

Camel case study

A customer approached me with something slightly out-of-the ordinary last week. She wanted to know whether it was possible to always write the name of her company in lower case – even at the start of a sentence.

I set out in search of precedents, turning up a number of examples where the company name always appears in lowercase, including a Swiss coffee capsule manufacturer by the name of cremesso (other Swiss coffee capsule manufacturers are available). Then there is the mixture of cases found in names such as e-Bay and i-Pad. You certainly won't find Apple beginning a paragraph with I-Pad. Tellingly, many German-language sites prefer to play it safe and capitalise the first letter, even though their UK and US equivalents are much more at home with the lowercase "i".

It was at this point that I bumped into the term that made my week: camel case. Also known as "medial case", this wonderfully evocative phrase simply means that letters inside the word are capitalised, while the first letter does not have to be. e-Bay and i-Pad are two of the most commonly known examples.

But to go back to the initial question, what does the "rulebook" actually say about opening a sentence with a small letter – and do any of the style guides mention this emerging trend? The indispensable Chicago Style Guide confirms that while most editors prefer to avoid doing so, there are a number of valid precedents.

Next, I turned to a copywriting guru in the UK and asked him what he thought about it. Although his advice was to try to recast the sentence so that the company name did not appear as the first word, he felt that if lowercasing helped shift more product then it could only be a good thing!

As language evolves, companies are constantly looking for new ways to express themselves – and it seems that tearing up the rulebook on capitalisation is an increasingly popular place to start.

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