



Setting Capitals

by Ilene Strizver

HEADLINES AND OTHER DISPLAY TYPE USAGES ARE MEANT TO BE NOTICED. One type treatment frequently employed to achieve this is the use of all capitals (usually referred to as *all caps*). You see this technique every day on book covers, in editorial spreads, and in newspapers. But before choosing this approach, it is important to weigh the relative benefits and drawbacks of all cap settings.

All cap settings should only be used when a strong emphasis is desired on the copy. When used sparingly, they command attention, communicating a sense of importance, and sometimes even urgency. All cap headings can provide contrast with neighboring typographic elements, such as subheads and body text. In some instances, using all capitals can produce a pleasing geometric block that might be desirable.

Considerations

But before you commit to an all cap setting, be aware of the following factors that can undermine the effectiveness of your message:

- The primary downside of all cap settings is reduced legibility due to the lack of ascenders and descenders. These up-and-down characters help distinguish one letter from the next,

CHANGING LANES

ALWAYS WANTED TO OPEN A BAKERY,
RUN A BED & BREAKFAST, OR BECOME
A NURSE? THEN TAKE A LEAP OF FAITH,
AND REACH FOR YOUR DREAMS!

CHANGING LANES

Always wanted to open a bakery,
run a bed & breakfast, or become
a nurse? Then take a leap of faith,
and reach for your dreams!

An all cap treatment works for the two word headline, but the lengthy subhead below it suffers from diminished legibility in all caps. Compare with the one below set in mixed case.

WANTED:
Dead or Alive
—
Wanted:
Dead or Alive

All caps (used sparingly) can command attention and convey a sense of urgency, as shown in the upper setting. The headline below, set in mixed case, doesn't have the same impact.

contributing to the creation of word shapes, which is thought to be how we actually read.

- Long words set in all caps are more problematic than shorter words, in terms of readability.
- All cap settings take longer to read. This can potentially affect reading comprehension, especially for children, seniors, and any demo-

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graphic with special learning needs, such as those caused by visual impairment or reading disabilities.

- All cap settings take up more space, which may be a concern when column width (or overall space) is limited. You can use a larger point size with mixed case settings than with all caps, which might need to go down in size to fit.

If you choose to set display copy in all caps, use them sparingly, as the more of them you use, the more readability may be compromised. They are best saved for headlines and short settings such as logos and wordmarks, titles and product branding. Limit all cap settings to a few lines at most and certainly not for an entire block of text. ■

**AMBIDEXTEROUS ANDROIDS
IMPROVE AUTOMOBILE PRODUCTION**

**ROBOTS USE BOTH HANDS EQUALLY
TO BUILD CARS FASTER AND CHEAPER**

Long words set in all caps are harder to read than shorter ones.

**Typhoon Rips Through Cemetery;
Hundreds Found Dead**

**TYPHOON RIPS THROUGH CEMETERY;
HUNDREDS FOUND DEAD**

All cap settings take up more space, and might need to be set smaller than mixed case in a fixed width scenario. The mixed case example on the top is set in 37 point, while the all cap version has to be set smaller, at 32 points, to fit in the same width.