

chicago manual of style spelling

The Chicago Manual of Style spelling is a cornerstone of meticulous writing and editing, guiding authors and publishers toward consistency and clarity in their work. Understanding its nuances is crucial for anyone aiming for a polished and professional final product, whether for academic papers, books, or digital content. This comprehensive guide delves into the core principles of Chicago-style spelling, exploring its preference for American English, its approach to common spelling variations, and its recommendations for specific word categories. We will also examine how the manual addresses hyphenation, compound words, and the importance of maintaining a consistent spelling approach throughout a document.

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American English as the Standard for Chicago Manual of Style Spelling

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) generally designates American English as its default spelling standard. This means that, unless a specific context or client dictates otherwise, writers and editors adhering to Chicago style should employ American English spellings. This choice impacts a wide range of words that have distinct American and British English variants, such as "color" versus "colour," "analyze" versus "analyse," and "defense" versus "defence."

This preference for American English spelling is not arbitrary; it reflects the manual's origins and its primary audience in the United States publishing industry. For authors and editors working with a US-based publisher or targeting a predominantly American readership, adopting this standard ensures immediate recognition and compliance. It simplifies the editing process by providing a clear, established baseline for all spelling decisions, reducing the need for constant arbitration between differing conventions.

However, CMOS is not rigidly dogmatic. The manual acknowledges that specific projects or publishers may have their own style preferences. For instance, a British publisher would naturally expect British English spellings. In such cases, the editor's role is to identify and apply the client's or project's specified standard consistently. The key takeaway is that while American English is the default, flexibility and adherence to project-specific requirements are paramount.

Handling Spelling Variations in Chicago Style

One of the most common challenges in any style guide is addressing words that have multiple acceptable spellings. The Chicago Manual of Style offers clear guidance on how to navigate these variations, emphasizing consistency above all else. When faced with a word that has both American and British English forms, or different acceptable spellings within American English itself, the primary directive is to choose one and stick with it throughout the entire document.

For example, words ending in "-or" in American English often end in "-our" in British English (e.g., "labor" vs. "labour," "honor" vs. "honour"). Similarly, verbs ending in "-ize" in American English are often spelled with "-ise" in British English (e.g., "organize" vs. "organise," "realize" vs. "realise"). The Chicago manual's default is the "-or" and "-ize" forms, but it permits the "-our" and "-ise" spellings if they are used consistently.

The manual also addresses variations within American English, such as "judgment" versus "judgement." While both are considered acceptable, CMOS recommends "judgment" for its brevity and common usage in legal and general contexts. The critical point is that an editor must make a choice and then meticulously apply that choice, ensuring that the spelling of a word does not waver from one page to the next. This practice prevents a jarring inconsistency that can detract from the professionalism of the text.

The Role of Dictionaries in Spelling

Dictionaries are indispensable tools when adhering to any style guide, and the Chicago Manual of Style is no exception. CMOS recommends consulting reputable, current dictionaries for spelling verification. Prominent among these are Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Webster's New World College Dictionary, and the Oxford English Dictionary. When a word has multiple acceptable spellings listed, the dictionary will often indicate which is more common or preferred, which can aid in making a consistent choice.

The manual advises editors to choose the spelling that appears first in the dictionary entry if both are listed as acceptable, or to consult the dictionary's usage notes for guidance. This hierarchical approach within the dictionary itself provides a secondary layer of authority, helping to resolve ambiguities. It is crucial to remember that the dictionary serves as a reference, and the ultimate decision on which spelling to use for consistency rests with the editor or author following CMOS principles.

Navigating Suffixes and Prefixes

The Chicago Manual of Style provides specific guidelines for spelling when suffixes or prefixes are added to base words. This is particularly relevant for words involving doubling consonants or changes in vowels. For example, when adding "-ing" or "-ed" to words that end in a silent "e," the "e" is usually retained (e.g., "care" becomes "caring," "move" becomes "moved"). However, exceptions exist, such as "argue" becoming "arguing."

Similarly, the doubling of the final consonant of a base word before a suffix (like "-er" or "-able") depends on whether the final syllable is stressed and whether the word ends in a single vowel followed by a single consonant. For instance, "refer" becomes "referring" and "referred" because the final syllable is stressed. In contrast, "benefit" becomes "benefiting" and "benefited" as the stress is not on the final syllable. CMOS provides clear rules for these scenarios to ensure uniformity.

Specific Spelling Conventions in Chicago Manual of Style

Beyond general principles, the Chicago Manual of Style offers guidance on the spelling of specific categories of words that commonly present challenges. These include proper nouns, place names, scientific and technical terms, and words borrowed from other languages. Adhering to these specific conventions contributes to the overall accuracy and credibility of the written work.

For proper nouns, such as company names, brand names, and personal names, the manual emphasizes the importance of using the exact spelling provided by the owner of the name. This often means accepting unconventional capitalization or spelling if that is how the entity or individual presents themselves. For place names, consistency with established geographical authorities is usually recommended.

Scientific and technical terms should be spelled according to their established usage within the relevant discipline. This often involves consulting specialized dictionaries or style guides for those fields. For words borrowed from other languages, CMOS generally advises using the spelling that is most commonly accepted in English, but it also acknowledges and permits more authentic spellings if they are widely recognized and understood by the target audience.

Foreign Words and Loanwords

The treatment of foreign words and loanwords in Chicago style is nuanced. The general principle is to adopt spellings that have become Anglicized and are therefore familiar to English readers. Many words that were once considered foreign borrowings are now fully integrated into English and are subject to standard English spelling rules. For example, words like "ballet" or "cafe" are typically spelled without their original diacritics unless their inclusion is essential for meaning or context.

However, for words that retain a distinct foreign character or where the original spelling is crucial to conveying meaning, CMOS allows for the retention of original spellings and diacritical marks. This is often the case with proper nouns from other languages or specialized vocabulary. When in doubt, consulting a good dictionary that notes the origin of the word and its common English usage is advisable. Consistency in how these words are presented is key; once a decision is made about including diacritics, it should be applied uniformly.

Numbers and Numerals

While not strictly a spelling issue, the Chicago Manual of Style has extensive guidelines on when to spell out numbers and when to use numerals, which is a critical aspect of textual presentation and consistency. Generally, CMOS recommends spelling out numbers from zero through one hundred and using numerals for larger numbers. However, exceptions abound, particularly for percentages, ages, measurements, and in certain contexts like tables or technical writing where clarity and conciseness are prioritized.

For instance, while "twenty-five" would be spelled out, "150" would be written as a numeral. But quantities of money, like "\$10," are typically presented as numerals. The manual stresses the importance of consistency within a document. If a decision is made to spell out a certain range of numbers, it should be applied rigorously. This rule also extends to ordinal numbers, where "first," "second," etc., are spelled out, but "1st," "2nd" might be used in specific contexts like addresses or rankings.

Hyphenation and Compound Words in Chicago Style

The Chicago Manual of Style provides detailed instructions on hyphenation, which significantly impacts the appearance and sometimes the meaning of words, effectively acting as a form of "spelling" in compound constructions. Compound words, formed from two or more words, can be open (two words separated by a space), closed (one word), or hyphenated. CMOS offers guidelines to determine which form is appropriate.

A key principle for hyphenation is when two or more words function as a single descriptive unit modifying a noun. In such cases, they are often hyphenated when they precede the noun but not when they follow it. For example, a "well-known author" is hyphenated, but "the author is well known." This prevents ambiguity and clarifies the relationship between the words.

The manual also addresses the evolution of compound words. Many compounds that were once hyphenated become closed over time as they become more common and integrated into the language. For instance, "e-mail" has largely become "email." CMOS encourages authors and editors to consult dictionaries for the current preferred form of compound words, but it reiterates that consistency is paramount. If a dictionary offers multiple forms, the choice should be made and applied uniformly throughout the text.

When to Hyphenate

Hyphenation is typically employed to avoid ambiguity or to link words that function together as a single concept. Common scenarios include compound modifiers that appear before the noun they modify, such as "state-of-the-art technology" or "long-term effects." This helps readers understand that "state-of-the-art" is a single idea describing "technology," rather than implying that the technology is "state" and also "of the art."

Another common use of hyphens is in compound numbers from twenty-one to ninety-nine when spelled out, like "thirty-five." Prefixes like "ex-," "self-," and "all-" are also frequently hyphenated, as in "ex-wife," "self-esteem," and "all-encompassing." The Chicago manual provides comprehensive lists and rules for these situations, emphasizing that context and clarity are the guiding principles. Overuse of hyphens can make text difficult to read, so judicious application is advised.

When Not to Hyphenate

Conversely, hyphenation is generally avoided when the words are already clearly understood as a unit or when the meaning is unambiguous. For example, adverbs ending in "-ly" are usually not hyphenated when they modify an adjective or participle, even before a noun, such as "highly effective method." The adverb "highly" clearly modifies "effective," and no hyphen is needed to clarify this relationship.

Furthermore, when a compound modifier consists of an adverb followed by a participle, hyphenation is typically not required. For instance, "a quickly made decision" does not need a hyphen between "quickly" and "made" because "quickly" inherently modifies "made." The Chicago Manual of Style encourages writers to rely on dictionaries to determine the established form of compound words, especially when they are common. If a compound word is consistently written as one word or as two separate words in reputable dictionaries, that is usually the preferred form, and hyphenation should be avoided.

Consistency in Chicago-Style Spelling

The overarching principle guiding Chicago Manual of Style spelling is consistency. Regardless of the specific choices made regarding American versus British English, or the resolution of minor variations, the most critical factor is that the chosen spelling is applied uniformly throughout the entire document. Inconsistency in spelling can create a sense of carelessness and undermine the author's or editor's credibility.

This commitment to consistency extends to all aspects of spelling discussed, from general word choices to the hyphenation of compound words and the treatment of foreign terms. An editor's primary responsibility is to identify and correct spelling errors and to ensure that the established spelling conventions of the project are maintained from beginning to end. This requires diligent proofreading and a keen eye for detail.

The Chicago Manual of Style provides the framework, but the execution relies on the careful attention of the writer and editor. By understanding and applying its principles, particularly the emphasis on consistency, authors can produce polished, professional, and error-free work that adheres to the highest standards of editorial practice. The goal is always to facilitate clear communication, and consistent spelling is a fundamental element of achieving that goal.

The Importance of a Style Sheet

For complex projects or ongoing publications, maintaining consistency in Chicago-style spelling is greatly facilitated by the use of a style sheet. A style sheet is a document that records all the editorial decisions made for a particular project, including spelling preferences, hyphenation rules, capitalization, and other stylistic conventions. It serves as a reference guide for all individuals working on the project, ensuring that everyone is operating under the same set of guidelines.

When it comes to spelling, a style sheet might list specific words that have variable spellings and indicate which version has been chosen for the project (e.g., "dialogue" over "dialog," "program" over "programme"). It would also note any specific rules adopted for hyphenating compound words that might not be explicitly covered or could be subject to interpretation within CMOS. The creation and diligent use of a style sheet are invaluable for large-scale projects, ensuring uniformity across all content produced.

Proofreading for Spelling Accuracy

Even with the best intentions and the most thorough style sheets, the final stage of proofreading is indispensable for catching any residual spelling errors. Proofreading is the last chance to identify and correct mistakes before a document is published. This involves a careful, detailed read-through specifically focused on spotting inconsistencies and errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and formatting.

When proofreading for Chicago Manual of Style spelling, one should pay close attention to words that were flagged in the style sheet, common typos, and any words that might have been inadvertently changed during the editing or typesetting process. Utilizing different proofreading methods, such as reading the text aloud or reading it backward, can help to isolate words and focus on their spelling without being distracted by the meaning of sentences. This final quality control step is crucial for ensuring that the document meets the high standards of accuracy expected in professional writing.

References and Further Consultation

While this article provides a comprehensive overview of Chicago Manual of Style spelling, the ultimate authority remains the manual itself. Writers and editors are encouraged to consult the latest edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* for the most up-to-date and detailed guidance. It is an invaluable resource for navigating the complexities of editorial style, including all aspects of spelling and punctuation.

Furthermore, the recommended dictionaries, such as Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary, should be readily accessible. These resources are essential for verifying spelling, understanding etymology, and resolving ambiguities. For specialized fields, consulting authoritative glossaries or style guides specific to those disciplines may also be necessary. A commitment to ongoing learning and reference is a hallmark of professional writing and editing.

Q: Does the Chicago Manual of Style prefer American or British English spelling?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style generally prefers American English spelling as its default. This means that words like "color," "analyze," and "defense" are typically used. However, the manual allows for the consistent use of British English spellings if a project requires it.

Q: How does CMOS handle words with multiple acceptable spellings?

A: CMOS emphasizes consistency above all else. When a word has multiple acceptable spellings, the manual advises choosing one and using it uniformly throughout the entire document. Dictionaries are recommended for guidance on which spelling is more common or preferred.

Q: What is the Chicago Manual of Style's approach to hyphenating compound words?

A: CMOS provides detailed guidelines for hyphenating compound words, especially compound modifiers that precede the noun they modify (e.g., "well-known author"). The goal is to avoid ambiguity and ensure clarity. Dictionaries are often consulted for the established form of compound words.

Q: Are there specific categories of words that CMOS addresses with unique spelling rules?

A: Yes, CMOS addresses specific categories such as proper nouns, place names, scientific and technical terms, and foreign words and loanwords. For proper nouns, exact spelling is crucial, while for technical terms, adherence to discipline-specific usage is recommended.

Q: How important is consistency in Chicago Manual of Style spelling?

A: Consistency is the most critical principle in Chicago-style spelling. Inconsistent spelling throughout a document can detract from its professionalism and credibility. Therefore, once a spelling choice is made, it must be applied rigorously.

Q: What role do dictionaries play in Chicago-style spelling decisions?

A: Reputable and current dictionaries, such as Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, are essential resources for verifying spelling and resolving variations. They often indicate preferred or more

common spellings, aiding in consistent application.

Q: Does CMOS recommend spelling out numbers or using numerals?

A: CMOS has specific guidelines for numbers. Generally, it recommends spelling out numbers from zero through one hundred and using numerals for larger numbers, but there are many exceptions based on context, such as percentages, ages, and measurements. Consistency in application is key.

Q: What is a style sheet and how does it relate to Chicago Manual of Style spelling?

A: A style sheet is a document that records all editorial decisions for a project, including spelling preferences. It is a valuable tool for maintaining consistency in Chicago-style spelling, especially for large or ongoing projects.

Q: What is the Chicago Manual of Style's stance on foreign words and loanwords?

A: CMOS generally advises adopting Anglicized spellings for common loanwords. However, it permits the retention of original spellings and diacritical marks for words that retain a distinct foreign character or where the original spelling is crucial to meaning.

Q: Is it ever acceptable to use British English spelling with the Chicago Manual of Style?

A: Yes, while American English is the default, the Chicago Manual of Style allows for the consistent use of British English spellings if specified by a client or publisher, or if the target audience is primarily British. The key is uniform application.

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