www.tysto.com/uk-us-spelling-list.html. Many of the differences concern using an *s* or a *z*, an *ae* or an *e*, a *u* or not, and doubling the final consonant before adding *-ed* or *-ing*. Remember, you don't have to memorize all of these words—you can always check your reference books—but you do have to develop the ability to spot them.

Of course, if you're editing a manuscript for a British audience, you must be aware of terminology differences. Go here to find a fairly long list of words and their meanings to a Brit and an American. Some editors like to print these pages out and keep them in a notebook for reference. Others prefer to bookmark the websites and consult them when necessary. There's only one right way for you: the way that works!

Plurals

Most words are made plural by adding *-s* or *-es*. We all learned this in elementary school, so we won't spend much time here, but we will concentrate on the more troublesome areas of making singular terms plural.

When you consult *MW* on how to spell a plural term, it sometimes lists two plural spellings. For example, the plural of *zero* can be spelled *zeros* or *zeroes*. *MW* lists *zeros* first; therefore, unless the publisher chooses otherwise, use the first listing in the dictionary as the preferable form.

Some singular words have more than one plural form, depending on the definition. For example, *staff*: *staffs* for a group of people in an office or another workplace, and *staves* for musical notations. So if you see two forms of plural, read the definition to make sure you're using the correct form.

Let's run quickly through some oddities of plurals.

Compound nouns: chiefs of staff, daughters-in-law, hangers-on (not chief of staffs, daughter-in-laws, hanger-ons).

Proper nouns: normally formed by adding *-s* or *-es*, but there are some exceptions.
- When the proper noun ends in *-y*, add *-s* (the three Marys). The exceptions to this rule include *Alleghenies*, *Rockies*, *Sicilies*, *Ptolemies*, and *Romanies*.

- When a proper noun ends in *-s*, add *-es* (the two Charleses).

- Native American group names can be used either as singular or plural. For example, *Chinook* is listed as both the singular and plural form, but *Chinooks* is also given as a plural. Consult the dictionary to see which way is the preferred plural form.

- Proper names ending in unpronounced *-s* or *-x* are usually kept in their singular form. *CMOS* 7.11 gives these examples: the seventeen Louis of France and two towns called Charlevoix.

When making an italicized word plural, leave the plural ending in roman. But in some cases, you will italicize the plural-forming *-s* (isn't English grand?). So consult the dictionary and *CMOS* 7.12 for some help.

Sometimes you'll find yourself in the awkward position of needing to make plural a singular-form word that is contained in quotation marks (see *CMOS* 7.13 for examples). The easiest way to handle this is to rewrite the sentence, avoiding the complication altogether.

Words or phrases used as nouns can be tricky to make plural. (For example: The dos and don'ts of writing are subject to change.) Consult *MW* for help.

Here are some general rules about forming plurals of letters and abbreviations. Uppercase letters: add an *-s* (his report card listed three As), but add an *-'s* to lowercase letters to avoid confusion or misreading (how many *a*'s are in *banana*?). Abbreviations: *YMCAs*, *Figs.*; but *pp.* (pages) and *vv.* (verses). (Check *CMOS* 7.15, 63–69 for more help.)

These are a lot of rules and exceptions to learn. You probably won't memorize them all right away, and that's okay. But you must be aware of these possibilities and spot problems in manuscripts. Keep your *CMOS*, house style manual, and *MW* handy as you edit. (Both *CMOS* and *MW* have online versions available as subscriptions.) The more you use these, the more you will remember the material.

On the next page you'll find a sample of troublesome words that do not follow the *-s* or *-es* plural form. Notice the highlighted endings, which show a pattern and can sometimes be clues to how to make the word plural.

Singular	Plural
larva	larvae
coma	comae
analysis	analyses
parenthesis	parentheses
phenomenon	phenomena
ovum	ova
cactus	cacti
half	halves
leaf	leaves
knife	knives

Possessive

You already know that the possessive form of most nouns is created by adding an apostrophe and an *s*: horse's hooves. And commonly, the possessive plural noun is formed by simply adding an apostrophe: horses' hooves.

Hang on to your hat, pardner, 'cuz we're going to gallop through several situations that are the exception to the above general rule of forming possessives.

Some nouns are plural in form but singular in meaning. For example, the possessive of *ethics* is *ethics'*. Follow this same example when forming the possessive of words that denote entities that are plural in form but are singular in meaning: United States' foreign policy.

For . . . sake expressions ending in *-s* take only the apostrophe (no additional *-s*: for goodness' sake, for righteousness' sake).

Closely joined nouns "possessing" jointly and used as a single unit form the possessive with the last word: Mom and Dad's house is for sale. When the elements possessed are distinct, both nouns use the possessive form: My sister's and brother's kids love playing outdoors.

A compound noun is a noun that is made with two or more words. For example: fairy tale, mother-in-law, doorbell. A noun phrase is a word or group of words that function as a noun. Both compound nouns and noun phrases form the possessive with either the first or final element. Use your common sense and you should be okay (but always consult your resources so you don't introduce an error into the manuscript): cow's milk, fool's gold; someone else's, office managers' file system, the governor of Montana's.

Probably the most common error I find in published material concerns possessives with gerunds. A gerund is a verb form that ends in *-ing* but acts as a noun (subject, predicate nominative, object of the preposition, appositive, direct object). The bold word is the gerund in the following sentences.

> ***Riding*** *a bike* is good exercise. (subject)

> The key is ***applying*** *good decision-making skills*. (predicate nominative)

> Children stay healthy by ***eating*** *nutritious foods.* (object of the preposition)

He developed a skill, ***reading*** *every night*, which improved his ability. (appositive)

I enjoy ***visiting*** *friends and family*. (direct object)

Generally speaking, when a pronoun (a word that substitutes for a noun or noun phrase) precedes a gerund, use a possessive case pronoun (mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, theirs):

Wrong: I hated him **leaving**.
Correct: I hated his **leaving**.

The first example states that I hated *him*, which is not true. I hated *his leaving*. *Leaving* (gerund) is the direct object. Here's another example:

Wrong: You **hiking** up the mountain was a great accomplishment.
Correct: Your **hiking** up the mountain was a great accomplishment.

You is not a great accomplishment but *your hiking* is, which is the subject of the sentence. Often, when a noun comes before the gerund, you'll need to make it possessive:

Wrong: The parents disapproved of Jason **biking** across the United States.
Correct: The parents disapproved of Jason's **biking** across the United States.

The first sentence means that the parents disapproved of *Jason*. In the correct version, the possessive *Jason's* identifies the gerund *biking* as the object of the preposition *of.* So the correct sentence says that the parents disapproved of the biking across the United States.

Capitalization

Whether to capitalize certain terms is a frequent question asked by new editors. As I mentioned earlier, various fields capitalize certain words that are normally lowercased. If you're editing, say, medical or legal manuscripts, be especially aware of the field's peculiarities and check their specific style manuals.

One example that shows the difference between government and journalistic manuscripts is the term *Korean War*. *[United States Government Printing Office (GPO) Style Manual](#)* (2016) lowercases *war*: Korean war. *The Associated Press Stylebook* uses *Korean War*, as does *CMOS*. These are subtle differences. So consider the manuscript's audience, know which style manual you are expected to abide by, and be consistent throughout the manuscript.

The opposite is equally true in that a specific field may lowercase a term that the general manuals capitalize. One example, which I see quite often, requires strong consideration of the book's audience and adherence to that market's manual. A guide for the religious audience, *The Christian Writer's Manual of Style*, does not capitalize *gospel*: the gospel of Matthew, Luke's gospel, the gospel that Jesus preached; but it capitalizes the *Gospels* when referring collectively to the first four books of the New Testament. But *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* says, "Capitalize [Gospel] when referring to any of the four books of the Bible so named,

or when using the word in the sense of the Christian message"; *The Associated Press Stylebook*: "Capitalize [Gospel] when referring to any of the first four books of the New Testament"; and *GPO Style Manual* says, "Gospel (memoir of Christ)."

Know the book's audience and always know which style manual you're to consult.

Brand Names and Trademarks

CMOS 8.68 and 8.154 state how to handle brand names and trademarks. Generally, use a generic term rather than a brand name if you can. Instead of *Kleenex*, use *tissue*; rather than *Band-Aid*, use *bandage*; avoid using *Realtor* and use *real estate agent* instead. If you must use a trademark name, capitalize it. A mistake I often see is *Dr. Pepper*. Wrong! It's *Dr Pepper* (no period after *Dr*).

The first rule is to try to avoid using brand names and trademarks. If you can't, then make sure they are properly used (not as verbs or adjectives), spelled, and capitalized by checking the company website.

Captions, Tables, and Illustrations

Because graphics, including tables, charts, and illustrations, are not typically included in the manuscript at the editing stage, we'll not spend much time on them here. However, as an editor, you need to be familiar with their treatment. Please study chapter three of *CMOS*, "Illustrations and Tables."

For now, note that sentence style is used in captions, tables, and illustrations. For example, turn to page 367 of *CMOS*: TABLE 6.1. Punctuation relative to closing quotation marks and parentheses or brackets.

A couple of things are evident here. First, *table* is in small caps (we'll address small caps later in the lesson); second, the title is in sentence style, which means only the first word is capitalized—as in a sentence; and, third, because it's a title in sentence style, it does not take a closing punctuation mark (unlike a sentence).

Vertical Lists

CMOS 6.128–132 covers how to treat vertical lists. I have this section bookmarked in my book because I use it often. But regarding capitalization, the first word of each item in vertical lists is capitalized if they are a complete sentence, are numbered, or are in outline form.

Quotations

Essentially, you'll capitalize the first word of a quotation unless it has a grammatical function within the sentence, which is typically introduced by *that*.

> He said, "The only thing to fear is fear itself."

> He said that "the only thing to fear is fear itself."

You might be familiar with the basic rules of capitalization for titles (headline style) of works. But let's review them:

1. Capitalize first and last words of the title and any major words, but lowercase conjunctions (*and*, *or*, *nor*, etc.), articles (*a*, *an*, *the*), and prepositions. (One publisher I work for requires capitalization of prepositions of five or more letters, so always remember that house style trumps *CMOS* or other style manuals.)

2. Lowercase *to* as an infinitive.

3. Lowercase the part of a proper name that would normally be lowercased (Jean de La Fontaine, Maria von Trapp).

4. Lowercase the second element of a species name, even if it is the last word of the title (*Canis lupus*).

5. Lowercase the modifiers such as flat or sharp if they follow musical key symbols (*Mozart: Great Mass in C minor*).

In addition to the above list, hyphenated words in titles follow certain rules.

1. If the first part of the hyphenated word is a prefix that cannot stand alone (anti, pre), lowercase the second element, unless it is a proper noun or proper adjective (*E-book Formatting for Beginners*).

2. Capitalize subsequent elements unless they are conjunctions, articles, or prepositions (*Twentieth-Century Super Heroes*).

Please study the list in *CMOS* 8.160 for additional rules. Also study the list in 8.161, the rules pertaining to capitalizing hyphenated terms in titles.

CMOS contains several sections pertaining to capitalization. Take the time to become familiar with all of chapter 8. The following sections you may refer to often while editing:

8.3–6—Personal names. Names don't always follow normal spelling or capitalization patterns, so consult a biographical dictionary (*Merriam-Webster's Biographical Dictionary*, for example) to make sure names are spelled correctly.

8.29—Academic designations. Student status is lowercased (freshman, etc.); academic degrees are typically lowercased (bachelor of arts), but their abbreviations are in caps with no periods (BA) (see next section).

8.85–86—Academic subjects. Do not capitalize academic subjects unless they are part of the department name or the course name (algebra, but Algebra II) or are normally capitalized (English).

8.44–50, 52–55—Geographic names. Any country, state, region, mountain, body of water included on a map is capitalized. Do not capitalize "the" unless it is part of the name.

8.56–59—Public places. Names of streets, parks, monuments, buildings, rooms are generally capitalized when used as a name but lowercased when used generically.

8.60–61—Words derived from proper names. Adjectives derived from proper nouns generally retain capitalization when used in proper meaning (Boston, Bostonian). But

when the words (nouns, adjectives, or verbs) are used in a common meaning, you'll lowercase (Russian army, russian dressing).

8.68–70—Businesses, companies, organizations. Capitalize the names of these entities. *A* and *the*, even if part of the name, are lowercased in running text. Business names that are all lowercase or all uppercase (adidas or LEGO, respectively) can be written with upper- and lowercase in text (I bought Sam a pair of Adidas, but I found a great Lego set for Andrew); however, keep names such as iPod and eBay as I've done here. If the word begins the sentence, rewrite to avoid the sentence beginning with a lowercase letter. For example, iPhone 11 is the newest Apple phone. Rewrite: The newest Apple phone is iPhone 11.)

8.79—Cultural movements. To capitalize or not seems to be a problem for many writers. If the term is derived from a proper noun, capitalize the term (Gnosticism). If you're not sure, check this section of *CMOS* or you can check *MW*, where you'll want to read the definitions. You might see "often capitalized." You'll have to determine how the term is being used to know if it should be capitalized or not.

8.92–111—Religious terms. Consult these sections of *CMOS* to guide you . . . however, *CMOS* may not be the authority you want to depend on. If you are writing or editing a work that would adhere to a particular religious group, find out if the organization has developed a style for their generally used terms. For example, the Catholic Church has a style guide for their works, as does the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A foundational source is *The Christian Writer's Manual of Style*. In addition, each publisher of religious works will adhere to a major style guide and then typically have their own house style.

A few other sections you will likely use often are 8.191–192 (websites and blogs) and 8.193–201 (works of music and art).

Acronyms, Initialisms, Academic Degrees, and Abbreviations
Generally, initialisms (abbreviations formed of initial letters) will be in all caps (FBI, AWOL, CD-ROM).

An acronym is a "word formed from the initial letters or groups of letters of words in a set phrase or series of words and pronounced as a separate word" (Dictionary.com: s.v. "acronym"). Most are all capped: UNICEF, SEAL, OPEC, but not always: scuba, radar, laser. Any articles before the acronym or initialism are in lowercase.

Initials of academic degrees are generally uppercased with no periods (*CMOS* 10.21):
MA
BS
MFA
but . . .
PhD
MDiv

With so many abbreviations, how can you know when you use all caps and when to use a combination of caps and lowercase? Look it up. Study chapter 10 in *CMOS*. Though the chapter doesn't specifically address capitalization, so many abbreviations require capitalization that it's worth your time to read it.

Small Caps

Small caps look like this: SMALL CAPS. All caps look like this: ALL CAPS. Generally, *CMOS* "recommends" full caps as opposed to small caps (see 9.34, 10.8, 10.38). While there's no "rule" designating all caps over small caps, common sense and preferences play a role in determining which to use.

If the manuscript will be a print book, it may make sense to use small caps for time designation: AM and PM, as well as signs, buttons, control panel items, and the like. Following are a few examples:

> I stopped at the door marked DANGER: HIGH VOLTAGE.
>
> Dave shifted the car into REVERSE and backed out of the garage.
>
> Once you've typed your paragraph, hit ENTER to begin a new paragraph.
>
> The waitress shuffled to our table. Popping her gum, she asked if we were ready to order. I glanced at her name badge: WANDA.

But . . . if the manuscript will be converted for e-publishing, small caps will not convert. So use all caps or put some terms within quotation marks or italics, whichever is appropriate.

Italics

On the next page is a list of several elements that should be italicized. I've included an example and directed you to the section(s) in *CMOS* where you can find more information. This is not an exhaustive list, but these are the most common instances of italics use. Chapters 8 and 14 in *CMOS* contain several other occurrences. (This is a prime example of material that is more easily read in a table, which we discuss in the courses Nonfiction Editing 101 and 201.)

ITALICIZE	EXAMPLE	CMOS
Airplane name	the *Spirit of St. Louis*	8.116
Book title	*Gone with the Wind*	8.2, 159
Emphasis	Never *ever* alter the author's voice.	7.49, 56; 13.62
Foreign words (first occurrence)	*Guten Tag* is a German greeting.	7.53
Gene names	*BRCA1, ZBTB7A*	8.132
Genus and species	*Ambystoma maculatum* (spotted salamander)	8.120–125
Letters as letters	Add *-s* or *-es* to form a plural. But: He got an A on his test.	7.64–65
Long poems	The author or authors of *Beowulf* are unknown.	8.181
Magazines	I have subscriptions to *Time* and *Prevention*.	8.168–171
Movies	*Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters* is an adventure sci-fi flick.	8.189
Newspapers	Have you ever read the *Chicago Tribune*?	8.168–171
Operas and long musicals	I have never seen or even heard *The Barber of Seville*. "Just You Wait" is from *My Fair Lady*.	8.194
Paintings	I like *Beach in Pourville* by Monet.	8.198
Photographs	*Moon and Half Dome* was one of Ansel Adams's favorite photographs.	8.198
Phrases as phrase	The phrase *fire in the hole* is a warning that a blast is about to occur.	7.63
Plays	*I Remember Mama* was made into a movie.	8.183
Ships	USS *Ronald Reagan* launched in 2001.	8.116
Statues	I'd like to see Michelangelo's *David.*	8.198
TV shows	I never thought I'd like *The Simpsons*, but it's a great show!	8.189

FIGURE 3.1: Examples of italic use

Summary

We covered a lot of material in this lesson. Congratulations on completing it!

You don't have to know how to spell every word in the dictionary to be a good editor, but you do need a good eye to detect when a word doesn't look right. Consult a dictionary and make sure the spelling is correct.

We covered various ways to improve your spelling skill. Find at least one way and start working on improving your spelling today.

Homophones can perplex even the best editors. Be able to spot misused homophones and correct them.

We discussed nonstandard, variant, and British spelling and how to determine which form to use in your manuscript.

Some singular words have more than one plural form, depending on the definition. And some words don't take the standard -*s* or -*es* to form the plural.

You studied several sections in *CMOS* about possessives, and you learned that if a pronoun or noun precedes a gerund, it generally should be in possessive form.

The lesson on capitalization began with an alert that certain fields differ in their treatment of capitalization. We followed that with several oddities concerning capitalization.

We ended our lesson with a quick overview of when to use italics.

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LESSON #3 ASSIGNMENTS

Access the Lesson 3 Assignment file.