

# Grammar Corner by Pat McNees

## 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.).

Copyright 2008 Association of Personal Historians  
APH Newsletter Fall 2008

### The answers:

Note the common error of lowering 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 (<http://www.writersandeditors.com/work1.htm#bookmark1>), create your own, and always be consistent within one document.

---

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