

Capitalization and Acronyms in Physics

Celia M. Elliott
Department of Physics
University of Illinois
cmelliot@illinois.edu

Copyright © 2014 The Board of Trustees of the University of Illinois

Today we'll look at conventions for capitalization and the use of acronyms in technical writing.

The basic rules of capitalization—proper nouns are capitalized and common nouns are not—generally apply in science writing, except for some special cases. (There are ***always*** “special cases” in English and physics.) Today, we'll look at them.

Adjectives taken from proper names are capitalized, nouns are not



Proper name used as an adjective:

Fermi energy or Fermi-Dirac statistics

en dash

New class of things named after a proper name (nouns):

fermions, fermi (unit)

Capitalize only the name in compound nouns

Bohr radius, Avogadro's number,
Debye temperature, Newtonian mechanics

Noun exceptions:

Hamiltonian, Lagrangian

2

If a proper noun is used as an adjective, it's ***always*** capitalized.

For *Hamiltonian* and *Lagrangian*, the “function” is implied but unstated, so the “adjective” rule still applies. These are the only two examples that I’ve been able to think of where a word derived from a proper noun is still capitalized when it’s used as a noun, but there are probably others. (Pesky mathematicians!)

Note that only the proper noun (name) is capitalized in a compound noun; the common noun is written lower case (e.g., Compton scattering)

If you’re not sure whether a word should be capitalized or written lower case, consult a scientific dictionary (I recommend *The Oxford Dictionary for Scientific Writers and Editors*) or the AIP Style Guide, Appendix B. You can buy a good used copy of the Oxford for about \$10.

An en dash (think of it as a super-hyphen) is used to join two proper nouns to make a combined adjective. We’ll talk more about dashes later in the semester.

Units of measure are capitalized only when they are abbreviated



Examples: watt (W), joule (J), tesla (T), volt (V)

“Powers” follow the same rule

megawatt (MW), terahertz (THz)

mega-electron-volt (MeV)

Note: “kilo” (1000) is *never* capitalized:

kV, keV, kg, kA, kHz, k Ω , \$100k

And: abbreviations for units are always singular

45 mm, 10 GeV, 3.6×10^7 n s cm

3

Even though we think “45 millimeters” when we see “45 mm,” the unit is written as a singular.

And remember, the unit is always abbreviated when it is associated with an exact number (measured or calculated); it is written out as a word only when it refers to an approximate number. Thus: “7 kg” and “a few kilograms”

**Names of elements are never capitalized
when written as words, only when they
are abbreviated**



**argon (Ar)
curium (Cm)**

**silicon (Si)
californium (Cf)**

And while we're on the subject of elements...

⁶⁰C

mass number

¹⁴N₂

number of atoms in molecule

Ca²⁺

state of ionization

¹¹⁰Ag^m, ¹⁴N^{*}

excited state

4

In general, common nouns are not capitalized when they're written out as words, but the abbreviations are ALWAYS capitalized—whether they're units, elements, or acronyms.

Elements, even those derived from proper names (curium, francium), are always written lower case when they are written out as words. Only the abbreviations are capitalized, and just the first letter of the abbreviation is capitalized.

The notation shown for chemical elements is the convention adopted by the International Union of Pure and Applied Physics in the 1970s. While you'll see "He-3" written in older papers (and by older authors), use ³He now.

**Particle names are always written
lower case**

quarks, muons, neutrinos

**...even when they are derived from proper
names**

fermions, bosons


**...except when the proper name is used
as an adjective**

Higgs boson



5

Although not used much by physicists, the names of minerals are never capitalized either, e.g., dolomite, diamond, even when derived from a proper name (fosterite, smithsonite).



Theories are not capitalized

- Einstein's theory of general relativity
- special relativity
- quantum chromodynamics
- second law of thermodynamics
- Newton's second law

Phenomena are not capitalized

- sonoluminescence
- condensation
- Bose–Einstein condensation

Experimental apparatus and techniques are not capitalized

- scanning tunneling microscope
- secondary ion mass spectrometry
- Auger electron spectroscopy

↙ except when it's somebody's name

6

In these examples, “Einstein’s,” “Newton’s,” “Bose–Einstein,” and “Auger” *are* capitalized because they are proper nouns (names) used as adjectives.

Protected brand names are capitalized



Plexiglas
tempered glass
epoxy
Stycast
simulation software
Mathematica

The trademark (™) or registered trademark (®) symbol is not necessary; the capitalization alone indicates that the name is a protected trade name

7

If used, the trademark and registered trademark symbol appear immediately after the trade name (no spaces) and are superscripted.



Names of academic degrees are written lower case, except when abbreviated

bachelor's degree (BS or BA)

doctorate (PhD or SciD)

Names of academic disciplines are never capitalized (unless it's a proper noun)

**physics, chemical engineering, Japanese,
molecular biology, Scandinavian studies**

Names of courses are never capitalized (unless it's the title of a specific course [has a number])

a physics class, Physics 496

8

In keeping with current usage, periods are no longer recommended for the abbreviations for academic degrees (more about abbreviations soon).

In general, if a number is associated with the name of something, the resulting compound noun is considered a "title" and is capitalized. (This rule is analogous to the one we learned last week about figure captions—"in the figure" but "in Figure 4.")

Single words or phrases following a colon are not capitalized



“Values were obtained for two parameters: the quantum cyclotron radius and the Debye shielding radius.”

Full sentences may be capitalized

“The experimental results led to one conclusion: The fast electron mode represents an unloading of excess excitons formed during excitation.”

but they look kind of stupid—*cme*

9

I personally think colons are overused in scientific writing; many times they just provide an excuse for an unwieldy, run-on sentence or title. Colon surgery is highly recommended for such cases.



Lower case symbols and abbreviations are not capitalized in titles, headings, or the beginnings of sentences

This title is okay—

New Mixed-Alkali Effect in the ac Conductivity of Ion-Conducting Glasses

This sentence is not—

ac conductivity measurements of ion-conducting glasses revealed a new mixed-alkali effect.

Recast it as—

Measurements of ac conductivity in ion-conducting glasses revealed a new mixed-alkali effect.

10

Ms. P would quibble about this title on general principles, regardless of what is done with the abbreviation. Presumably the “effect” is not “new”—it’s probably been there since the elements formed, but nobody ever looked before now. A more accurate title would be “Mixed-Alkali Effect Observed in ...”

Some common physics abbreviations are supposed to be written in lower case:

ac (alternating current)

bcc (body-centered-cubic)

cw (continuous-wave)

dc (direct current)

fcc (face-centered-cubic)

ir (infrared)

mp (melting point)

rf (radio-frequency)

rms (root-mean-square)

Consult the *AIP Style Guide* for a complete list of standard abbreviations.

We’ll talk more about abbreviations and acronyms later today.



Different journals have different rules for capitalizing words in a title

PRL: “Observation of Resonance Condensation of Fermionic Atom Pairs”

Phys. Rev. B: “Spin-orbit coupling and intrinsic spin mixing in quantum dots”

11

There’s no consistency, even among journals published by the same publisher!
Just look ’em up.

... and please Avoid ranDom CapiTaLiZation:
“Comments on Likelihood fits with Variable resolution”

Moving right along, now we'll look at acronyms...



12

Double-check your titles for random capitalization. Either capitalize only the first word of the title (and proper nouns), or capitalize every word except prepositions (e.g., *in*, *with*, *from*, *by*), conjunctions (e.g., *and*, *or*, *but*), and articles (*a*, *an*, *the*).

Strive for witless consistency.



Which is which?

Abbreviation—shortened form of word

average = av const = constant
usually written lower case and without
a terminal period (.) in physics

Acronym—pronounced as a word

NASA, MOSFET, LIGO

Initialism—pronounced letter-by-letter

STM, QCD, CMB

**“In this class, we use a lot of three-letter acronyms,
or TLAs.”—*attributed to Dale Van Harlingen***

13

While purists make distinctions among abbreviations, acronyms, and initialisms, we'll just call them all acronyms for the purposes of this class.

Acronyms and initialisms (A&Is) must be defined at their first use



Spell out the words first, followed by the acronym in parentheses ()

Cosmic Background Imager (CBI)

density functional theory (DFT)

$\text{Na}_x\text{Ca}_{2-x}\text{CuO}_2\text{Cl}_2$ (NCCOC)

The AIP lists common physics acronyms that need not be defined

BCS, emf, NMR, dc, ir, DNA

Tip: When in doubt, write it out!

14

You can make an acronym out of almost anything that functions as a noun or an adjective in a sentence. Generally, a compound noun or adjective-noun phrase must include at least three words to qualify for acronymization. However, you'll find some common two-word acronyms (e.g., ac, dc, rf) and some acronyms made out of single, very long words (e.g., magnetohydrodynamics [MHD]).

Some acronyms have become so widely used and recognized that they don't have to be defined at first use, but most do. Consult the *AIP Style Guide*, Appendix D, for a list of standard abbreviations in physics.

When it doubt, write it out.

A sentence may NOT begin with an acronym, even if it has been previously defined



To image the surface of thin films of a superconducting crystal, the group uses a low-temperature scanning tunneling microscope (STM) that they built at Illinois. ~~STM~~ topographic images are correlated with X-ray crystallographic data.

Three ways to fix this sentence



Orig: “STM topographic images are correlated with X-ray crystallographic data.”

- 1. Write out “scanning tunneling microscope” again—wordy and redundant**
- 2. Add an article—“The STM topographic images...”**
- 3. Rearrange the sentence—“Topographic images obtained by STM are correlated with X-ray crystallographic data.”**

16

I personally prefer #3, because it emphasizes “topographic images”; the device used is of secondary importance.—*cme*

X-ray or x-ray?? Both are used in US English; just pick one and be consistent.

British usage is X-ray.

Capitalize most A&Is



**Some common A&Is are not capitalized
(q.v. AIP for a complete list)**

rpm	ir
ac	dc
rf	uv

**The spelled-out words are not capitalized,
unless the word is a proper name**

magnetohydrodynamics (MHD)
atomic force microscope (AFM)
National Academy of Sciences (NAS)
Bose–Einstein condensate (BEC)


17

Most, but not all, acronyms are capitalized. Consult the *AIP Style Guide* for the list; you'll find some surprises.

The spelled-out words that the acronym is made from are written in caps or lower case, depending on normal capitalization rules. So if the word is a proper noun, it's capitalized; if the word is a common noun or other part of speech (usually an adjective or adverb), it's written lower case.

The use of periods (.) in abbreviations is evolving



 **US usage is to put periods after one-word abbreviations (Dr., Ms.) but not after multi-word abbreviations (APS, NASA, LIGO)**

 **British usage is just the opposite**
Dr, Ms, I.U.P.A.P., N.I.H.

As always, there are exceptions:

Fig., Figs., Eq., Eqs. H.c., i.d.

18

The *Chicago Manual of Style* and the *The CBE Manual for Authors, Editors, and Publishers*, 6th ed., now recommend no periods anywhere.

The *AIP Style Guide*, Appendix D, lists the exceptions to the “no periods” rule.

If you’re not sure, look it up.

If you’re sure, look it up anyway. You will learn humility.



Making acronyms plural? Just add an s

Do not use an apostrophe to make an acronym plural

AFMs, CD-ROMs, PMTs

While I'm on the subject, don't use an apostrophe to make numbers >9 plural, either

expressed in 100s, Boeing 767s

Do use apostrophes for plurals of single numbers or letters

1's and 0's, *p*'s and *q*'s

19

Now would be a great time to review the "Writing Numbers" rules.

**Select an article (*a* or *an*) by the *sound*
of the acronym it precedes**



Begins with a vowel *sound* → *an*
an STM

Begins with a consonant *sound* → *a*
a SQUID
a USDA-approved pesticide

What about Si (???)
a Si substrate
an SiO₂ substrate

20

How will your reader say the acronym to him- or herself when reading it?