

Agonising Over North or north? When to Capitalise Compass Points

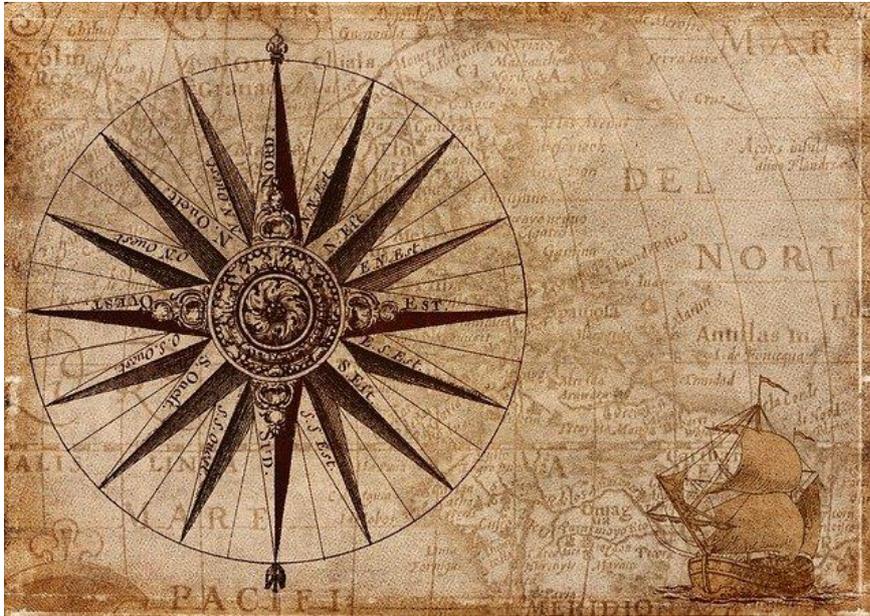


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When it comes to navigating the points of the compass in your writing, you can be forgiven for some uncertainty as to which case to use for initial letters. Upper or lower? Are there any guidelines for this issue?

There's good news and bad! The good news is yes, there are some basic principles, which I will outline below. However, the bad news is that there are some variations, shall we say, and your best option then is to consult a dictionary if you are a writer, or the publisher's style guide if you are an editor.

The simple principles are as follows:

When using compass points as directional aids or referring in a general way to a geographical region, use lower case.

With a proper name, such as a political region (country, county or area), use upper case.

Directional aids

When using the compass as a simple navigational aid, use lower case:

Bear due north for six miles up the unmarked footpath.

Lower case is also used for geographical areas which can be distinct from their official designations:

The population of Cheshire East is around the 370,000 mark these days.

I used to love walking in the east Cheshire countryside when I was younger.

Here, Cheshire East is the unitary authority and therefore comes under the 'official' name category. The actual countryside, on the other hand, is geographical and, in this case, a vaguer designation.

Here's another slightly tricky one:

I live in the north-west of England.

I live in the North West.

I live in North West England.

Why the differences in the above?

The reasoning behind the only lower-case version above is that 'the north-west of' refers to a general geographical region, not its official name. The North West is an official region of England, hence its initial capitals. So is North West England. However, consistency is important in examples like this, so whether you are a writer or an editor, work out what the underlying logic seems to be, then stick to it! When editing, you may (or may not!) find that there is a consistent style to the case usage.

And you're going to ask me about hyphenation in the first example above, aren't you? Let me save that one till last. There's another little issue to deal with first – a suffix.

The suffix '-ern'

The use of the suffix '-ern' makes the compass point into an adjective and is more likely to be used in a geographical context:

Areas of Russia include regions of eastern Europe and northern Asia.

Again, note the more general way of indicating those locations.

Beware, however! The '-ern' suffix can also be found as part of an official name as you will see in the next section.

Proper names

Proper names (in this context) refer to political names of countries, regions, counties, unitary authorities and cultural designations (the West). Therefore, these take upper case, as you would expect with other types of proper name.

North Carolina

South Devon

East Anglia

West Berlin

And here are some examples of those 'official' uses of '-ern':

Northern Ireland

Southern Rhodesia

Southern Alps

Eastern Cape

Eastern Standard Time

Western Australia

These take upper case because they are officially designated names. You can find such names in the main dictionaries, with the correct use of initial capitals. Be careful, however, when googling, as you will often find incorrect usage and inconsistency on the Internet.

A brief note on compass hyphenation

Most of the examples above were based on the four main compass points, otherwise known as the cardinal points. There are four other directions, which you'll remember from your geography lessons as ordinal points:

BRITISH

north-east/north east

north-west/north west

south-east/south east

south-west/south west

AMERICAN

northeast

northwest

southeast

southwest

As you can see from this list, they tend to be hyphenated or two words if you are writing in the UK, but closed up in the US. However, if the majority of examples you find either side of the water favours one or the other system, don't be too quick to apply the above principles; there could a house style at work which favours the other version!

And finally . . .

When you throw the suffix '-ly' into the equation, there is no need to use upper case in either UK or US usage:

Blow the wind southerly

But if that was the title of the song and not just the first line of the lyrics, it would be:

Blow the Wind Southerly

That's to keep in with the localised rule of capitalising significant words in titles.

I did warn you there could be some variations . . .

Ivor McGregor August 2021