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Hi everyone. This is Kurtis with another effective writing podcast. In this episode, I will discuss the somewhat confusing capitalization rules of titles on the references page of an APA formatted research essay.

The references page, as you probably know, contains the complete bibliographic information required for the sources used in a paper—and thus lots of formatting requirements. Typically, an entry will include the author, year of publication, title and other specific information such as place of publication, publisher, and URL depending on the type of source.

Regardless of whether the source is a book or web page, titles need to be formatted following APA’s capitalization rules.

One issue to recognize is that some sources have one title (a book, for example, usually has only one title); and some sources will have two titles—an article in a newspaper, for example, will have the title of the article and the title of the newspaper. Depending on whether the title is a first level title or a second level title will dictate how the words in the title are capitalized.

Let’s start by talking about first level titles (the title of a book or the title of journal article).

The APA rule says to capitalize only the first letter of the first word in the first level titles except for proper nouns, proper adjectives, and the first letter of words that follow a mark of punctuation in the title (usually a colon).

The second level titles rule requires one to capitalize the first letter of the first, last, and all important words, something we might call standard capitalization or title case.

Let’s look briefly at a couple of examples.

In this reference page citation, you can see that the source has only one title—a first level title—Writing in the online environment. The rule for first level titles says to capitalize only the first letter of the first word except for proper nouns, proper adjectives, and the first letter of words that follow a mark of punctuation in the title. This title has no proper nouns or proper adjectives, any punctuation within the title, so the only letter that needs to be capitalized is the first letter of the first word—the W in Writing.

In this second example, note the two titles: Understanding the Vikings: Journey into the past is the first level title; it’s the title that appeared in the journal Journal of Norwegian History, which is the second level title.

Note in the first level title how the U is capitalized because it is the first letter of the first word; and note how the V in Vikings is capitalized because Vikings is a proper noun—it names a specific group of people. The J in Journey is capitalized because the word follows a colon. All other letters are lower
case.

The second level title requires capitalization of the first letter of the first, last, and all important words, so in this case the J in Journal, the N in Norwegian, and the H in History should all be capitalized. The o in of stays lowercase.

You may be wondering how do you determine if a word is “important”—and this is an excellent question. Unless told otherwise, follow the rules for title case: Capitalize the first letter of the first and last words; capitalize the first letter of all verbs; capitalize the first letter of all other words except a, an, the, coordinating conjunctions, and prepositions of fewer than four letters.

The capitalization rules for titles on an APA references page can be a bit confusing, but with an understanding of or access to a simple set of rules, you should be able to master the formatting. Of course, this podcast did not speak to which titles are italicized and which ones are not, but this is a topic for another podcast.

Thanks everyone. Happy writing!