What is Wrong with my Title?

Errors in capitalization of titles and headlines signal that a product was not professionally edited. Which capitalization errors can you spot and correct in these titles?

- What is Wrong with my Title?
- What A Difference a Tooth can Make
- A Good Man to Work for
- Where do you Look for Answers to your Personal Problems?
- To the Moon and Back
- Which Memories are Important
- The Man who Was Nearly Blind
- Following up After the Interview
- Down and out in Paris

Note these traditions for capitalizing titles and headings:

**Capitalize:**
1. First and last word
2. All nouns, pronouns, verbs (including “to be”), and adjectives

**Lowercase:**
3. The articles (a, an, the), unless this conflicts with another rule (e.g., rule 1)
4. Coordinating conjunctions (and, but, for, or, nor, so)
5. The word ‘to’ before a verb (e.g., “to run”), unless this conflicts with another rule (e.g., rule 1)

**Less fixed traditions:**
Some style guides lowercase all prepositions (including “through”), and capitalize most adverbs, but for personal history work I suspect the following traditions are easier on the eye:
6. Capitalize all prepositions, adverbs, and conjunctions of four letters or more, and lowercase those with three letters and fewer. (Common exceptions to the four-letter rule: no, nor, not, off, out, so, up, by.)

In some style guides, the cut-off is words of five letters or more, so that “with” and “over” would be lowercased. Decide which you prefer and stick with it within a document.

**The grand exceptions:**
7. Capitalize ANY word, no matter what part of speech, if it is stressed, is a principal word (“Shut Up, Honey”), or is parallel in structure with a word that must be capitalized (“Up and Down,” “Neither…Nor,” “Either…Or,” etc.).

**The answers:**
Note the common error of lowercasing all words of three letters or fewer, no matter what part of speech.
- What Is Wrong With My Title? (rules 2, 6, and 2, pronouns and the four-letter rule)
- What a Difference a Tooth Can Make (rule 2, cap all verbs, including helping verbs)
- A Good Man to Work For (rule 1, cap first and last word)
- Where Do You Look for Answers to Your Personal Problems? (rule 2 cap all verbs and pronouns)
- To the Moon and Back is okay. “Back” would be capitalized both as last word and because it’s stressed.
- Which Memories Are Important (rule 2, cap all verbs, including forms of the verb “to be”)
- The Man Who Was Nearly Blind (rule 2, all pronouns)
- Following Up After the Interview (rule 7, stressed)
- Down and Out in Paris (rule 7, both stressed and parallel).

Other editorial decisions include whether to cap the second word of a hyphenated compound (do so if it’s equal in weight, as in Spanish-Speaking Countries) and whether to capitalize the first word after the colon or em dash before a subtitle (I generally do).

This explanation is oversimplified because space is tight, but you need rules to edit by. Read the major style guides [here](http://www.writersandeditors.com/work1.htm#bookmark1), create your own, and always be consistent within one document.

Pat McNees was a book editor (Harper & Row and Fawcett) before becoming an independent journalist, writer, and editor. You’ll find more links to helpful explanations of grammar here: [here](http://www.writersandeditors.com/work1.htm).