Letters in Context

Read how editors handle changing and contested conventions.

11-12.L.2.a "Apply the understanding that mechanics are a matter of convention, can change over time and within different contexts, and are sometimes contested."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two forms preserved in older documents, circle their modern counterparts, and number two sentences that explain why the forms differ.

An Exhibit in Two Voices

1. In 2008, a library printed an online-safety pamphlet with this warning: "Do not post your address on the Internet." Years later, a student editor prepares an exhibit about the library's advice. The old pamphlet will appear beside a new caption that uses "internet" instead. The Associated Press changed its style to lowercase "internet" in 2016, reflecting a term that had become ordinary in everyday writing. The editor does not quietly fix the pamphlet's capital letter. In a historical document, that letter is evidence of how a convention looked at the time, not an error to erase.

2. Another exhibit panel quotes a 1994 community newsletter that printed "black artists" in a headline. The new caption uses "Black artists" when referring to a shared cultural identity. In 2020, the Associated Press adopted a capital B for Black in that sense, while continuing to write "white" with a lowercase w. Not every editor agrees with that pairing. Some argue that capitalizing both Black and White would treat the terms consistently; others question whether White names one shared identity. The old headline remains as printed, but the new caption follows the exhibit's current style.

3. Before the exhibit opens, two volunteers notice the different capital letters and ask for a single rule. The editor explains that a quotation records a source's choices, while a new caption speaks in the library's present voice. She adds a short note identifying the caption style so readers will not mistake the difference for a printing accident. A style guide can make a publication consistent, but it cannot end every disagreement about identity or usage. For this exhibit, the editor weighs the date, purpose, and audience of each piece of writing before deciding what to preserve or change.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why does the editor keep “Internet” in the old pamphlet but use “internet” in the new caption?

2. Why is “black artists” left in the old headline while “Black artists” appears in the new caption?

3. What disagreement does the passage describe about capitalizing “White”?

4. Why do the different capital letters in the exhibit not necessarily show careless editing?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write two versions of one short announcement for different audiences, using a punctuation or capitalization choice not discussed in the passage. Then explain in two sentences why each version fits its context and why editors might debate the choice.

ANSWER KEY

Letters in Context

HIGH SCHOOL · 11-12.L.2.a

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two forms preserved in older documents, circle their modern counterparts, and number two sentences that explain why the forms differ. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why does the editor keep “Internet” in the old pamphlet but use “internet” in the new caption?	**The capital letter preserves the historical document’s wording. The new caption follows a current convention that uses lowercase “internet.”**
2	Why is “black artists” left in the old headline while “Black artists” appears in the new caption?	**The headline preserves the newsletter’s original wording. The caption follows a current style that capitalizes Black when it refers to a shared cultural identity.**
3	What disagreement does the passage describe about capitalizing “White”?	**Some editors favor capitalizing both Black and White for consistency; others question whether White names one shared identity.**
4	Why do the different capital letters in the exhibit not necessarily show careless editing?	**The exhibit preserves older sources as printed but applies a current style to new captions. The editor also explains that distinction to readers.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

Academic program: Guests include poets, dancers, and actors. Newspaper notice: Guests include poets, dancers and actors. The academic program uses a serial comma to separate each item visibly. The newspaper omits it because the list is clear without it, though editors debate whether that comma should be used in every list.

Accept answers that distinguish preserved source text from new editorial text and recognize that style choices can change or remain contested. For Part 3, look for two versions of the same announcement, a mechanics difference not discussed in the passage, and two sentences explaining context and debate.