

# The UPs and Downs of Citation Titles: What Librarians Should Know When Helping Students

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## Abstract

Whether you are an academic librarian, school librarian, or public librarian, if you work in Reference you probably get asked about how to cite a book or article in a particular style. One of the thorniest parts about helping someone with a citation is knowing how that style capitalizes words in the title. It is not obvious. The three primary citation styles (MLA, APA, and Chicago) have all published updated citation style manuals in the last couple of years and there have been some changes even in how titles are capitalized. This article describes the changes and breaks down the differences between each of the citation styles.

**Keywords:** citations; citation styles; MLA; APA; Chicago; Turabian; research papers

One of the most frustrating things for students writing research papers is formatting the citations for the particular style required. Librarians and teachers who assist the students can often feel the same frustration. Now that all three of the major citation style guides (Chicago, MLA, & APA) have recently published an updated version, some analysis is called for. These guides have very detailed rules about formatting papers and citations and even how to capitalize words in the titles of sources. Unfortunately each style has different rules. Most people have a general idea of what rules to follow when citing sources, but no specific details. If one is writing for publication or for an academic research paper, though, accurate capitalization is critical and should not be left to guesswork. Since one of our primary reference and instruction services is helping students with citations, this knowledge is especially important for librarians.

The purpose of this article is to create a brief resource that definitively compares and contrasts the new versions of the major citation styles with regard to their capitalization of both English and non-English titles, including

the latest changes. One might suppose that the principles of basic capitalization should be straightforward, but a deeper analysis will reveal the confusion that can arise.

## Definitions and styles

Before proceeding further, some basic definitions are necessary. Capitalization of titles falls into two standard formats: headline style (capitalizing the first and last words and all "major words" in between) and sentence style (capitalizing the first word and all proper nouns and proper adjectives, as when writing a sentence). These are used selectively by the different citation styles. MLA requires headline style (*MLA Handbook*, 2009, p. 86), APA requires sentence style (APA, 2010, p. 101), and Chicago (*Chicago Manual of Style*, 2010, p. 448) and Turabian (Turabian, 2007, pp. 167, 235) require both, depending on whether you use the Reference List (Author-Date) style or the Bibliography (Humanities) style. This disparity is only when creating the bibliography or reference list, though; within the body of the paper, all citation styles use headline-style capitalization for English language titles for the sake of clarity.

Figure 1 – Comparison of capitalization styles  
In general and regardless of citation style, a reference list (in which only the works actually cited are listed) uses headline style, while a bibliography (in which all consulted works are listed, whether or not they were actually cited) uses sentence style. Since MLA and Chicago's Author-Date system call for bibliographies, they both use headline style. APA and Chicago's Humanities style, on the other hand, require reference lists (or "works cited" pages) and therefore use sentence style for titles in the list.

## English titles

Since most of the content in the citation style manuals refers to the English language, English will be the first focus here. Sentence style in English is straightforward, reflecting

	MLA	APA	Chicago (Author-Date)	Chicago (Humanities)
<b>In the text</b>	Headline	Headline	Headline	Headline
<b>Ref. List/ Bibliography</b>	Headline	Sentence	Headline	Sentence

**Figure 1 - Comparisons of Capitalization Styles**

the way a sentence is normally written. It is the headline style that has conflicting definitions. One of the most confusing is that there are different interpretations of what constitutes a "major word." While most of the word types (parts of speech) are treated the same way by all of the citation styles, there are some points of difference that must be noted by anyone wanting to be truly accurate in their citation capitalization. Figure 2 lists some general rules on which all the styles agree:

Many grammar guides suggest using the acronym FANBOYS for remembering which are the coordinating conjunctions (For, And, Not, But, Or, Yet, So); all other conjunctions are subordinating. It is easy to see how confused a writer might become.

**Figure 2 - General rules for capitalizing in headline style**

The remaining parts of speech are prepositions and conjunctions, which are handled differently for each style:

Capitalize all nouns verbs pronouns adjectives and adverbs.
Lowercase all articles (the, a & an) and the words "to" and "as."

APA: "Conjunctions, articles, and short prepositions are not considered major words; however, <b>capitalize all words of four letters or more</b> [emphasis added]" (p. 101).
Turabian: Lowercase coordinating conjunctions. ( <i>and, but, or, not, for, so, yet</i> ) or "to" or "as." Lowercase all prepositions (regardless of length) unless they are emphasized or used as adverbs, adjectives, or conjunctions (p. 314).
Chicago: "Lowercase the conjunctions <i>and, but, for, or, and nor.</i> " "Lowercase prepositions, regardless of length, except when they are stressed or used adverbially or adjectivally... or when they compose part of a Latin expression used adjectivally or adverbially" (p. 448).
MLA: Lowercase all prepositions. Capitalize subordinating conjunctions (e.g., <i>after, although, as if, as soon as, because, before, if, that, unless, until, when, where, while</i> ) but not coordinating conjunctions ( <i>and, but, for, nor, or, so, yet</i> ) (p. 86-87).

**Figure 3 - Exceptions for capitalizing in headline style**

<b>Within the Text</b>
APA: How to Travel Through Time if You Try
Quality of Life After Stroke in England
Chicago: How to Travel through Time If You Try
Quality of Life After Stroke in England
MLA: How to Travel through Time If You Try
Quality of Life After Stroke in England
<b>In the Bibliography or Reference List</b>
APA: How to travel through time if you try
Quality of life after stroke in England
Chicago (Bibliography): How to Travel through Time If You Try
Quality of Life After Stroke in England
Chicago (Reference List): How to travel through time if you try
Quality of life after stroke in England
MLA: How to Travel through Time If You Try
Quality of Life After Stroke in England

**Figure 4 – Examples of capitalizing**

**English titles**

All styles do agree on how to capitalize the titles of some poems. When a poem title is the first line of the poem, all the style guides say to capitalize it exactly as it appears in the poem. When the title is not the first line of the poem, then standard rules for the relevant citation style should be followed.

One other point of contention is the hyphenated compound word. APA and MLA ask for both parts of the word to be capitalized. The recently published 16th edition of the Chicago Manual of Style also requires capitalizing the second part *unless* that part is an article, preposition, or coordinating conjunction or if the first element cannot stand on its own (e.g., E-mail, Bed-and-Breakfast).

The 15th edition of the Chicago Manual of Style attempted to clarify any question of major words and parts of speech in the following way: "If you are not sure what grammatical function a word is performing (or even if you are), try reading the title aloud: if you would stress the word, capitalize it; if not,

lowercase it" (p. 367). The 16th edition merely lists examples.

One would think that the different citation styles could agree on something as basic as what constitutes a major word, but this analysis has clearly demonstrated that there is confusing disagreement. Each style is similar to the others yet no two are alike (except for Chicago and Turabian, which are virtually identical styles).

**Non-English titles**

Whether mentioned in the body of the text or in the bibliography itself, the titles of foreign-language materials are often capitalized by different rules than English language materials. The details of working with non-English titles never seem to be adequately communicated to students or faculty, though. This author discovered the difference serendipitously while compiling a "Citation Guides" LibGuide (<http://libguides.butler.edu/citations>). An informal verbal poll by this author found that many librarians are unsure about what to do with non-English materials.

Music students and faculty tend to be more familiar with these rules because of their

frequent exposure to the foreign language titles of many music compositions, both through writing research papers and through creating recital programs. Outside of music, though, this knowledge seems to be less common.

The general rule for non-English titles in all the major citation styles is to capitalize them using sentence style, with all words capitalized as they would be in a normal sentence in that language. For most languages, that means like sentence style in English, capitalizing the first word and all proper nouns. There are a couple of exceptions. In German sentences, all nouns are capitalized whether or not they are "proper," but proper adjectives are not because German does not use them.

For many years there was a different format for capitalizing French titles as well. MLA is the only style that mentions this and refers to it as a secondary style. In this style, every word is capitalized up through the first noun, so any preceding articles or adjectives are also capitalized. Then after that first noun, everything is lowercase (except for proper nouns, of course). This style seems to be going out of favor, with French titles being capitalized now mostly in the standard sentence style as with other languages.<sup>1</sup>

After closely examining the citation style manuals, the following list shows where the details for non-English title capitalization are buried:

- APA, 5th ed. - pp. 246-47. Capitalize "as done in the original language." (sentence style)
- Chicago, 16th ed. - p. 532. "Capitalize only the words that would be capitalized in normal prose."

- MLA, 7th ed. - pp. 105-13. (in general, capitalize the first word and "all words normally capitalized")
- The 7th edition of the Turabian manual (p. 169) sums it up well: "Use sentence-style capitalization for non-English titles, following the capitalization principles for proper nouns and adjectives within the relevant language."

Some basic examples are provided in Figure 5.

### Conclusion

It is easy for students to capitalize titles automatically, using their preconceptions of what seems to be right, but this can clearly result in errors. Librarians and teachers must become familiar with the rules to better support the students. High school students could benefit from this knowledge as they look to continuing their education. As college students go from class to class, they are often asked by their professors to use different citation styles, thereby preventing the students from becoming familiar with one particular style and all its nuances. Since, for the foreseeable future, those in academia will continue to be forced to juggle multiple citation styles, familiarity with any one style manual will be difficult to achieve. Those who must switch between styles will need to rely on librarians and professionally created external summary resources like the aforementioned LibGuide for examples of form, style, and capitalization. Knowing the differences between headline style and sentence style, as well as the variations in how the citation styles define "major words," will go a long way toward ensuring proper capitalization and therefore a higher quality research paper.

Italian:	La vita è bella
	Le nozze di Figaro
German:	Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache
	Die Entführung aus dem Serail
French:	En la fête de Noël
	La nuit de mai
French (old style):	En La Fête de Noël
	La Nuit de mai

**Figure 5**

<sup>1</sup> This style is still used for titles of French books (not journals) by some French periodicals such as The French Review.

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Turabian, K. (2007). *A manual for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations: Chicago Style for students and researchers*, 7th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

## **About the Author**

Scott Pfitzinger specializes in adapting and integrating new technologies for the enhancement of library services. He is a 1994 SLIS alumnus from Indiana University - Bloomington, and currently serves as the Information Commons & Technology Librarian at Butler University, where he recently earned a second master's degree, this time in Music Composition.

