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Why do CAPITAL LETTERS so annoy us?

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A New Zealand woman has lost her accounting job after sending "confrontational" e-mails filled with block capitals. So why is it taboo to hit the caps-lock key?

"TO ENSURE YOUR STAFF CLAIM IS PROCESSED AND PAID, PLEASE DO FOLLOW THE BELOW CHECK LIST."

The actual words may seem harmless enough, but their appearance **ultimately** contributed to the **firing** of ProCare Health worker Vicki Walker in Auckland. It was one of a number of e-mails that her employer **claimed**, at a tribunal, had spread disharmony at work. Some also "provocatively" contained highlighted phrases in bold or red, the tribunal heard.

Most web users know capital letters are a capital offence – they're commonly thought to be online shorthand for screaming. But how did they get this reputation?

"Historically, capped letters portrayed a certain formality", says Paul Luna, director of the department of typography and graphic communication at the University of Reading. "They're associated with things like Roman inscriptions and the formal presentation of text. They have a certain sort of architectural **quality**."

The forum in ancient Rome, for instance, showcased the emperors' great **deeds** written in capital letters.

"While capitals were reserved for the best and the greatest, lowercase letters in the Latin alphabet - which English is based on - developed as a **faster** way to write", says Mr Luna. "And over time, capitals have become a way to set text apart - whether to articulate the beginning of a new sentence or to mark a major heading in a book. While they were sometimes used for emphasis, typographers typically didn't like the look of the dense text blocks that make the page **appear** grey".

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In the print-based world, other **options**, like bold and italics, became more common, leaving capital letters for proper nouns and sentence beginnings. But the internet changed all that, he says.

The high resolution of a printed page is enough to make bold and italics stand out, but the lower quality of a screen often **requires** people to revert to the caps-lock key to make a point. And while printing houses and publishing companies have traditionally regulated the use of capitalisation, the web is a bit of a free-for-all, says Martin Manser, author of the Good Word Guide.

"The thing about e-mail is that there's no particular etiquette. The whole thing is more fluid," he says. "In written letters, there are definite conventions that are right or wrong."

Ultimately, in the rushed world of online communication, all-caps has become a bit of a "lazy" shorthand for yelling - it's faster than finding another way to convey excitement or agitation. But the recipient feels like they are being **shouted** at.

And is there also a physical reason? Are all of those rectangular letters hard on the eyes?

Some studies say yes - indicating that people read by recognizing the shapes of letters within words and that the lowercase versions have more shape differentiations than block capitals.

But Mr Luna says this is **"nonsense"** - pointing to new research that has found capitals and lower-case letters make no real difference. Instead, the caps-lock key has become a tool for writers. "It's a great aid to articulating a message, really," he says.

And if that means the occasional CAPITAL e-mail, then so be it.

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1. Read the text

2. Now answer the following questions

a) Why has Vicki Walker lost her job?

b) What effect did her employer claim these emails had on fellow employees?

c) How did the Roman forum use capital letters?

d) Why were lowercase letters developed?

e) Why did typographers not like capital letters?

f) How did print-based writing affect the use of capital letters?

g) How did Martin Manser describe the Internet?

h) What effect is the use of all capital letters having on the recipients of email?

3. Which of the following words should *always* start with a capital letter?

june	dad	may	april
theatre	cinema	english	march
mum	july	brother	john
east	easter	pole	monday

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4 . Look at the words in the text that are in **bold.** They are listed on the left below.

Work out from the clues given in the right hand column the words that could

replace them in the text.

For example, *firing* can be replaced by *sacking*.

firing   ⟶   s_ _ k_ _ g

ultimately   e _ _ _ t _ _ _ _ y

claimed   a _ _ _ _ d

commonly   g _ _ _ _ _ l _ y

quality   v _ _ _ _

deeds   f _ _ _ s

faster   q _ _ _ _ _ r

appear   s _ _ _

options   c _ _ _ _ _ s

requires   n _ _ _ _

shouted   y _ _ _ _ d

nonsense   r _ _ _ i _ _

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5. The following are anagrams of words in the article. They are all parts of verbs (doing words) e.g. run, walked and singing. You may use a dictionary to help you solve them.

    For example, **cob rutted in** turns into **contributed**

> **decimal**
>
> **caned into**
>
> **send gin**
>
> **deep loved**
>
> **me be co**
>
> **hang ced**
>
> **raged lute**
>
> **gain indict**
>
> **flees**
>
> **zing core gin**

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ANSWERS

2.

   a) For sending confrontational emails using capital letters

   b) They have spread disharmony

   c) For highlighting the great deeds of the emperor.

   d) They made it easier to write more quickly.

   e) They were dense and made the page look grey.

   f) Capital letters were less used for emphasis, (bold and italic replaced them) and became used for proper nouns and sentence beginnings,

   g) A bit of a free- for-all

   h) They felt they were being shouted at.

3.   June   April   English   July   John   Easter   Monday

4.

firing	sacking
ultimately	eventually
claimed	argued
commonly	generally
quality	value
deeds	feats
faster	quicker
appear	seem
options	choices
requires	needs
shouted	yelled
nonsense	rubbish

5.

decimal	claimed
caned into	contained
send gin	sending
deep loved	developed
me be co	become
hang ced	changed
raged lute	regulated
gain indict	indicating
flees	feels
zing core gin	recognizing