

When to Capitalize: A Small Group Lesson Focused on Proper Nouns

Max Brand

Why?

Learning to capitalize proper nouns is a skill that many states list for mastery by the end of second grade. Yet I find some of my fifth-grade students still struggle with capitalization. In social studies they run up against confounding words like *battle*, *war*, and *king*. When and why are these words sometimes capitalized and other times not? To support and guide all my students' understanding, I have designated a section of their word study notebooks for proper nouns they may use in their writing.

When?

Before I pull together a small group with a focus on capitalizing proper nouns, all students will have experienced using their word study notebooks to record proper nouns, and we will have had a number of whole-class discussions about capitalization as part of the word study curriculum. All these materials and experiences are fodder for use in a small group focused on when to capitalize proper nouns.

Group Membership

Students who might be selected for the group include those I notice routinely forget to capitalize proper nouns. Students who ask to join the group may have identified capitalization strategies as a need based on the editing and spelling self-assessments we've done earlier in the year. I also look for students who aren't using that particular section of their word study notebooks much – the group might help them test out the value of looking more closely at proper nouns.

Format for the Group

I ask students to bring their word study notebooks and social studies textbooks to the group. We sit on the rug, and I have a piece of blank chart paper on the stand labeled "Proper Nouns." I begin the first meeting by explaining the purpose, "I've been noticing some of you forget to capitalize some important words in your writing. These important words are called proper nouns. A proper noun is a name, a name of a place, or title that is given to something important."

At this point I write on my chart paper a proper noun, *Battle of Lexington and Concord*. I first demonstrate what skill we will practice together, understanding when to capitalize different nouns. “I’ve capitalized ‘Battle’ because it’s part of the title of an important event. Open your word study notebooks to a blank page in the ‘Proper Nouns We Might Use in Our Writing’ section.”

I then ask students to turn to a specific page in their social studies textbook, and read one paragraph from the page silently, writing down any proper nouns they encounter in their word study notebooks.” I give them about five minutes to complete the task, and then we spend another five minutes writing down their discoveries on the chart paper. I like to have a copy of the textbook handy in the small group for myself, so that if there is confusion, I can reread and talk through the difficulties.

Duration

We repeat this activity with very brief sections of the social studies text each day for about a week, until students in the group have begun to see some of the patterns for nouns that may or may not be capitalized in the textbook (i.e., king/King, congress/The Congress, war/War of 1812). Textbooks are a rich source for nouns with varied capitalization. This short, focused group also instills the habit for these students of looking for and noting proper nouns in their word study notebooks independently.

Added Benefits

Shared reading, observation, and analysis of information-rich paragraphs in a challenging textbook helps students who struggle with the difficulty of the text hone in on other text features (capitalization, headings, bulleted points) that may aid in comprehension.