

British versus American English: Spelling Differences

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There are two main forms of written English – British and American – and most scholarly journals will indicate a preference or requirement for one or the other in their instructions for authors. Even if the guidelines of the journal to which you are hoping to submit your academic or scientific article does not specify whether you should use British or American English, you will be expected to use one form or the other consistently, and your spelling choices will need to be appropriate in every relevant instance. Unfortunately, many authors are not aware of the exact nature of the variations between British and American English, and while setting the default language in Microsoft Word to either British or American can help you catch and correct some misspelled words, it is far from foolproof. Most good English dictionaries will note spelling variations, but some dictionaries do not indicate in all cases whether the variants provided are determined by the differences between the two forms of English. Creating correct British or American English can therefore be challenging, and the following spelling notes may prove helpful as you polish your writing for publication.

- British English often uses 'our' (colour, behaviour) where American English uses

only 'or' (color, behavior).

- British English tends to use 're' at the end of words such as 'centre' and 'metre,' whereas American English uses 'er' (center, meter), but this is not always the case, with 'parameter' and 'sober,' for instance, correct in both forms of the language.
- British English can use either 'ise' or 'ize' in verbs that are always spelled with 'ize' in American English, so 'organize' and 'specialize' are correct in American English and can also be correct in British English, but British English can instead use 'organise' and 'specialise.'
- British English uses 'yse,' as in 'analyse' and 'paralyse,' whereas American English uses 'yze' (analyze, paralyze).
- British English tends to use 'ae,' 'oe' and 'ou' in situations where American English uses only 'e' or 'o,' so 'aesthetics,' 'manoeuvre' and 'mould' are correct in British English, but the spelling would be 'esthetics,' 'maneuver' and 'mold' in American English, though these differences are not always observed.
- In British English 'defence' is spelled with a 'c,' but in American English the word is spelled with an 's' (defense). The decision to use 'c' or 's' can be tricky, however, with British English spelling the nouns 'practice' and 'licence' differently than the verbs 'practise' and 'license,' whereas American English uses 'practice' for both the noun and the verb and, conversely, 'license' for both the noun and the verb.
- British English will often retain an 'e' where American English will not, so 'sizeable' and 'acknowledgement' in British English are 'sizable' and 'acknowledgment' in American English, but this is not necessarily predictable: 'judgement,' for instance, is used in British English, except in legal contexts, in which case the correct form is 'judgment,' which is always the correct form in American English, and 'knowledgeable' retains its 'e' in both forms of the language.
- British English tends to use a single 'l,' as in 'enrol' and 'skilful,' whereas American English uses double 'll' in the same words (enroll, skillful).
- British English often doubles consonants when endings are added to words, as is the case with 'focussed' and 'travelling,' while American English does not (focused, traveling), but there are exceptions, with 'enrolling' the correct form in both.
- British English occasionally uses 'ph' (sulphur) where American English uses 'f' (sulfur), 'sc' (sceptic) where American English uses 'sk' (skeptical), 'que' (cheque) where American English uses 'ck' (check) and 'ogue' (catalogue) where American English uses only 'og' (catalog), though the two forms of the language do not always differ in the last of these ways, with 'epilogue,' for instance, the same in both.
- In some cases British English uses 'mme' (programme) where American English uses an 'm' alone (program), but this varies, and when 'program' applies to computer software, 'mme' is never used.

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