

chicago manual of style british vs american spelling

Navigating the Nuances: Chicago Manual of Style British vs. American Spelling

chicago manual of style british vs american spelling is a common point of confusion for writers, editors, and publishers worldwide. The esteemed Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) provides comprehensive guidelines for a vast array of editorial concerns, including the subtle yet significant differences in spelling between British and American English. While CMOS primarily adopts American spelling conventions, it acknowledges and offers guidance for instances where British spelling is preferred or encountered. Understanding these distinctions is crucial for maintaining consistency, professionalism, and clarity in any written work, whether it targets a transatlantic audience or adheres to specific regional publishing standards. This article delves into the core differences, CMOS recommendations, and practical strategies for effectively managing British versus American spelling.

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Understanding the Core Differences in British and American Spelling

The divergence in spelling between British and American English is not a recent phenomenon but rather a gradual evolution influenced by historical, cultural, and linguistic factors. These differences, while often minor, can significantly impact the perceived origin and audience of a text. Understanding these foundational variations is the first step to navigating the complexities when consulting a style guide like CMOS.

The "-our" vs. "-or" Suffix

One of the most frequently cited distinctions involves the final syllable of certain words. British English characteristically uses the "-our" suffix in words like "colour," "favour," "honour," and "labour." American English, conversely, simplifies these to "-or," resulting in "color," "favor," "honor," and "labor." This change, largely attributed to Noah Webster's efforts to simplify and rationalize American English spelling, is a hallmark of the American lexicon.

The "-re" vs. "-er" Suffix

Another prominent area of divergence lies in words of French origin that end

in "-re" in British English, such as "centre," "theatre," and "metre." American English typically converts these to end in "-er," as seen in "center," "theater," and "meter." This reflects a tendency in American English to align spelling with pronunciation more closely, or to adopt simpler orthographic forms.

The "-ise" vs. "-ize" Suffix

The verb-forming suffix "-ise" is prevalent in British English (e.g., "organise," "realise," "apologise"). American English overwhelmingly prefers the "-ize" ending (e.g., "organize," "realize," "apologize"). While both are understood in either region, adherence to one over the other is a strong indicator of the intended audience and the adopted style guide.

Doubled Consonants

British English often doubles the final "l" in words when adding a suffix, even when the preceding vowel is not stressed. Examples include "travelling," "jewellery," and "worshipped." American English generally does not double the "l" in such cases, leading to "traveling," "jewelry," and "worshiped." This rule, while not absolute, is a consistent differentiator.

Other Common Variations

Beyond these major categories, numerous individual words present distinct spellings. For instance, British English uses "programme" for television or radio broadcasts, while American English uses "program." Similarly, "catalogue" (British) becomes "catalog" (American), and "dialogue" (British) becomes "dialog" (American). "Grey" (British) is often "gray" (American), and "pyjamas" (British) is "pajamas" (American).

The Chicago Manual of Style's Stance on Spelling

The Chicago Manual of Style, a cornerstone of editorial practice in the United States, primarily advocates for American spelling. However, its approach is nuanced and acknowledges the existence and validity of British English conventions.

The Default: American Spelling

As a general rule, CMOS assumes and recommends the use of American spelling throughout a manuscript. This means that for the common variations previously discussed, the American forms are to be preferred. This aligns with the manual's origins and its widespread adoption in American publishing houses, academic institutions, and professional writing environments.

Flexibility and Context

Despite its primary preference for American spelling, CMOS is not rigidly prescriptive. It recognizes that the context and intended audience of a publication are paramount. If a work is specifically intended for a British audience, or if it deals with subjects or authors where British spelling is the established norm, CMOS allows for and guides the consistent application of British spelling conventions.

Consistency is Key

The overarching principle emphasized by CMOS, as with all aspects of style, is consistency. Whichever spelling convention is chosen—American or British—it must be applied uniformly throughout the entire document. Mixing spellings within a single work is considered an editorial error and detracts from the professionalism and clarity of the text. CMOS provides guidance on how to make informed decisions about which convention to adopt based on the project's requirements.

Common Spelling Variations and CMOS Guidance

CMOS directly addresses many of the recurring spelling differences between British and American English, offering clear recommendations for writers and editors.

Words Ending in "-ise" and "-ize"

CMOS explicitly advises the use of "-ize" endings for verbs, aligning with American English practice. For example, "organize," "realize," and "apologize" are the preferred forms. This is a widely adopted convention in American scholarly and commercial publishing. However, it's crucial to note that CMOS acknowledges that some authors may prefer the "-ise" spelling, and if this is the case, it must be applied consistently.

Words Ending in "-our" and "-or"

When it comes to words like "colour," "favour," and "honour," CMOS recommends the American "color," "favor," and "honor." This is another instance where the manual defaults to the widely accepted American standard. The reasoning behind this preference is rooted in the simplification and phonetic alignment that is characteristic of American English orthography.

Words Ending in "-re" and "-er"

Similarly, CMOS prefers the "-er" ending for words like "center," "theater," and "meter." These are the standard spellings in American English, and CMOS follows suit. The "-re" ending, while common in British English, is considered less conventional within the framework of the Chicago Manual of Style.

Other Divergent Spellings

CMOS also weighs in on other specific word differences. For instance, "program" is the standard American spelling recommended by CMOS, rather than the British "programme." "Catalog" is preferred over "catalogue," and "dialog" over "dialogue." The manual's stance is to adopt the forms that are most prevalent and standardized within American English usage, ensuring clarity and conformity for its primary audience.

When to Use British Spelling with CMOS

While CMOS champions American spelling, it offers clear guidelines for situations where British spelling is appropriate, emphasizing the importance of context and audience.

Target Audience and Geographic Focus

The most compelling reason to adopt British spelling is when the intended audience is predominantly British or when the subject matter has a strong geographic or cultural connection to the United Kingdom. Publishers often have specific style guides that dictate the use of British English for their imprints targeting this demographic. In such cases, following CMOS's principles of consistency means adopting the "-our," "-re," and "-ise" spellings throughout the document.

Authorial Preference

In some instances, an author may have a strong personal preference for British spelling, perhaps due to their background or academic training. CMOS respects authorial intent and allows for this preference to guide the choice of spelling, provided it is maintained consistently. Editors working with authors who use British English should be prepared to accommodate these choices.

Specific Journals and Publications

Certain academic journals, literary magazines, or specialized publications might have explicit requirements for British spelling. These editorial mandates take precedence, and CMOS's guidance would then involve applying the British forms diligently. Recognizing these specific requirements is a crucial part of professional editing.

Maintaining International Standards

For international publications or works intended for a global audience where British English is widely recognized and used, adopting British spelling can sometimes be a strategic choice for broader accessibility. CMOS allows for this flexibility, prioritizing the effectiveness of communication for the intended readership.

Strategies for Managing Spelling Consistency

Ensuring absolute spelling consistency within a document, regardless of whether American or British English is chosen, is a critical editorial task. CMOS provides the framework, but practical strategies are essential for implementation.

Develop a Style Sheet

The creation of a detailed style sheet is an indispensable tool. This document should record all editorial decisions, including specific word spellings that deviate from a standard or present a choice. For example, if "colour" is chosen over "color," this decision should be noted. This serves as a reference point for all contributors and helps prevent inconsistencies from creeping in.

Utilize Digital Tools Wisely

Modern word processing software and editing tools offer spell-checking functionalities. However, these tools are often set to default to American English. It is imperative to configure these tools to the chosen spelling standard (e.g., British English for Microsoft Word or Google Docs) or to use them as a first pass and then conduct manual review. Relying solely on automated checks can lead to errors.

Conduct Thorough Proofreading

Multiple rounds of proofreading by different individuals are highly recommended. Proofreaders should be specifically instructed to look for spelling inconsistencies based on the agreed-upon style. Reading the document backward, word by word, can also help catch subtle errors that might be overlooked during a linear read-through.

Reference CMOS and Dictionaries

When in doubt about a particular word's spelling, it is always best to consult The Chicago Manual of Style itself, as well as reputable dictionaries for both American and British English. Dictionaries like Merriam-Webster (American) and the Oxford English Dictionary (often reflecting British usage) can be invaluable resources for verifying correct spellings and identifying variations.

Understand the Scope of the Manual

CMOS covers a broad spectrum of editorial concerns, and its recommendations on spelling are part of a larger system of style. While focusing on the British vs. American spelling aspect, it's important to remember that consistency in punctuation, grammar, and capitalization also contributes to a polished and professional document, all of which are detailed within the manual.

The Importance of Style Guides in Editorial Decisions

The meticulous attention to detail that The Chicago Manual of Style advocates underscores the profound importance of style guides in professional writing and publishing. These guides are not merely collections of rules but rather comprehensive frameworks that ensure clarity, consistency, and a polished presentation of information. The distinction between British and American spelling, though seemingly minor, is a prime example of how adherence to a chosen standard contributes to the overall integrity of a written work.

By providing clear, authoritative guidance, style guides like CMOS empower writers and editors to make informed decisions that enhance readability and professionalism. Whether adopting the default American spellings or accommodating British English for a specific context, the key takeaway is the unwavering commitment to consistency. This diligence not only reflects editorial expertise but also builds trust with the reader, signaling a text that has been carefully crafted and meticulously reviewed.

Ultimately, understanding and applying the principles outlined in CMOS regarding British vs. American spelling is an integral part of effective communication. It demonstrates a writer's or editor's awareness of linguistic nuances and their ability to tailor a text to its intended audience and purpose, ensuring that the message, not the spelling, remains at the forefront.

FAQ

Q: Does The Chicago Manual of Style strictly enforce American spelling?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style primarily recommends and defaults to American spelling. However, it allows for flexibility and permits the use of British spelling when a publication's audience, subject matter, or authorial preference dictates it, emphasizing consistency above all else.

Q: What is the most common spelling difference covered by CMOS?

A: Some of the most common spelling differences addressed by CMOS include the "-our" vs. "-or" endings (e.g., "colour" vs. "color"), the "-re" vs. "-er" endings (e.g., "centre" vs. "center"), and the "-ise" vs. "-ize" verb endings (e.g., "organise" vs. "organize"). CMOS generally favors the American forms for these.

Q: Can I mix British and American spellings in one document if I follow CMOS?

A: No, CMOS strictly advises against mixing British and American spellings within the same document. The paramount rule is consistency. Once a spelling convention is chosen, it must be applied uniformly throughout the entire text.

to maintain professionalism and clarity.

Q: How does CMOS advise on words like "programme" vs. "program"?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style recommends the American spelling "program" for computer programs and general use, rather than the British "programme" which is typically reserved for theatrical or broadcast events. This aligns with the manual's preference for American English conventions.

Q: What if my author insists on using British spelling for an American publication?

A: If your author insists on using British spelling, and you are working within the framework of CMOS, the primary directive is to ensure consistency. You would adopt the British spelling throughout the document and note this decision in your style sheet. CMOS respects authorial preference when applied consistently.

Q: Are there any exceptions to the "-ise" vs. "-ize" rule in CMOS?

A: While CMOS recommends the "-ize" ending for verbs, it acknowledges that some words are traditionally spelled with "-ise" even in American English (e.g., "advertise," "surprise"). However, for the vast majority of verbs where the suffix can be applied, the "-ize" form is preferred by CMOS for American English contexts.

Q: How can I verify which spelling is considered "American" or "British" for a specific word?

A: To verify spellings, it is best to consult reputable dictionaries. For American English, Merriam-Webster is a standard resource, while the Oxford English Dictionary often reflects British usage. The Chicago Manual of Style itself will also specify its preferred forms.

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