

# The Most Frequent Capitalization Errors Made by the EFL Learners at Undergraduate Level: An Investigation

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## Abstract

Capitalization is one of the most essential conventions of writing in English. A proper use of capitalization not only signals the beginning of a sentence or highlights certain types of words in a sentence but also ensures the clarity of meaning and the effectiveness of writing. Unfortunately, many EFL learners fail to use it correctly in their writing that prevent them from developing their writing skills and eventually negatively affect their overall language learning process. The goal of the present study was to find out the most frequent capitalization errors made by the EFL learners at the undergraduate level. By using a survey sheet, the study conducted a survey among 230 undergraduate students at Bangladesh Agricultural University and found that the use of capital/small letters with certain words associated with the Internet like Net, Web, Internet, etc.; with the names of general academic subjects; with the family relationship words; with the exceptional proper nouns such as black & white (names of human race), sun & moon (names of planet); with the first word of an incomplete sentence after a colon; with the titles of people; etc. are some of the particular areas where the participants made most frequent errors. The study basically attempted to make the learners aware of their common capitalization errors, so that, they can minimize the errors in their writing, and can make their writing more accurate, meaningful, and comprehensible.

**Keywords:** Capitalization Errors; Capitalization Rules; Capital/Small Letters; EFL Learners; Undergraduate Students; Writing Skills.

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## INTRODUCTION

Capitalization refers to the use of a capital/uppercase letter at the beginning of a word while rest of the letters in the word remains small/lowercase. It is an indispensable part of written English. It serves many different purposes in writing. Among them, the most common purpose of capitalization is to signal the beginning of a sentence. In written English, every sentence starts with a capital letter regardless of the grammatical category of the first word or the length or type of the sentence. Capitalization also serves the purpose of highlighting certain types of words in a sentence like proper nouns, proper adjectives, etc. The other important purpose of capitalization is to separate specific words from the general words in a sentence. However, the most important purpose of capitalization is to convey a clear and unambiguous meaning of the words. By highlighting and specifying particular words in a sentence, capitalization helps the reader to properly understand the intended meaning of the written words. Capitalization thus helps to ensure the clarity of

meaning whereas lack of or misuse of capitalization can entirely alter the meaning of the words. Let us consider the following two phrases for example:

The White House

The white house (Capitalization Rules in Writing, 2014) [1]

In the above example, both the phrases are composed of similar words. But the use of capitalization in the first phrase has completely changed the meaning of this phrase from that of the other. Because, here the first phrase with uppercase letters refers to the house of the president of the United States of America, while the second phrase with lowercase letters refers to any house that is white in color. Thus we see, how capitalization changes the meaning of the words and also ensures the clarity of meaning. Capitalization is, indeed, absolutely necessary for a meaningful and clear writing. The importance of capitalization in written English has nicely been described by Siddiqui [2] in the following words:

“Capitalization makes communication clear, effective and impressive by giving the text a standard and distinctive appearance. It specifies proper and common nouns in the text and enables readers to skim and scan the text faster. Each sentence starting with a capital letter carries a new idea and helps readers to distinguish within different ideas in the text. Capitalization is also a medium to describe different kinds of moods and attitudes of the writer [2].”

## LITERATURE REVIEW

A lot of studies have been carried out in the field of error analysis of EFL learners' writing composition. Different errors in different areas are pointed out by the researchers. Among them, capitalization error is one of the most common errors made by the EFL learners in their writings. Sermsook et al. [3] examined the language errors in the writings of twenty-six Thai EFL students, and found that capitalization error is one of the most frequently committed errors made by the learners. Sawalmeh [4] investigated the writing errors in the English essays of thirty-two Saudi EFL learners, and found that capitalization error is one of the ten common errors made by the learners. Nuruzzaman et al. [5] also investigated the writing errors in the English paragraph writing of ninety Saudi non-English major students and found a good percentage of capitalization errors in their writings. Similarly, Mohammad & Hazarika [6] scrutinized the writing samples of fifty Saudi EFL learners at Najran University and found a good number of capitalization errors in their writings. Mohammed [7] likewise studied the substance errors in the argumentative composition writing of seventy Iraqi EFL learners, and found a considerable number of capitalization errors in their writings. Alfonso [8] also examined the errors in the written compositions of one hundred and thirty-six freshman education students and found that capitalization error is one of the most common errors made by the learners. Furthermore, Sharma [9], Alfaki [10], Wilcox et al. [11], Catabay [12], Awad [13], Alamin & Ahmed [14], Napitupulu [15], Ngangbam [16], etc. are the examples of some studies conducted previously to find out the most common writing errors including capitalization error.

Exclusive study in the field of capitalization error in the writings of EFL students is very rare. However, Siddiqui conducted an extensive study on capitalization errors in Saudi female students' EFL writing at Bisha University. The researcher marked a total of 983 errors across the 10 categories of capitalization in the composition of 12000 words by 20

students. Salamin et al. [17] also investigated the most frequent punctuation and capitalization errors made by the 157 EFL students from the English Department of Hebron University, Palestine. The researcher administered a specially designed test comprised of 24 punctuation fill-in-the-blank items and 6 capitalization error identification items, and found that capitalization errors were the most frequent errors made by the participants. Shweba & Mujiyanto [18] similarly conducted another study to analyze spelling, capitalization, and punctuation errors encountered by 30 first year English college students at Al-Merghib University, Libya. The researchers collected the data through a questionnaire comprised of 9 punctuation error identification items, 7 capitalization error identification items and 7 spelling error identification items, and then administered a test to analyze the errors in the respondents' written language, and found that capitalization errors were the most committed errors made by the participants. Among the capitalization errors, according to the findings of the previous researches, capitalization of proper nouns, people's titles, titles/subtitles of books, articles, songs, etc., first person pronoun I, first word of a complete sentence/quotation, etc. are some of the most common categories where EFL learners made errors. The present study, however, is going to put focus on all the areas of capitalization except the proper noun category. Because, in my context, the students usually make no capitalization mistake in the proper noun category. However, there are some exceptional proper nouns that require no capitalization, I will take them into consideration in this study.

### Capitalization rules

Capitalization error is one of the writing errors that tend to be overlooked by EFL learners [15]. Most of the EFL learners are unaware of proper use of capitalization. They only tend to capitalize the first letter of all such words or even sometimes all the letters of a single word that they want to emphasize. However, there are some other important uses and also some definite rules of capitalization in English that the students are mostly unaware of or consider unimportant in their writings. Given below is a list of most frequently used capitalization rules compiled from different popular EFL/ESL websites e.g. GrammarBook [19], TALKENGLISH [20], Your Dictionary [21], Grammar Revolution [22], grammarly blog [23], University of Maryland Global Campus [24], Towson University Online Writing Support [25], Cairn University [26], A Guide to Learning English [27], The Guide to Grammar and Writing [28].

**Table-1: Rules and examples of capitalization in English**

<b>Capitalization Rules</b>	<b>Examples</b>
1) The first word of a complete sentence/quotation	Use a capital letter to start a sentence. He asked, "What are you doing?"
2) The first word of a complete sentence after a colon (The first word of an incomplete sentence or the first item of a series of items after a colon should not be capitalized)	The teacher made an announcement: Tomorrow's classes are suspended for annual sports. He got what he hoped for: a job in a software firm. Bring the following items: eggs, a pan, and a spoon.
3) Only the first word of salutations and closings in letters unless proper noun is used	Salutations: Dear friend, My dear Mr. Monty Closings: With best regards, Sincerely yours
4) The first person pronoun I	Tom and I were very good friends.
5) All proper nouns including:  Names of specific persons, pet animals, & things Names of nationalities, languages, races (except white & black), tribes Names of buildings, monuments, manmade/natural structures, territories, bridges, tunnels, streets, roads Names of institutions, organizations, companies, trademarks, govt. departments, political/other groups Names of continents, regions, countries, states, districts, cities, towns, villages Names of planets (except sun & moon), mountains, mountain ranges, hills, water bodies, volcanoes Names of days, months, special occasions, but not seasons except when they are parts of proper nouns Names of religions, gods, religious figures, scriptures Names of historical events, eras, documents, etc.	My friend, Mary, has a cat called Mitty.  A British doesn't speak English like an American. The Empire State Building is located on the west side of Fifth Avenue in Manhattan. Whether or not Pepsi and Coca-Cola contain any pesticide residue, the Ministry of Public Health should ascertain the composition of the two sodas. Mount Everest is Earth's highest mountain located on the border between Tibet and Nepal in the Himalayas in Asia. My son is born in April this summer on Monday. Hermes, Zeus, Castor and Pollex are some of the Greek gods mentioned in the Bible. The Renaissance marks the transition from The Middle Ages to The Modernity.
6) Adjectives derived from proper nouns	I love to read Shakespearean sonnet & Indian novel.
7) People's titles when they are used:  a) As a direct address b) Before a personal name without comma c) After a personal name of very high-ranking govt. official with comma d) After a personal name on the address/signature line (Titles do not otherwise require capitalization when they are used after names or instead of names. Prefixes/suffixes added to the titles are also not capitalized)	Will you check my blood pressure, Doctor? Yesterday, I met Professor Patrick in the dept. John, the chairperson of the company, will address the staff today. The director, the manager, and the supervisor of the company are having a secret meeting now. Barack Obama, the ex-President of the USA, was a very popular president. Yours truly John, Chairperson
8) Family relationship words when they are used:  a) Alone in place of a personal name b) Immediately before a personal name (Family relationship words should not be capitalized when they are used with possessive nouns/pronouns, or when they do not refer to a specific person, or when they are used immediately after a personal name)	I discussed the matter with Dad. The man with blue shirt is Uncle Peter. Tony's brother married my sister. Every mother loves her child. The Bragg brothers were famous magicians.
9) All words in titles/subtitles of books, articles, songs, etc. except short prepositions, conjunctions, & articles unless they are the first words of the titles/subtitles	I read your article "Writing a Good Business Letter and Grant Proposal: An Effective Way" in the newspaper yesterday.
10) Educational degrees, specific course titles, and names of languages used as academic subjects but not the names of general academic subjects	He has completed Bachelor of Arts in English. I took Math 101 and Economics 111 last semester. My favorite subjects are history & social science.
11) Compass points when they are regions; not directions	Some of my relatives live in the South. I stay three miles north of the bus stop.
12) Initials, acronyms, and the words associated with the Internet like Net, Web, etc. except 'e-mail' & 'online'	Dr. J. R. Brown works on HIV project in WHO. Send me an e-mail if it is not found in the Internet.

**Research purpose**

Despite knowing the importance of appropriate capitalization, many students fail to use it correctly in their writing. It is one of the most neglected as well as most misunderstood areas in students' writing. A lot of

mistakes are typically found in EFL learners' writing regarding capitalization. Here, the indifference that the students show to appropriate capitalization and the mistakes they make in their writing regarding capitalization, all these evidently hamper their writing

skills, and eventually negatively affect their language learning process. It is, therefore, definitely important to find out the mistakes that students usually make in their writing regarding capitalization, and make the students aware of accurate capitalization to help them develop their writing skills. That will, in return, help students to improve their overall language competence, and the achieved findings will also contribute to the more effective teaching and learning of writing skills in the language classroom.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The participants of the present study were the undergraduate level EFL students belonging to different faculties (Faculty of Veterinary Science, Faculty of Agricultural Economics & Rural Sociology, and Faculty of Fisheries) of Bangladesh Agricultural University. A total of 230 students participated in the

survey. They were basically selected through the purposive sampling method on the basis of convenience and availability.

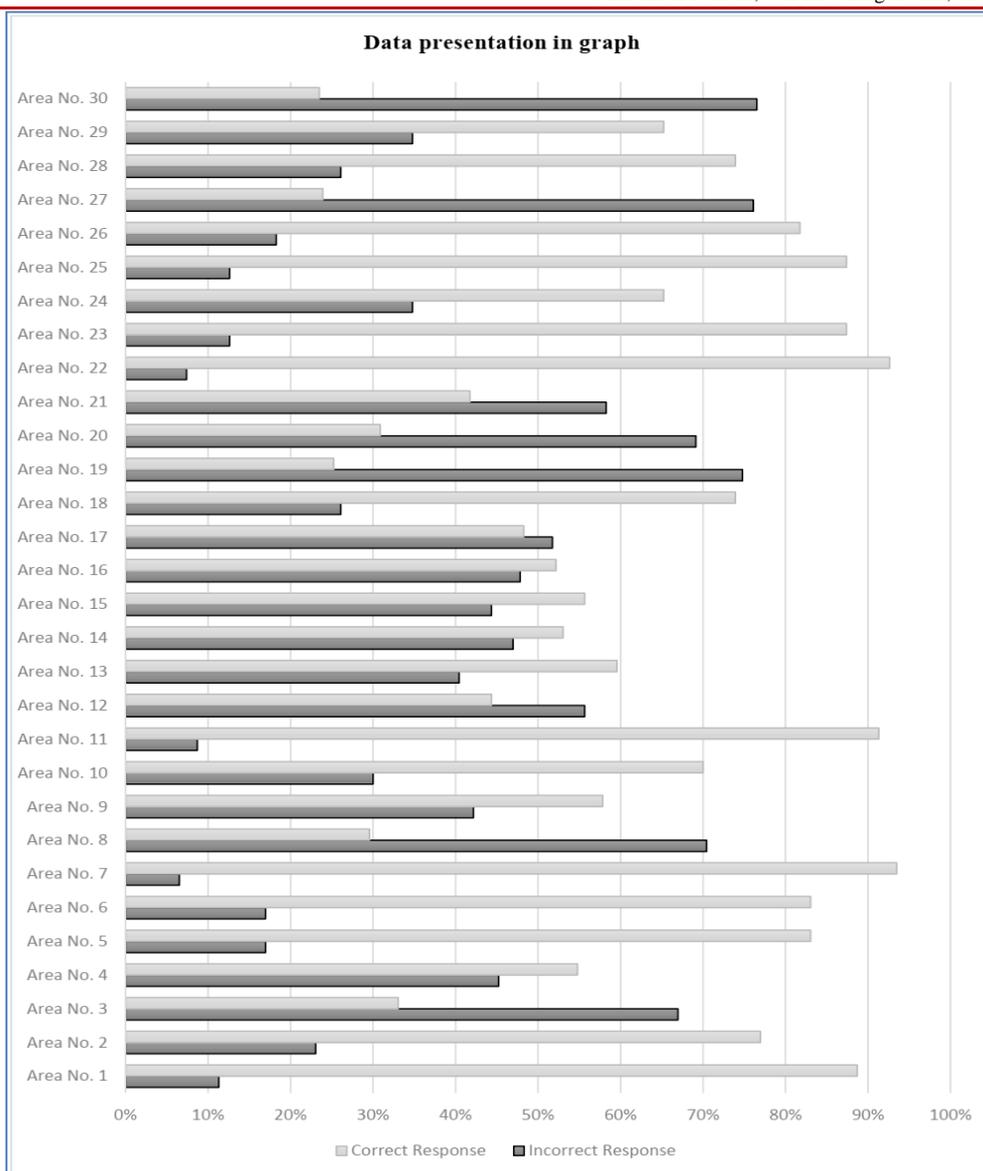
## DATA COLLECTION

The data for the present study were collected through a sheet of paper containing 30 pairs of sentences (Appendix-1). One sentence from each pair is correctly capitalized, and the other one is incorrect. In the capitalization classes, every student was given the sheet and asked to put a tick mark against the correct sentence from each pair. The students expressed their knowledge about capitalization through these sentences, and the researcher, in return, obtained a clear picture of the most common capitalization errors by the EFL students.

### Data Presentation

**Table-2: Capitalization errors made by the EFL learners at undergraduate level (Data in figures with percentage)**

No.	Covered Areas	Correct Response	Incorrect Response
1.	The first word of a complete quotation	204 (88.70%)	26 (11.30%)
2.	The first word of a complete sentence after a colon	177 (76.96%)	53 (23.04%)
3.	The first word of an incomplete sentence after a colon	76 (33.04%)	154 (66.96%)
4.	The first item of a series of items after a colon	126 (54.78%)	104 (45.22%)
5.	The first word of salutations in letters	191 (83.04%)	39 (16.96%)
6.	The first word of closings in letters	191 (83.04%)	39 (16.96%)
7.	The first person pronoun I	215 (93.48%)	15 (6.52%)
8.	The exceptional proper nouns-1 (black & white)	68 (29.57%)	162 (70.43%)
9.	The exceptional proper nouns-2 (sun & moon)	133 (57.83%)	97 (42.17%)
10.	The exceptional proper nouns-3 (seasons)	161 (70.00%)	69 (30.00%)
11.	Adjectives derived from proper nouns	210 (91.30%)	20 (8.70%)
12.	People's titles as a direct address	102 (44.35%)	128 (55.65%)
13.	People's titles before a personal name without comma	137 (59.57%)	93 (40.43%)
14.	People's titles after a personal name with comma	122 (53.04%)	108 (46.96%)
15.	People's titles after a personal name of very high-ranking govt. official with comma	128 (55.65%)	102 (44.35%)
16.	People's titles used instead of names	120 (52.17%)	110 (47.83%)
17.	People's titles with prefixes or suffixes	111 (48.26%)	119 (51.74%)
18.	People's titles after a personal name on the address/signature line	170 (73.91%)	60 (26.09%)
19.	Family relationship words used alone in place of a personal name	58 (25.22%)	172 (74.78%)
20.	Family relationship words used immediately before a personal name	71 (30.87%)	159 (69.13%)
21.	Family relationship words used immediately after a personal name	96 (41.74%)	134 (58.26%)
22.	Family relationship words used with possessive nouns/pronouns	213 (92.61%)	17 (7.39%)
23.	Family relationship words when they do not refer to any specific person	201 (87.39%)	29 (12.61%)
24.	Titles/subtitles of books, articles, songs, etc.	150 (65.22%)	80 (34.78%)
25.	Educational degrees	201 (87.39%)	29 (12.61%)
26.	The names of specific academic subjects	188 (81.74%)	42 (18.26%)
27.	The names of general academic subjects	55 (23.91%)	175 (76.09%)
28.	Compass points when they are regions	170 (73.91%)	60 (26.09%)
29.	Compass points used for directions	150 (65.22%)	80 (34.78%)
30.	The words associated with the Internet like Net, Web, Internet, etc. except 'e-mail' & 'online'	54 (23.48%)	176 (76.52%)



**Chart-1: Capitalization errors of the EFL learners at undergraduate level (Data in graph)**

## DATA ANALYSIS

From the survey, it is found that the 1<sup>st</sup> most frequent capitalization error made by the participants (176 out of 230) is the use of small letters with certain words associated with the Internet like Net, Web, Internet, etc. except 'e-mail' & 'online' (area no. 30). This reveals that almost 77% of the participants are unaware of the use of capital letters with such words.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> most frequent capitalization error, which is made by 175 participants out of 230, is seen in the area no. 27 with the names of general academic subjects. This exposes that 76.09% of the participants do not know that the names of general academic subjects should be written with small letters.

According to the responses of 272 participants, the 3<sup>rd</sup> most frequent capitalization error is the use of small letters with the family relationship words when

they are used alone in place of personal names. This depicts that almost 75% of the participants are unacquainted with the use of capital letters in this area (area no. 19).

The 4<sup>th</sup> most frequent capitalization error, which is made by 162 participants out of 230, is seen in the area no. 8 with the exceptional proper nouns-1 (black & white referring to human race). This exposes that 70.43% of the participants do not know that black & white when referring to human race should be written with small letters although they are proper nouns.

The responses of 159 participants showed that the 5<sup>th</sup> most frequent capitalization error is the use of small letters with the family relationship words when they are used immediately before personal names. This uncovers that 69.13% of the participants are ignorant of the use of capital letters in this area (area no. 20).

The 6<sup>th</sup> most frequent capitalization error, which is made by 154 participants out of 230, is seen in the area no. 3 with the first word of an incomplete sentence after a colon. This exposes that almost 67% of the participants do not know that the first word of an incomplete sentence after a colon should be written with a small letter.

The responses of 134 participants exposed that the 7<sup>th</sup> most frequent capitalization error is the use of capital letters with the family relationship words when they are used immediately after personal names without comma (area no. 21). This depicts that 58.26% of the participants are unaware of the rule that the family relationship words written immediately after personal names should be written with small letters.

According to the survey results, the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, & 11<sup>th</sup> most frequent capitalization errors are seen in the area no. 12, 17, 16, & 14 respectively. Quite interestingly, all these four most frequent capitalization errors are related to people's titles. 55.65% of the participants (128 out of 230) are unacquainted with the use of capital letters with the titles of people when they are used as a direct address (area no. 12). 51.74% of the participants (119 out of 230) are unaware of the use of small letters with the prefixes/suffixes attached to people's titles (area no. 17). 47.83% of the participants (110 out of 230) are ignorant of the use of small letters with people's titles when they are used instead of personal names (area no. 16). 46.96% of the participants (108 out of 230) are unaware of the use of small letters with people's titles when they are used after the personal names with comma (area no. 14).

The 12<sup>th</sup> most frequent capitalization error, which is made by 104 participants out of 230, is seen in the area no. 4 with the first item of a series of items after a colon. This exposes that 45.22% of the participants do not know that the first item of a series of items after a colon should be written with a small letter.

The responses of 102 participants exposed that the 13<sup>th</sup> most frequent capitalization error is the use of small letters with people's titles after personal names of very high-ranking govt. officials with comma (area no. 15). This depicts that 44.35% of the participants are unaware of the rule that people's titles after personal names of very high-ranking govt. officials with comma should be written with capital letters.

The 14<sup>th</sup> most frequent capitalization error, which is made by 97 participants out of 230, is seen in the area no. 9 with the exceptional proper nouns-2 (sun & moon). This exposes that 42.17% of the participants do not know that sun & moon should be written with small letters although they are the names of planets and considered as proper nouns.

Finally, the 15<sup>th</sup> most frequent capitalization error, which is made by 93 participants, is the use of small letters with people's titles before a personal name without comma. This depicts that 40.43% of the participants are unacquainted with the use of capital letters in this area (area no. 13). However, for the remaining 15 areas, since the number of correct responses is pretty high, we are not categorizing them in the most frequent capitalization errors.

## CONCLUSION

Capitalization is one of the most problematic areas in written English for the EFL students. Inaccurate capitalization is, in fact, the mostly occurred and observed error in students' writings that evidently hampers their writing skills. Being an English teacher of a university, I find every year a lot of students having a lot of problems and confusions in capitalization. Most of the students are also found unaware of and indifferent to correct use of capital/small letters, and consequently make frequent mistakes in their writings. In the present study, I tried to find out the most common capitalization errors made by the EFL students at undergraduate level and also tried to make the students aware of correct use of capital/small letters. I believe, the findings of the study will help the students develop their writing skills, and contribute to the more effective teaching and learning of the writing skills in the language classroom.

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**APPENDIX-1**

**Put a tick mark against the sentence with correct capitalization from each pair.**

1	He asked, "what are you doing?"	1	He asked, "What are you doing?"
2	The teacher made an announcement: tomorrow's classes are suspended for annual sports.	2	The teacher made an announcement: Tomorrow's classes are suspended for annual sports.
3	He got what he hoped for: a job in a software firm.	3	He got what he hoped for: A job in a software firm.
4	Bring the following items: eggs, a pan, and a spoon.	4	Bring the following items: Eggs, a pan, and a spoon.
5	My dear Mr. Monty,	5	My Dear Mr. Monty,
6	With best regards,	6	With Best Regards,
7	Tom and i were very good friends.	7	Tom and I were very good friends.
8	Danish or Spanish, black or white, everyone is equal.	8	Danish or Spanish, Black or White, everyone is equal.
9	The third planet from the sun is Earth.	9	The third planet from the Sun is Earth.
10	My son is born in April this summer on Monday.	10	My son is born in April this Summer on Monday.
11	I love to read shakespearean sonnet & indian novel.	11	I love to read Shakespearean sonnet & Indian novel.
12	Will you check my blood pressure, doctor?	12	Will you check my blood pressure, Doctor?
13	Yesterday, I met professor Patrick in the dept.	13	Yesterday, I met Professor Patrick in the dept.
14	John, the chairperson of the company, will address the staff today.	14	John, the Chairperson of the company, will address the staff today.
15	Donald Trump, the president of the USA, will meet the press tomorrow.	15	Donald Trump, the President of the USA, will meet the press tomorrow.
16	The director, the manager, and the supervisor of the company are having a secret meeting now.	16	The Director, the Manager, and the Supervisor of the company are having a secret meeting now.
17	Tony Blair, the ex-Prime Minister of the UK, was born in Edinburg on 6 May 1953.	17	Tony Blair, the Ex-Prime Minister of the UK, was born in Edinburg on 6 May 1953.
18	Yours truly, John, Chairperson	18	Yours truly, John, Chairperson
19	I discussed the matter with dad.	19	I discussed the matter with Dad.
20	The man with blue shirt is uncle Peter.	20	The man with blue shirt is Uncle Peter.
21	The Bragg brothers were famous magicians.	21	The Bragg Brothers were famous magicians.
22	Tony's brother married my sister.	22	Tony's Brother married my Sister.
23	Every mother loves her child.	23	Every Mother loves her child.
24	I read your article "Writing a good business letter and grant proposal: an effective way" in the newspaper yesterday.	24	I read your article "Writing a Good Business Letter and Grant Proposal: An Effective Way" in the newspaper yesterday.
25	He has completed bachelor of arts in English.	25	He has completed Bachelor of Arts in English.
26	I took math 101 and economics 111 last semester.	26	I took Math 101 and Economics 111 last semester.
27	My favorite subjects are history & social science.	27	My favorite subjects are History & Social Science.
28	Some of my relatives live in the south.	28	Some of my relatives live in the South.
29	I stay three miles north of the bus stop.	29	I stay three miles North of the bus stop.
30	Send me an e-mail if it is not found in the internet.	30	Send me an e-mail if it is not found in the Internet.