

# Lesson 12: Letters and E-Mails – Part 2

---

When writing a business letter or e-mail, it's important to have correct punctuation and capitalization because this helps your writing look professional. In this lesson, we're going to review the rules for capitalization and punctuation marks in English.

You may already know some of these rules, but it's good to review them - and you might learn something new, because the rules may be different from those in your native language.

## Capitalization

### Always capitalize...

#### The word "I"

#### The first word of a sentence:

- ~~the budget for next year has been approved.~~
- The budget for next year has been approved.

#### Names of cities, states, and countries, as well as their adjectives:

- ~~Our company's headquarters are located in paris, france.~~  
Our company's headquarters are located in Paris, France.
- ~~We are currently investing in japanese technology.~~  
We are currently investing in Japanese technology.

#### Names of languages:

- ~~The contract was translated from chinese into italian and russian.~~  
The contract was translated from Chinese into Italian and Russian.

#### Days of the week and months:

- ~~I have a meeting next thursday.~~  
I have a meeting next Thursday.
- ~~Let's plan a trip for november.~~  
Let's plan a trip for November.

### **Names of companies, brands, and organizations:**

- ~~We received a shipment from dow chemical.~~  
We received a shipment from Dow Chemical.
- ~~I own two toyota trucks.~~  
I own two Toyota trucks.
- ~~The world trade organization has created a new policy to help developing countries.~~  
The World Trade Organization has created a new policy to help developing countries.

### **Names of official events:**

- ~~Seven representatives from our company attended the international conference on information and electronics engineering.~~  
Seven representatives from our company attended the International Conference on Information and Electronics Engineering.

You'll notice that it's not necessary to capitalize the "small" connecting words like "on" or "and" - only the major words.

### **Titles of books, magazines, and newspapers:**

- ~~Dale Carnegie is the author of the best-selling book how to win friends and influence people.~~  
Dale Carnegie is the author of the best-selling book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*.

- ~~My letter was published in the wall street journal.~~  
My letter was published in *The Wall Street Journal*.

## Don't capitalize...

### Seasons:

- ~~We plan to launch a new product this Summer.~~  
We plan to launch a new product this summer.

### Directions:

- ~~This is the largest agricultural center in the North of Brazil.~~  
This is the largest agricultural center in the north of Brazil.
- ~~Our factory is located 50 km West of Berlin.~~  
Our factory is located 50 km west of Berlin.

### **Exception:**

*If the word north, south, east, or west is part of the official name of a country/state/city, such as South Africa or North Carolina*

## Punctuation

### Periods, Question Marks, and Exclamation Points

You can end a sentence with:

- A period (.) for normal sentences
- A question mark (?) for questions
- An exclamation point (!) to express excitement or emphasis  
*Exclamation points are rarely used in Business English. You'll generally find them in e-mails, in phrases such as "Have a good weekend!" - but they shouldn't be used too frequently.*

### Commas

Many students have difficulty knowing when and where to use commas (,) in English sentences. The general rule is to use a comma where you would naturally make a small pause when speaking.

However, this is not always easy for English learners to know - so here are some more specific guidelines. Use a comma...

**To separate items in a list:**

- Our company manufactures refrigerators, stoves, washing machines, and other appliances.

**To separate two parts of a sentence connected by BUT / AND / SO:**

- I worked all night, but I didn't finish the project.
- All new employees must complete the training program, and current employees must take a 2-hour review course.
- The equipment failed, so we had to shut down the entire factory.

**After an introductory phrase:**

- By the beginning of next year, we hope to expand our operations into three new countries.
- Although she works rather slowly, the quality of her work is excellent.

**Before and after "extra" information (relative clauses):**

- Our facilities, which are already the most advanced in the region, will be equipped with new machinery next year.
- I'll put you in touch with Keith Brown, who I met at a conference in Amsterdam.

**After an "if" phrase (if it begins the sentence):**

- If you would like to schedule an appointment, please contact my assistant.

- If we had been more organized, this project would have been much easier.

It's not necessary to use a comma when the "if" phrase does not begin the sentence:

- Please contact my assistant if you would like to schedule an appointment.
- This project would have been much easier if we had been more organized.

## Semicolons (;) and Colons (:)

Use a **semicolon (;)** to separate two independent clauses. What is an "independent clause"? It means a phrase that could be a complete sentence by itself. Here's an example to help:

- Our office is closed tomorrow. We will reopen on Friday.  
= Our office is closed tomorrow; we will reopen on Friday.

Don't use a semicolon if one of the parts of the sentence could not be a complete sentence by itself. In this case, use a comma instead.

- **Incorrect:** After completing your job application; please send it to human resources.
- **Correct:** After completing your job application, please send it to human resources.

"After completing your job application" could not be a complete sentence by itself - so in this case we use a comma, not a semicolon.

Use a **colon (:)** to introduce a list or example(s) after a complete sentence:

- There are three possible solutions to our financial problems: cutting back on spending, borrowing money, or increasing our profits.

Do not use a colon if the part of the sentence before the list is not a complete sentence:

- **Incorrect**  
We need to: increase production and reduce waste.
- **Correct**  
We need to increase production and reduce waste.  
We need to do two things: increase production and reduce waste.

## Hyphens (-) and Dashes (--)

**Hyphens (-)** are used in the middle of certain words, for example:

- ex-wife
- all-inclusive
- self-service
- well-known
- part-time job
- twenty-one
- thirty-eight

**Dashes (—)** are used to add an extra thought or extra information to a sentence, either in the middle or at the end:

- Our company offers a pleasant working environment and excellent benefits—as well as numerous career advancement opportunities.
- The New York City Cultural Tour—a popular option for all ages—includes a visit to Chinatown and lunch at a world-famous Italian restaurant.

In many cases, you can use commas instead of dashes.

## Apostrophes (')

Use an apostrophe in **contractions (short forms)**:

- can not = **can't**
- do not = **don't**
- I am = **I'm**
- would not = **wouldn't**
- he is = **he's**
- they will = **they'll**

Although we avoid using contractions in formal business letters, they can be used in less formal business e-mails.

- Use an apostrophe + s in **possessives**:
  - Janet's car
  - Nick's office

This is true even if the word or name ends in "s":

- My boss's phone number
- Chris's wife

### **Exception:**

If the word is **plural and ends in "s,"** then add only the apostrophe but do not add another "s":

- **Singular:** One **country's** laws  
**Plural:** Five **countries'** laws
- **Singular:** The **manager's** approval  
**Plural:** The **managers'** approval (approval of multiple managers)