

A tip of the cap to Caps Lock

Written by 'Grammar Guy' By Curtis Honeycutt Guest Columnist
Friday, 30 June 2023 06:02



Why are you yelling? Have you seen someone post a social media update in all caps? It's not a good look. In fact, posting in all caps makes it seem like we're getting yelled at by a bike of hornets (yes, one term to describe a group of hornets is a "bike"). Calm down!

In honor of International Caps Lock Day, a semiannual holiday observed on June 28 and Oct. 22, here's a deep dive into big and little letters.

The origin of the term "Caps Lock" has its roots in typewriters. When typing a capital letter on a mechanical keyboard, a typist would press and hold the "Shift" key in order to physically shift the typebar up in order to type a capital letter. In order to remain shifted up to capital letters, typewriter technology developed the "Shift Lock" key, which would essentially lock the keyboard in the capital position. As computers were introduced, Shift Lock became "Caps Lock," allowing users to type in big letters with gusto.

What about "uppercase" and "lowercase?" Many of you know this one, but I'll recap (no pun intended) the origin story of these words we still use to refer to capital and smaller letters.

In the days of the printing press, typesetters would manually set the letters to print on a page. Smaller letters were kept in a low, easy-to-access case, while larger letters were stored in a case above the typesetter's desk. The large letters, therefore, became known as "uppercase" letters, while the smaller letters became "lowercase."

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Here's one you probably didn't know: lowercase letters developed in the Middle Ages, evolving from written cursive letters. As this "Roman" alphabet evolved into distinct capital and smaller letters, the two types got their own names — majuscule and minuscule.

Roman majuscule letters had been around since Rome was built in a day. You've seen Latin inscriptions on old Roman buildings in all caps, many without spaces between the words. The newly created Middle Ages smaller letters were called "minuscule" letters. This word survives today, although it usually refers to something on a small scale.

If you type an entire page in bold letters, nothing stands out. If everything is important, nothing is important. Typing in all caps is similar.

In 2010, Google's Cr-48 laptop launched without a Caps Lock key on its keyboard. There has been a movement to scrap the cap since the mid-2000s. Is Caps Lock overused and tired? Is it time to lose it, or does this topic only hold minuscule importance? Either way, please don't send me a heavily opinionated email in all caps.

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