Writing Tip #9

Capitalization

Introduction
The rules for capitalization may seem inconsistent, but for academic writing, the rules are standard. The confusion comes from other genres (like creative writing) where capitalization can be used for emphasis or to assign special characteristics to an otherwise non-capitalized entity, e.g. “The smaller creatures of the sea withdrew in awe of the Creature as he rose from the waves.” We don’t do this in academic writing.

The primary function of capitalization is to identify an entity as unique, so we make its name a proper noun.

DO Capitalize
1. Proper nouns: names of people, institutions, months, days of the weeks (but not seasons).

2. The official name of departments but not the informal name:
   Department of Sociology
   but
   the sociology department

3. Titles when used before a person’s name, but not after:
   Professor Anne Boleyn
   but
   Anne Boleyn, professor of drama

4. Academic degrees when they’re spelled out and the major when it’s part of the degree.
   Bachelor’s of Arts in Physics
   but
   She has a bachelor’s degree in physics.
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5. Geographic names and regions, but not points of the compass (direction):
   
   *the Amazon River*
   
   *I live in the Southwest*
   
   *but*
   
   *Georgia is in the southern U.S.*

6. Names of all ethnicities, nationalities and languages:
   
   *African-American, Hispanic*
   
   *Puerto Rican, Peruvian*
   
   *Mandarin, English, French*

7. Major words of book and article titles when used in the body of your paper—all nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and pronouns. Conjunctions, articles, and short prepositions are not considered major words; however, capitalize all words of four letters or more no matter what part of speech.
   
   *How Attitudes Toward Male Nurses Have Changed in the Last Century*¹

8. In titles and headings, if one part of a hyphenated compound adjective is capitalized, both parts should be, but do not capitalize the root of a word with a hyphenated prefix.
   
   *The Double-Barreled Problem of Re-entering College as a Non-traditional Student*

Do NOT Capitalize

1. Seasons, even when referring to a semester:
   
   *I’ll start next spring semester.*
   
   *Let’s get married in the fall.*

2. Names of majors, disciplines, fields of study, unless a specific course or degree is being referred to:
   
   *I’m studying chemistry.*
   
   *I’m taking Chemistry 251.*

3. Common names of plants or animals:
   
   *tiger lily, dandelion, coffee bean*

4. The words or abbreviations *a.m., p.m., baccalaureate, federal, state, government, department, bureau, etc. when they’re not part of an official name.*

¹ Depending on the publication style you’re using, the rules for capitalization in references may vary.
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For more help with capitalization rules specific to APA, see the APA Publication Manual, 6th Edition.

For more examples of the rules in this pamphlet, see

http://www.sc.edu/webpresence/editorial_guide/capitalization.html

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