

When to Capitalize Directional Words

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February 12, 2015

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Troublesome Words...

You know how most people have trouble spelling certain words? The word that always gets me is *vacuum*. I can never remember if there is one C or two Cs. (It's one—but I just double-checked in my dictionary to make sure!) This can happen with many issues in English: spelling, punctuation, capitalization, etc. Some rules are so troublesome to remember that not only do English language learners frequently mix them up, native speakers do too!

One such case that I find particularly tricky for myself and my students is directional words. There are so many rules about when to capitalize or lowercase these words that I find myself looking them up again and again in my style guide. I hope that, by blogging about them today, the rules will stick with me as well as with you and your students! Note that the rules may vary in different regions of the world, and even in different fields within the same region.

Note: This post is based on the popular North American style guide *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 16th edition.

To the West or to the west? Western or western?

According to *The Chicago Manual of Style*, sections 8.45–46, you don't normally capitalize directional words when referring to direction or location. You should write *He lives to the **west** of the church*, for example, and *She lives in the **western** part of Canada*.

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- a northern climate
- an easterly wind
- toward the south
- to the east
- in the southwestern part
- an eastward direction

These words usually do get capitalized when they describe a region of the world or of a country, but there are some exceptions.

- the East, the North, the South, the West (of a country)
- northern, southern, eastern, western (parts of a country)
- the East/Eastern (referring to the Orient), the West/Western (referring to the Occident or the Western Hemisphere)
- the East Coast, the West Coast
- Northern, Southern (in American Civil War contexts)
- Northern California, the Middle East, the Pacific Northwest, Southeast Asia

Tips for Students

There are some patterns to make the capitalization of directional words easier for your learners to remember.

1. Directions (compass points) are not capitalized.

- Should I go north or south?
- I traveled in a northeasterly direction.
- to the east

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- southwest-facing

2. The article *the* usually indicates that capitalization is required, except if the preposition *to* is used (in most cases).

- He lives in the East.
- He lives to the east.

3. Country/region names are almost always capitalized if they are followed by another noun.

- North America
- West Africa
- the South of France
- Eastern Europe

4. In American Civil War contexts, always use capital letters.

- the North, Northern, a Northerner
- the South, Southern, a Southerner

5. For terms denoting the area or culture of Asia (the Orient) and Europe (the Occident) or the Western Hemisphere, use capital letters.

- in the West, Western society
- in the East, Eastern culture

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