



*What's a Snippet?* Glad you asked! A Snippet is short article about meetings or parliamentary procedure. New snippets are released on the first day of every month at [www.agreatmeeting.com](http://www.agreatmeeting.com).



## Snippet #145 A Capital Offense

To capitalize or not to capitalize? Unfortunately, many people are choosing the former. But Rampant use of Capital Letters makes Sentences more Difficult to Read – kind of like Reading Across a Mountain Range. How did this start?

One possible origin might be with the common legal practice of capitalizing the parties to a contract: referring, for example, to an Association, Applicant, Plaintiff, Respondent. This usage is customized to a particular situation and, in these documents, the alternate capitalized word is first defined and thereafter substituted for the name – in other words, it's being used in that document as a proper noun.

Bylaws frequently contain examples of capitalization excess. It's as if giving something a capital letter makes it more important or more special. It's a hard habit to break. Names of membership categories, offices, committees, and certain events suddenly take on unintended importance, like Honorary Member, Treasurer, Finance Committee, and Annual Meeting. Following are some prominent examples of such capital offenses.

Titles and positions are not capitalized unless used with the name of a person. The word "president" is not a proper noun. When used with a name, the title is capitalized, but not when used in the generic – if not attached to the name of a person, it's kept in lower case. For example:

The president of our board is President Jessica MacRae.

Committees and boards are not capitalized unless used as part of a name Subordinate groups, such as committees, boards, and the house of delegates are generic unless used with the name of the association. Microsoft Word likes to correct the spelling of "house of delegates" by capitalizing it, but in that case the reference is to the legislative body of a particular state. (Interestingly enough, government bodies are considered proper nouns, so Senate refers to a state or the US Senate even without the name attached.)

*But didn't we learn that if we're referring to a specific person, place or thing it is capitalized?* Remember, the president at the time is only a specific person when we attach the person's name; the office itself is generic. The board of directors is generic until we attach the specific name, as in the ABC Board of Directors. The bylaws committee is also generic. Otherwise, this capitalization habit will have us using Living Room because we are referring to a specific room, or going to the Grocery Store because there's only one in town. If Tom has a boat and names it "Tom's Boat" it becomes a name and is capitalized, but otherwise it's just Tom's boat.

Ask this question: is it a name or is it a description? Although the name of a committee may be the finance committee, that's no different than the name of a room: the living room. Both are common nouns, not proper names. Capitalization is not synonymous with importance.