



Ms. Particular Presents: Ability, Capability, or Capacity?

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The careful writer makes distinctions among *ability*, *capability*, and *capacity*. Although these words are sometimes used interchangeably, they have subtle differences in meaning that should be preserved. Today we'll look at them.

Here are the definitions:

Ability is qualitative and refers to what a *person* can do

Capability is qualitative and refers to power or ability in general; it most often refers to what an *inanimate object* can do

Capacity is usually quantitative and refers to how much something can contain or receive; it is sometimes used figuratively to indicate a person's mental or physical power (to receive)

See Bryan A. Garner, *Garner's Modern American Usage* (Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 4 and 127.

Ms. Particular to the rescue!
**Simple mnemonic: If it's animated,
use ability**

