

Capital Letters at the Start: Why Sentences Begin That Way

In Reception, children start to notice that sentences begin with a 'tall' capital letter and end with a full stop. This guide explains why that matters, what it looks like in your child's writing, and a simple, playful way you can help them spot it themselves - no pressure, just a quick visual check.

What it is

A capital letter is the 'big' version of a letter - like A instead of a. English writing uses one at the very start of every sentence, as a signal to the reader that a new sentence is beginning. For young children who are just learning their letter shapes through phonics (the way children learn to match sounds to letters and blend them to read and spell), telling capital and lower-case letters apart can take a while. A helpful picture some teachers and parents use is a 'tall letter standing at the gate' - the capital letter stands up straight right at the start of the sentence, like a guard at a gate, before the rest of the (usually shorter) letters follow. This is simply a friendly way to help children remember where a sentence begins, rather than a special rule your child needs to memorise with technical terms.

What happens

Through Reception, children are building up to writing short phrases and sentences as part of their early literacy learning. Capital letters and full stops are part of this journey, and schools introduce them gradually - some children will start noticing and using a capital letter at the start of a sentence during Reception, while for others this skill develops more fully once they reach Year 1, when it becomes a clearer expectation in the National Curriculum for English. Exactly when and how this is taught can vary between schools and even between children in the same class, since every child develops at their own pace. If you're ever unsure where your child is up to with this, their teacher is the best person to ask, as they'll know what's expected for your child's class and stage.

What it means for your child

If your child isn't yet starting sentences with a capital letter, there's no need to worry - this is a normal part of early writing and takes practice over time. What matters most at this stage is that your child enjoys putting marks, letters and words on paper, and feels confident having a go, even if the letters aren't perfectly formed or capitals aren't in the right place yet. Spotting the difference between capital and lower-case letter shapes (for example, a tall, often differently-shaped capital like 'S' next to its smaller lower-case 's') is a skill that builds alongside phonics and letter formation. Children learning English as an additional language, or children with SEND (special educational needs and disabilities), may simply need a little more time and repetition, and that's absolutely fine too.

How you can help at home

Keep it light and playful - a few minutes here and there is plenty. When your child writes something, such as a card, a shopping list or a label for a drawing, you could point to the first letter and ask, 'Is that one tall, standing at the gate?' Try spotting capital letters together in books, cereal boxes or signs when you're out and about, turning it into a little game rather than a correction. You could also encourage your child to check their own writing before showing it to you, by looking at the very first



letter of their sentence themselves - this builds independence and confidence, rather than them waiting for an adult to point out mistakes. Always praise the effort and ideas in their writing first, and treat capital letters as one small, fun detail among many.

Questions parents often ask

Should my Reception child already be using capital letters correctly? Not necessarily - this is a skill that develops over time, often continuing into Year 1, and it's fine if your child is still learning. What if they use capital letters in the wrong places, like in the middle of a word? This is very common while children are experimenting with letter shapes, and it usually settles down with practice and gentle modelling. Should I correct every mistake? It's best to keep writing time positive and low-pressure; a quick, friendly check using a phrase like 'tall letter at the gate' is enough, without turning it into a test. If you're ever concerned about your child's progress, the simplest step is to have a friendly chat with their teacher, who can tell you what's typical for their class.

Sources

- Department for Education, GOV.UK - Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (EYFS)
- Department for Education, GOV.UK - National curriculum in England: English programmes of study (key stages 1 and 2)