

Not To Put  
Too Fine  
a Point  
on It.

**Excerpt**

Glenn Fleishman

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# CAPITAL CRIMES

## *WHY AM I YELLING?*

**I HAVE IMPORTANT, BREAKING NEWS FROM 1856** about a truly upper-case notion.

If you were reading this article on a screen, you would certainly know that **THESE ARE CALLED SHOUTY CAPS**. The use of all upper-case letters in email, on web pages, in forums, and beyond has meant that someone is angry, confused, or elderly—or a combination of all

three. Even if they didn't MEAN TO SHOUT, you certainly HEAR IT AS SHOUTING INSIDE YOUR HEAD. Unintentional caps denote cluelessness; if intentional, jerkiness.

The National Weather Service (NWS) paid homage to this recently, [noting on April 11, 2015](#): "LISTEN UP! BEGINNING ON MAY 11, NOAA'S NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE FORECASTS WILL STOP YELLING AT YOU." The use of only uppercase letters by the NWS dates back to 1928, with the installation of teleprinters that could be remotely controlled to type out news reports. The NWS finally retired the last vestiges of these elder systems, allowing it to switch to mixed case.

Previous articles on this subject—such as [a previously definitive short](#) at the *New Republic*—trace the explicit association of capitals with yelling (as opposed to mere emphasis) to 1984, with inferences a few decades previous.

I'm here to BLOW THIS OUT OF THE WATER, with a series of citations that date back to 1856. People have been uppercase shouting intentionally for a century more than recollected. And, as with so many things, longtime Internet users want to claim credit, when they really just passed on and popularized an existing practice.

I suspected a longer history because I'm a recovering typesetter, a one-time member of a now nearly defunct profession of compositing type in lines and on a page, whether in metal, wood, or bits. I was trained in the 1980s, among the very last in a line stretching back to not long after Gutenberg. I studied graphic design and its history in college and have read extensively on the subject since.

In all my typographic reading, I'd never come across an explicit connection between all capitals and *yelling*, but I knew two things: First, capitals and lowercase developed not in lockstep but from different methods of inscribing or writing; second, uppercase letters have been used for millennia for emphasis and importance.

# DER POX!



LUCY BELLWOOD

Sue Walker, the director of collections and archives in typography at the University of Reading, England, found an apposite description in *The Compleat English Schoolmaster* (1674) by Elisha Coles, who wrote that a whole word in capitals “is alwa[y]es more than ordinarily remarkable; as some signal name, Title, Inscription, or the like...”

But surely, I thought, there must be some more direct correlation out there—not just an insinuation or a practice, but writers (or fictional characters) explaining it to a reader.

AND, YES, THERE IS. But let’s start with the reveal before diving into the full history and a novel theory I have about shouty caps’ disappearance and re-emergence.

## Small pox in small caps

The first clear citation I can find is in the *Evening Star*, a Washington, DC, newspaper. It appears on **February 28, 1856**, and was syndicated to other papers around the same time. In a “hilarious” dialect story about a “Dutchman” (a corruption of Deutsch man, or a German) who seems to be disease-ridden, this wonderful sentence appears:

“ You git out o’ this ! clear yourself quick-er. I aint going to have you diseasing honest folke, if you have got the small pox !”

“ I dells you I’ve got der small pox. Ton’t you versteh ? der SMALL POX !” This time he shouted it out in capital letters

“ Clear out ! I’ll call the men folks, if you don’t clear !” and at once she shouted, in a tip-top voice, “ Ike ! you Ike ! where air you ?” Ike made his appearance on the full run.

*[“I dells you I’ve got der small pox. Ton’t you vetsteh? der SMALL POX!” This time he shouted it out in capital letters.*

The words “small pox” appear in capitals—well, *small* capitals, a variant I’ll explain in a moment—but there’s our smoking gun. The way the sentence is phrased makes it clear that the convention of capitals meaning shouting has already become part of readers’ consciousness. (By the way, the Dutchman of the story was trying to deliver a “small box.” It’s retold in various settings in later decades.)

I found a small but significant cascade of newspaper and book references following that. The *Ottawa Free Trader* in 1860 notes that a story in another newspaper announced an election “in grand glaring capitals and head letter shouts of victory.”

In 1870, the *Shamrock* (Ireland) published part 3 of a fictional account labeled “The Sore Grievance of Wellspanked John.” At one point, the narrator is thrown into a great basket of duck eggs, and after that his aunt is told she must pay for them:



## TWELVE SHILLINGS?

*“TWELVE shillings and SEVEN pence?” roared my aunt in the biggest capital letters — “Twelve and seven pence! Good gracious me!”*

There’s also a clear connection in elocution manuals. For instance, an 1880 book, *The Standard Speaker and Elocutionist*, explains the convention to readers. “As examples, note the following selections marked in CAPITAL letters as the appropriate place for shouting emphasis.” It then proceeds to mark up part of Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s “The Charge of the Light Brigade.”

There are more, too, such as “The enthusiasm of the shout in capital letters” (1885), “warning signals which flash up in front of his eyes and shout in capital letters, SLOW DOWN!” (1913), and the like. I am sure there are more and earlier examples in which people *used* the convention without the archness of *mentioning* it.

Paul Luna, an expert in the design of complex text and a professor at the University of Reading, points out that these examples of mine and others he found separately demonstrate a “moralistic sense”: “The association with pomposity, bureaucracy, and self-importance crops up

the great man which the puny young villain had thrown me. Yes, the voice of the bloated Plugwort recalled me, and “Well-spunked was him-self again.”

And this was my awakening.

“TWELVE shillings and SEVEN pence?” roared my aunt in the biggest capital letters—“Twelve and seven pence! Good gracious me!”

“I’m a lettin’ you hoff dog cheep,” returned the egg merchant, who was a jovial Englishman, and therefore a miracle of good nature to the mere Irish—“dog cheep, old un, that I his.”

“Pleeceman, will you please explain how this thing—this—

too often.” He notes, “No one seems to think that the use of capitals (whether in writing/print or by analogy in speech) is unequivocally a good thing!”

Starting in about the 1920s and through the 1980s, I can’t find anything of the sort available from the 1850s to 1910s. This is partly due to copyright eccentricities: Everything published in America before 1923 is in the public domain and more readily digitized and searched; starting in 1923, it’s a complicated mix. I consulted Google Books, Newspapers.com, Amazon (which has full-text search of some modern books), and other sources and found almost nothing.

Before we leap forward, let’s take a pause as we step back in history.

## Letters came to a fork in the road

To the modern eye, uppercase and lowercase letters (written in industry shorthand as u&l) have a strong relationship and appear natural together. But that’s a result of a bifurcated evolution that later fused together, imperfectly. Capitals (also known as “majuscules”) arose from stonecutting. “Capital letters were a symbol of the power of the Roman Empire, which left its traces over most of Europe,” James Mosley writes via email when I ask him for the long, long view on this

## FORWARD THE LIGHT BRIGADE!



topic. Mosley is a renowned librarian and historian whose work across several decades centers on the history of printing and letter design.

Lowercase, called minuscule, developed from written versions of capitals. While the main body of most small letters is the same height, portions may rise above and drop below a baseline, an outgrowth of how they are written by hand, especially in smoothly flowing script. (I promised above to explain small capitals. As a typographic refinement, they are used when a run of capitals is needed in the middle of mixed-case text, as in a book or magazine article, and to aid legibility. Drawn separately from true uppercase, they fit into the height of the lowercase letters, called the *x-height*.)

Eventually, uppercase and lowercase merged into a single alphabet. Mosley notes, “The ‘binary’ writing system (caps and lowercase) is a bit of a nuisance, but since we have it we may as well make the best of it.” He says that in more modern times, telegrams were written tersely (to save money) and appeared only in all caps—and brought bad news. “[This] has tended to color our reaction to information that is given in capital letters, and so did public notices in the name of authority and backed up with a threat of punishment, which were always in caps (NO PARKING or NO SMOKING).”

It's rare to see a stretch of full capitalization in handwriting, except in block printing, as it would be somewhat illegible, as well as tedious and slower to write. Movable type made runs of uppercase feasible, and often preferable, as it required more work to pick among letters of mixed case. (Uppercase and lowercase in fact refer to a typical arrangement for handset type, in which cases contained type in cubbyholes. The lower case had small letters, among other symbols; the upper case, the capitals.)

Paul Shaw, a design historian, points out that newspapers tended to use all-capital headlines through the 1910s, when typographer Ben Sherbow, at the *New York Tribune*, pushed for the use of mixed case, among other layout changes, for better legibility.

It's just possible that the decreased use of what the newspaper world called "screamers," a good synonym for shouting, led to less association between uppercase letters and yelling. I can't make a solid case for that, except for the quiet period until the 1980s.

But a new way to type seemed to bring on the noise.

## A capital idea returns

At the outset, I noted that for those accustomed to seeing caps on a screen, you already know the convention. But where did you learn it? Who first told you, or how did you understand, that uppercase implied loudness?

I asked Dave Decot this question. He studied computer science from 1979 to 1984 at Case Western Reserve University (CWRU) and worked for many years in information technology. He recalls, "I would have to say I first saw that other people were using all caps for emphasis and to shout at each other while at CWRU." Decot says that in high school,

When a writer desires to give more prominence or emphasis to certain words or sentences, he should designate the same by underscoring or drawing lines beneath the words that are to be emphasized. One line indicates *italics*, two lines SMALL CAPITALS, three lines LARGE CAPITALS, four lines *ITALIC CAPITALS*. Thus, the following sentence, underscored,

"I never would lay down my arms, never! never!! never!!!"

appears in print thus:

"I never would lay down my arms, *never!* **NEVER!!** **NEVER.!!!**"

*An elocution manual offers proper markup details for typesetting.*

a few years before, they had shifted from teletypes to uppercase-only CRT terminals and then, his last two years, to more advanced HP2645A terminals that had mixed upper- and lowercase.

Now why am I seemingly quoting Decot at random? He also has the quiet distinction of being the first person on the modern Internet to explain in detail the convention of all-capital yelling (and a couple of other conventions). The *New Republic* story from 2014 noted above cited his March 1984 post:

*Well, there seem to be some conventions developing in the use of various emphasizees. There are three kinds of emphasis in use, in order of popularity:*

- 1) using CAPITAL LETTERS to make words look "louder",*
- 2) using asterisks to put sparklers around emphasized words, and*
- 3) s p a c i n g words o u t, possibly accompanied by 1) or 2).*

<h1 style="font-size: 4em; margin: 0;">The Sun.</h1> 				
<p>♦♦NEW YORK, THURSDAY, APRIL 1, 1909.—Copyright, 1909, by the Sun Printing and Publishing Association.</p>				
<p><b>FIRE AT FORT LEAVENWORTH.</b>  <b>WATER PRESSURE WEAK.</b>  <b>PRISONERS ESCAPED.</b></p>	<p><b>FATHER M'MAHON BANKRUPT.</b>  <b>AFTER MIXUP WITH KEIRIN.</b></p>	<p><b>MILITARY PRISON BURNS.</b>  <b>ALL BUILDINGS AT FORT LEAVENWORTH IN</b>  <b>WANGER—PRISONERS IN A PALE.</b></p>	<p><b>WOMEN GET SUBWAY CARS.</b>  <b>PLAN TRIED IN HUDSON TUNNELS.</b>  <b>INTERBOROUGH GIVEN IN.</b></p>	<p><b>MISS</b>  <b>SAID A</b>  <b>FRONT</b>  <b>OF VEG</b>  <b>CAME U</b>  <b>Mrs.</b>  <b>the No</b>  <b>with</b>  <b>Y</b>  <b>ARRIVED</b>  <b>ATIONS</b>  <b>All the</b>  <b>deposi</b>  <b>TRAVI</b>  <b>This T</b>  <b>th</b>  <b>Some</b>  <b>FRENCH</b>  <b>HOUSE</b>  <b>aftern</b></p>
<p><b>LANEYS.</b>  <b>Which May</b>  <b>fire.</b>  <b>Three months</b>  <b>building at</b>  <b>Forty-ninth</b>  <b>th Shanley</b>  <b>The plan</b>  <b>the ground</b>  <b>by There</b>  <b>ful possibly</b>  <b>its on the</b>  <b>that as the</b>  <b>his was not</b>  <b>tion would</b>  <b>ling Ho</b>  <b>t the foun</b>  <b>steel con</b>  <b>strength in</b>  <b>ers Par</b>  <b>fecta, are</b>  <b>igh it has</b>  <b>at they are</b></p>	<p><b>PASTOR OF ST. BRIDGET'S, IN CLEVELAND.</b>  <b>First Went Into Scheme to Borrow</b>  <b>Money for Church at 2 Per Cent.</b>  <b>Through Head of Fidelity Funding Co.</b>  <b>CLEVELAND, March 31.</b>—The Rev. William McMahon, pastor of St. Bridget's Church and editor of the Catholic Enterprise, late this afternoon filed a petition in voluntary bankruptcy. The liabilities are put at \$1,504,141.81 and the assets at \$75,207.64.  <b>The bankruptcy was brought about by</b>  <b>Father McMahon indorsing notes for P. J.</b>  <b>Keirin of the defunct Fidelity Funding</b>  <b>Company of New York to a total of close</b></p>	<p><b>ALL BUILDINGS AT FORT LEAVENWORTH IN</b>  <b>WANGER—PRISONERS IN A PALE.</b>  <b>FORT LEAVENWORTH, Kan., March 31.</b>—The military prison here caught fire shortly before 11 o'clock to-night and by midnight there was great danger of the entire group of buildings being destroyed.  <b>The water pressure was weak and at</b>  <b>midnight arrangements were under way</b>  <b>to check the fire by blowing up several</b>  <b>buildings with dynamite. All the build</b>  <b>ings inside the walls were old and those</b>  <b>that caught fire burned rapidly.</b>  <b>The fire started in some rubbish left</b>  <b>in the paint and carpenter shop. This</b>  <b>was a three story building and it made</b>  <b>a great blaze. The second building</b>  <b>destroyed was the power house.</b>  <b>Up to midnight none of the cell house</b>  <b>where the 20 prisoners were housed</b>  <b>had caught fire. When the fire started</b>  <b>intense confusion set in around the prison.</b>  <b>The prisoners yelled to be taken from</b></p>	<p><b>REAR CARS OF TRAINS TO AND FROM HOBOKEN</b>  <b>WERE BARRED TO MEN IN RUSH HOURS</b>  <b>—Some Women Prefer to Ride Where</b>  <b>Men Are—McAdoo Pleased With Plan.</b>  <b>Every train from Hoboken between 7</b>  <b>o'clock and 9 o'clock in the Hudson tunnels</b>  <b>yesterday morning and every train from</b>  <b>Twenty-third street between 4:30 o'clock</b>  <b>and 7 o'clock in the evening carried a</b>  <b>rear car exclusively for women and chil</b>  <b>dren. Nearly 2,000 women coming over</b>  <b>to Manhattan in the morning and nearly</b>  <b>2,500 going back in the afternoon availed</b>  <b>themselves of the privilege. President</b>  <b>McAdoo was much pleased with the way</b></p>	

Headlines in The Sun, 1909, were all yelling.

I contacted Decot, and he was surprised and pleased to discover his historic role. “I was then in the slog of completing my computer science thesis (an ASCII-based music description language, compiler, and graphical sheet music formatter, if you must know),” and to his recollection, he picked up these definitions during his time at CWRU, not in high school.

The most significant preceding mention comes indirectly in 1982, when Steven McGeady posted “A Plea” in the net.general group:

*At the risk of sounding like I am flaming, let me state a simple fact: MODERN MAILERS WILL NOT HANDLE PATHNAMES AND SITENAMES WHICH CONTAIN CASE DISTINCTIONS. MANY SITES CANNOT REPLY TO SITES WHO HAVE UPPER-CASE NAMES.*

<p>FOR QUALITY READ The New York Age 11th HOME PAPER</p>	<h1>The New York Age</h1>		<p>WHEN YOU SEE IT IN The Age YOU CAN DEPEND UPON IT That's the difference</p>
<p>WEEKLY 33. NO. 37.</p>	<p>THE NATIONAL NEGRO WEEKLY</p>	<p>NEW YORK, N. Y., SATURDAY, JUNE 5, 1920</p>	<p>EST. 1857—BUILT KNOWN PRICE FIVE CENTS</p>
<h2>Many Graduates From Colleges and Schools of Country; Dining Car Employees Meet in N. Y.--Form Organization</h2>			
<h3>Atlanta Gives Welcome To Meeting of N. A. A. C. P.</h3> <p>First of Eleven Annual Sessions To Be Held in a Southern City Is One of Most Successful.</p>	<h3>Dining Car Men Organize A National Brotherhood</h3> <p>Body Formed at Session Held in New York City May 25 to 28--J. Frank Nickens is First President.</p>	<h3>MOTON CO. ACQUIRES 139th STREET HOUSES</h3>	<h3>39th Commencement At Tuskegee Institute</h3>
<h3>The Mayor Gives Greeting</h3> <p>Both Races Unite With Cordial Cooperation To Attain Object of the Advancement Society.</p>	<p>A group of the meeting held in New York, May 25 to 28 of railroad dining car employees from all sections of the country, that has been organized the Brotherhood of Dining Car Employees, a national organization comprising the railroad men serving the nation's dining car service. The representative group were the guests of the New York Dining Car Cooks' and Waiters' Association, of which George W. Smith is president, and which has its headquarters in the office of the New York Urban League at 2303 Seventh Avenue.</p> <p>The annual convention was held in the hotel at New York, where the delegates were held in session and breakfasted in the dining car. The convention was held in the dining car of the New York Dining Car Cooks' and Waiters' Association, of which George W. Smith is president, and which has its headquarters in the office of the New York Urban League at 2303 Seventh Avenue.</p>	<p>The houses on May 1, 1920, were sold to the Moton Co. by the City of New York. The houses are situated on the corner of 139th Street and Broadway, and are one of the finest groups of houses in the city. The houses are situated on the corner of 139th Street and Broadway, and are one of the finest groups of houses in the city.</p>	<h3>Bishop Hurst, of Baltimore, President King, of Oberlin, Speakers</h3>
<p>(By Telegram to The New York Age)</p> <p>ATLANTA, Ga.—The spirit of southern hospitality was apparent in the reception given the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which held its eleventh annual convention at Hotel A. M. E. Church, corner Auburn Avenue and E. 10th Street, here, May 20 to Wednesday, June 2. Because of the plans of Woodard Stacey, president, the opening session on</p>	<p>Monday, June 2, will be the closing session, and the closing session will be held in the dining car of the New York Dining Car Cooks' and Waiters' Association, of which George W. Smith is president, and which has its headquarters in the office of the New York Urban League at 2303 Seventh Avenue.</p>	<p>Monday, June 2, will be the closing session, and the closing session will be held in the dining car of the New York Dining Car Cooks' and Waiters' Association, of which George W. Smith is president, and which has its headquarters in the office of the New York Urban League at 2303 Seventh Avenue.</p>	<h3>Other Schools Close</h3> <p>A. &amp; T. College, Morgan College, St. Paul N. &amp; I. School, and Many Others, End Year's Work.</p>

By 1920, this front page has a more typical mixed case.

(McGeady was at Tektronix at the time and is well known for a later stint at Intel, when he was a key witness against Microsoft in its antitrust lawsuit.)

After Decot's post, I found a few interesting citations. Another from March 1984, in response to a post by well-known programmer and tech writer Randall Schwartz defending his copyright, complains, "Schwartz is really looking to be argumentative and shouting, terminal-style, a lot." (This is also a good early case of tone policing.)

In July 1984, in [alt.flame](#):

*am i getting carried away here, or will maybe all of this ranting and jumping up and down (if it's in caps i'm trying to YELL!) will knock some sense into some people.*

And in November 1984, someone asks, “Do all the CAPITALS suggest that you are trying to shout?” in net.abortion.

## Keep it down

There’s no drama in discovering more historical evidence for the use of shouting capitals, but it’s always rewarding to find a through line from modern culture that goes back not just dozens, or even hundreds, but possibly thousands of years. Our use of technology for communication is much more similar to that of preceding generations than it seems at first glance. But I rest comforted knowing that people were just as irritated by SHOUTY CAPS 160 years ago as we are today.

**THE ARTICLES IN THIS EDITION** were adapted, updated, and extended in most cases from previous appearances.

“Look Askew” appeared in a patron-supported newsletter the author produced in 2016, and he is grateful for those backers’ support.

“Noto Bene” should have shown up in print in October 2016, but a surprising election bumped its news slot. It appears here for the first time.

“A Font of Type” made its debut in shorter form as a folio printed by letterpress for the crowdfunding campaign.

“A Crank Turns a Letterpress” was written for this edition.

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