

chicago manual of style spelling of foreign words

chicago manual of style spelling of foreign words can present a unique challenge for writers aiming for clarity and adherence to established publishing standards. Navigating the intricacies of how the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) treats loanwords, technical terms, and phrases from other languages is crucial for producing polished prose. This article delves deeply into the principles and practices governing the Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words, offering guidance on capitalization, italics, diacritics, and common pitfalls. We will explore the core philosophy behind CMOS's approach, which prioritizes reader comprehension and a consistent aesthetic. Understanding these guidelines ensures your writing maintains a professional and authoritative voice, especially when incorporating international vocabulary.

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The Philosophy Behind CMOS Guidelines for Foreign Words

The Chicago Manual of Style approaches the spelling of foreign words with a pragmatic philosophy centered on clarity, consistency, and the reader's experience. Its primary goal is to ensure that borrowed words are presented in a way that is both accessible to the intended audience and respectful of the original language. This often means striking a balance between maintaining the integrity of the foreign word and facilitating its integration into English text. The manual does not advocate for a rigid, one-size-fits-all approach but rather provides flexible principles that can be applied to a wide array of linguistic situations.

CMOS recognizes that the English language is a dynamic entity, constantly absorbing and adapting words from other tongues. Therefore, its guidelines are designed to accommodate this natural linguistic evolution. The manual emphasizes that the ultimate test for any foreign word's presentation is

whether it hinders or enhances the readability of the text. If a foreign term is well-established in English usage and readily understood, the rules may lean towards anglicization. Conversely, for terms that are less common or carry specific cultural or technical nuances, preserving their original form, including diacritics and spelling, becomes more important.

General Principles for Foreign Word Spelling in CMOS

The overarching principle for the Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words is to use the word as it is conventionally spelled in its original language, unless there is a widely accepted anglicized version or the term has become thoroughly integrated into English. This means researchers and editors should make an effort to ascertain the correct spelling in the source language, paying close attention to specific characters and orthography.

However, CMOS also acknowledges that perfect adherence to original spelling can sometimes create barriers to understanding. For this reason, the manual encourages the use of anglicized spellings when they are common, familiar, and do not obscure the word's meaning. For example, a word like "rendezvous" is a French loanword, but its spelling and pronunciation are so well-established in English that it is rarely italicized or treated as an exotic foreign term.

Another key consideration is the context of the writing. In academic or specialized works, preserving the original spelling and form of foreign terms might be essential for precision and scholarly accuracy. In more general publications, prioritizing ease of understanding might lead to a preference for anglicized forms or explanatory parentheticals. The manual provides a framework, but judgment is often required based on the specific text and its audience.

Handling Diacritical Marks (Accents and Other Marks)

The correct use of diacritical marks, such as accents, umlauts, and cedillas, is a significant aspect of the Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words. CMOS generally advises retaining these marks when they are an integral part of the word's spelling in its original language and when their presence does not impede readability or typesetting. These marks are not mere decorations; they often alter pronunciation and meaning.

For instance, in Spanish, the tilde over the 'n' in "niño" changes its sound, and omitting it would alter the word significantly. Similarly, the acute accent in French words like "café" distinguishes it from "cafe" (a building). The manual recommends using the correct diacritics for words that are not yet fully assimilated into English or when their omission could lead to ambiguity or mispronunciation. This ensures accuracy and demonstrates respect for the

source language.

However, there are instances where CMOS permits the omission of diacritics, particularly for terms that are very common, have established anglicized spellings without the marks, or when technical limitations in printing or digital rendering make their inclusion problematic. For example, words like "naive" are sometimes written without the diaeresis, though "naïve" is generally preferred for stylistic accuracy. The decision often hinges on whether the omitted mark would cause confusion or misinterpretation for the reader. If a word is consistently and unambiguously understood without its diacritics in common English usage, their omission might be acceptable.

Italicization of Foreign Words

One of the most common ways to distinguish foreign words from the surrounding English text is through italicization. The Chicago Manual of Style Spelling of Foreign Words offers clear guidance on this practice. Generally, foreign words and phrases that are not considered to be part of standard English vocabulary should be italicized. This serves as a visual cue to the reader that the term is borrowed and may require a slightly different reading approach.

The purpose of italicizing foreign terms is to signal their foreignness, thereby helping readers to recognize them as such and potentially adjust their pronunciation or understanding accordingly. It also adds a touch of formality and accuracy to the text, especially in academic or literary works. Examples of words that are typically italicized include Latin phrases like "ad hoc" or "et al." (though "et al." is very common and sometimes not italicized), French culinary terms like "hors d'oeuvre," or German philosophical terms like "Weltanschauung."

However, the rule of thumb is that once a foreign word becomes sufficiently common in English—meaning it is widely recognized, understood, and frequently used—it generally loses its need for italicization. Words like "algebra," "ballet," "croissant," and "opera" were once foreign but are now so integrated into English that they are presented in roman type. The key is the degree of assimilation. If a word is found in most standard English dictionaries in its non-italicized form, it is likely safe to treat it as English for typographical purposes.

Capitalization of Foreign Terms

Capitalization of foreign words in English text follows rules that are largely consistent with those for English words, but with some specific considerations. The Chicago Manual of Style Spelling of Foreign Words often requires a nuanced approach. Generally, foreign words are capitalized according to standard English rules for proper nouns, the beginning of sentences, and titles of works. However, the capitalization within the foreign language itself can sometimes influence the treatment in English.

For instance, in German, all nouns are capitalized. When a German noun is incorporated into an English text, the question arises whether to follow English capitalization rules (only capitalizing if it's a proper noun or at the start of a sentence) or to retain the German convention. CMOS typically advises adopting English capitalization rules for ease of reading unless the foreign capitalization is essential to the meaning or is part of a formal title or established phrase where it is conventionally observed.

When it comes to phrases or titles in foreign languages, the original capitalization conventions of that language should be observed if possible and if clarity is not compromised. For example, a French title might retain its specific capitalization rules. However, if a foreign phrase is used as an adjective or in a context where capitalization would be unusual in English (e.g., mid-sentence), it is often lowercased unless it functions as a proper noun. The ultimate decision should prioritize the readability and grammatical flow of the English sentence.

Common Foreign Words and Phrases

Many foreign words and phrases have become so commonplace in English that they are no longer italicized and are treated as standard vocabulary. The Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words acknowledges this natural evolution of language. These terms have essentially been adopted into the English lexicon, and their foreign origin is often overlooked by native English speakers.

Examples of such words include terms borrowed from Latin (e.g., "status quo," "vice versa"), French (e.g., "chauffeur," "silhouette"), Spanish (e.g., "patio," "rodeo"), Italian (e.g., "piano," "spaghetti"), and many other languages. These words have been integrated into English through consistent usage over time, and their spellings have often undergone slight modifications or simplifications to better fit English phonetics and orthography.

When encountering a potentially foreign word, it is helpful to consult a good English dictionary. If the word is listed as a standard English word, often with multiple definitions and without any indication of foreignness (like italics), it is generally safe to use it as is. This approach ensures that the writing remains fluid and accessible to a broad audience, without unnecessarily drawing attention to the word's origin unless its foreign nature is pertinent to the discussion.

Foreign Words That Have Become Anglicized

Anglicization is the process by which foreign words are adapted to English spelling, pronunciation, and grammar. The Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words recognizes that many loanwords undergo this transformation, becoming more or less indistinguishable from native English words over time. This is a natural and expected linguistic phenomenon.

The key criterion for determining whether a foreign word has been sufficiently anglicized is its widespread acceptance and common usage within the English-speaking community. Words that have undergone this process no longer require special treatment such as italicization. Their spellings are often simplified, and their pronunciation is adapted to English phonetic patterns. For instance, the French "crème brûlée" is often written as "creme brulee" in less formal contexts, though the original spelling with diacritics is still considered more correct in formal writing.

It is important for writers and editors to be aware of which words have been anglicized and to apply consistent usage. Consulting reputable dictionaries is crucial, as they will typically indicate whether a word is considered part of the standard English lexicon and how it should be spelled. By using anglicized forms where appropriate, writers can enhance the readability of their text and avoid making it appear unnecessarily pedantic or difficult to understand.

Technical and Scientific Terms

Technical and scientific terms, even when derived from foreign languages, often adhere to specific rules to maintain precision and international understanding. The Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words in these specialized domains requires careful consideration. In many scientific fields, terms are deliberately kept in their original or standardized Latin or Greek forms to ensure they have a universal meaning, irrespective of the reader's native language.

For example, binomial nomenclature in biology uses Latin or Latinized Greek names for species (e.g., *Homo sapiens*). These terms are typically italicized and follow strict naming conventions. Similarly, medical and chemical terms often retain their foreign roots. The principle here is accuracy and universality over anglicization.

When incorporating foreign technical or scientific terms, it is vital to verify their correct spelling and usage within the specific discipline. Authors should consult subject-specific glossaries, encyclopedias, and style guides in addition to CMOS. If a term is essential for conveying precise meaning and is not commonly understood in an anglicized form, it should be presented as accurately as possible, often with an explanation or definition upon its first use. The goal is to communicate complex information effectively without sacrificing scientific integrity.

Proper Nouns and Titles in Foreign Languages

Proper nouns and titles in foreign languages present a distinct set of challenges for the Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words. Generally, foreign proper nouns—names of people, places, organizations, and specific artworks or publications—should be rendered as they appear in their original language. This preserves the identity and authenticity of the entity being named.

However, just as with common words, very famous or widely known foreign proper nouns may have established anglicized spellings. For instance, the city of Florence is known as "Firenze" in Italian, but in English, "Florence" is the standard and preferred name. The same applies to historical figures or artworks where an English name has become universally recognized.

For titles of books, films, or other creative works, CMOS generally recommends retaining the original title and italicizing it. If the work has a well-known official English translation, the original title can be given in parentheses upon first mention, or vice versa, depending on the context and emphasis desired. For example, "Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (originally *Madame Bovary*)" or "the novel *Les Misérables* (The Miserable Ones)." The aim is to provide the reader with the most accurate and helpful information, allowing them to identify the work easily.

When in Doubt: Consulting CMOS and Other Resources

Navigating the nuances of the Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words can sometimes lead to uncertainty. When faced with a decision about how to spell or present a foreign term, the primary resource should always be the latest edition of The Chicago Manual of Style itself. Its comprehensive index and detailed chapters on matters of style, including foreign words, provide authoritative guidance.

Beyond CMOS, reputable English dictionaries are invaluable. They will indicate whether a foreign word has been adopted into English, its common spelling, and whether it is typically italicized. For specific subject areas, specialized glossaries or style guides pertinent to that field can offer further clarification, especially concerning technical and scientific terminology.

If a word is not found in standard references or if its usage remains ambiguous, it is often best to err on the side of caution. This might involve retaining original spelling and diacritics, italicizing the word, or providing a brief definition or explanation in a footnote or parenthetically. Ultimately, the goal is always clarity and accuracy for the reader, ensuring that the borrowed word enriches, rather than complicates, the text.

Conclusion

Mastering the Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words is an ongoing process that requires diligence, a keen eye for detail, and a commitment to clarity. By understanding the underlying principles of CMOS—prioritizing reader comprehension, respecting linguistic origin, and recognizing the natural evolution of language—writers can confidently integrate foreign terms into their work. Whether it involves carefully preserving diacritics, judiciously italicizing loanwords, or adopting widely accepted anglicized forms, adhering to these guidelines ensures a polished and professional final

product that upholds the highest standards of written communication.

FAQ Section:

Q: Does the Chicago Manual of Style always require foreign words to be italicized?

A: No, the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) does not always require foreign words to be italicized. Generally, foreign words and phrases that are not considered part of standard English vocabulary should be italicized. However, once a foreign word becomes sufficiently common and integrated into English usage, it typically loses its need for italicization. The key factor is the degree of assimilation and recognition within the English-speaking community.

Q: How does CMOS handle diacritics (accents, umlauts, etc.) in foreign words?

A: CMOS generally advises retaining diacritical marks when they are an integral part of a foreign word's spelling and when their inclusion does not hinder readability or typesetting. These marks are important for accurate pronunciation and meaning. However, CMOS permits the omission of diacritics for terms that are very common in English, have established anglicized spellings without the marks, or when technical limitations are a concern.

Q: Should I use the original spelling or an anglicized spelling for a foreign word?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style spelling of foreign words suggests using the word as it is conventionally spelled in its original language unless there is a widely accepted anglicized version or the term has become thoroughly integrated into English. For words that are very common in English, an anglicized spelling is often preferred for readability. For less common or technical terms, preserving the original spelling is usually more appropriate. Consulting a standard English dictionary is recommended.

Q: What is the rule for capitalizing foreign words in English text?

A: Capitalization of foreign words in English generally follows standard English rules. They are capitalized if they are proper nouns, begin a sentence, or are part of a title according to English conventions. While some languages (like German) capitalize all nouns, CMOS typically advises adopting English capitalization rules unless the foreign capitalization is essential to the meaning or part of an established title.

Q: How should I handle foreign titles of books or other creative works?

A: CMOS recommends retaining the original title of foreign works and italicizing it. If there is a well-known official English translation, you can provide it in parentheses upon first mention, or vice versa, depending on which is more relevant to your audience. For instance, "the novel *Les Misérables* (The Miserable Ones)."

Q: Are there exceptions for very common foreign words that are no longer italicized?

A: Yes, absolutely. Many foreign words have become so common in English that they are treated as standard vocabulary and are no longer italicized. Examples include "ballet" (French), "algebra" (Arabic via Latin), "piano" (Italian), and "rodeo" (Spanish). These words have been fully adopted into the English lexicon.

Q: What if I encounter a foreign technical or scientific term that is not common?

A: For foreign technical and scientific terms, precision and international understanding are paramount. CMOS and disciplinary standards generally advocate for maintaining the original or standardized spelling (often Latin or Greek-based) to ensure universal meaning. Always verify the correct spelling within the specific field and consider providing a definition or explanation upon its first use if the term is not widely understood.

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