Writer's Edge

Random Acts of ... Capitalization?

By Ingrid Sapona*

Today's topic comes from an e-mail a reader sent about one of his pet peeves: writers who capitalize nouns "as if they are proper nouns". The reader gave the following example of the type of capitalization he objects to:

> The Court's decision in the *Mxyzptlk* case was...

He then went on to say that he wonders whether the person who capitalized the c in court would also write: "The Dog is cute." He concluded by making the point that in both cases the writer is "simply capitalizing a noun because it is the subject of the sentence."

Over use of initial capital letters is also something that bugs me and it's something I too see a fair bit of in business writing. Of the two misuses the reader points out, the issue I see far more of is writers who abuse the rules related to capitalizing proper nouns. So, I thought it would be helpful to briefly review the rules and then look at how capitalization of words can create confusion.

Capitalizing Proper Nouns

Proper nouns are nouns that refer to specific people, places, or things. The basic rule is that proper nouns are supposed to be capitalized. Here are a few examples: Ingrid Sapona, Niagara Falls, the Swiss, the Supreme Court of Canada, and Parliament.

Some of the confusion writers seem to have could be attributable to the fact that "places" and "things" are fairly vague concepts. For example, if you write: "Jane lives in the west end of Toronto", you may wonder whether the w and e in "west end" should be capitalized. The answer depends on whether the west end is generally considered a distinct geographic region or a well-known neighborhood, such as London's West End.

Another culprit is careless application of the rule to words that can be proper nouns, but that aren't being used as proper nouns. For example, if you write: "I took Mom to the doctor", you'd capitalize the m because you're referring to a specific person. But, if you write, "I'm a mom", you're using "mom" generically so you don't capitalize it. Here's another example: "I mailed it in a manila envelope." Manila is a place, but here the word is used as an adjective, so it's not capitalized.

Ways Capitalization Can Create Confusion

Besides the risk of irritating some readers, there's another very good reason to be careful when capitalizing things: sloppy capitalization can cause reader confusion. Here's an example of where mere capitalization of one word can change how readers interpret the sentence: "It was made in Cheddar" versus "It was made in cheddar." Without more information or context, given the capital c, a reader could infer that the first sentence is about something manufactured in the town of Cheddar, England. The lower case c in the second sentence implies the item referred to was made out of cheddar cheese.

Though the Cheddar vs. cheddar example may seem contrived, when I saw the capital c in court in the example the reader provided, I first thought that the court that rendered the *Mxyzptlk* case must have been the Supreme Court of Canada. Given my legal training, I assumed the writer had applied the formal rule for citing court cases, which is that you capitalize Court only when you're talking about the highest court of the land, or if the word is part of a fuller title, such as the Court of Queen's Bench of New Brunswick.

Acceptable Capitalization

There is a situation when capitalizing a word (or phrase) that would normally not be capitalized is well accepted — I call it nicknaming. Here's a simple example:

The employee sued Wabash Central Inc. (the Company) for wrongful dismissal. The Company argued it...

In the first sentence I assigned Wabash Central Inc. a nickname (the Company) and I alerted readers to this fact in two ways: I put the nickname in parentheses and I capitalized the c. I specifically chose to capitalize the c because I wanted to differentiate it from the generic meaning of company. In effect, I made the nickname a proper noun. (Mind you, it would have been better to nickname the company "Wabash," as readers would probably recognize that as being a reference to Wabash Central Inc. even faster than references to "the Company," but I wanted to demonstrate that capitalizing a word you want to treat as a proper noun is perfectly acceptable and quite common.)

Indeed, looking back at the examples the reader sent, it could be that earlier in the text the author had assigned "Court" as a nickname for the court in issue, and "Dog" could have been the nickname for a particular dog, but such an interpretation would have been a stretch.

Think Before You Capitalize

The bottom line is that you should always think before you capitalize. It's okay to go beyond strict application of the rules, but be sure that readers don't misunderstand what you're trying to convey by capitalizing words.

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