

# chicago manual spelling variations

The Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) is a cornerstone for many writers and editors, and understanding its nuances is crucial for producing polished, professional work. Among these nuances, the treatment of spelling variations stands out as a frequent point of inquiry. Whether dealing with British versus American English, preferred spellings of specific words, or even hyphenation choices that affect spelling, the Chicago Manual provides clear guidance. This comprehensive article delves into the various aspects of Chicago Manual spelling variations, exploring its stance on international English, common spelling choices, and the reasoning behind its recommendations. We will examine how the manual helps writers navigate potential ambiguities and establish consistency in their texts.

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## Understanding the Core Principles of CMOS Spelling

The Chicago Manual of Style, in its most recent editions, primarily advocates for American English spelling as the default for texts intended for a primarily American audience. This doesn't mean it entirely dismisses other English variations, but rather establishes a clear baseline for consistency. The manual emphasizes clarity, readability, and adherence to established lexicographical standards. Editors and writers are encouraged to consult reputable dictionaries, such as Merriam-Webster or the Oxford English Dictionary, for guidance, understanding that even these authoritative sources may offer multiple valid spellings.

The underlying philosophy is that a text should maintain a uniform approach to spelling throughout. Inconsistency can be distracting to the reader and may undermine the author's credibility. Therefore, the manual's guidance on spelling variations is rooted in the principle of making informed, deliberate choices and then applying them rigorously. This approach ensures that the visual presentation of the text remains uncluttered and professional, allowing the content to take center stage.

## American vs. British English: Navigating the Divide

One of the most common areas of divergence in English spelling lies between American and British conventions. The Chicago Manual of Style acknowledges this difference and generally directs users to adopt American spellings unless the subject matter or intended

audience clearly dictates otherwise. This means favoring spellings like "color" over "colour," "center" over "centre," and "analyze" over "analyse." The rationale is to provide a consistent standard for the majority of its users.

However, the manual is not dogmatic. If a text is specifically about British culture, history, or is intended for a British readership, the use of British spellings is permissible and often preferable. The key is to make this decision consciously and apply it consistently. Editors might flag instances where American and British spellings are mixed within the same document, suggesting a standardization to one or the other. This choice should be documented and communicated to all parties involved in the editing process.

## When to Consider British English Spellings

There are several scenarios where embracing British English spellings aligns with the goals of clear and effective communication according to CMOS principles:

- **Target Audience:** If the primary audience for the work resides in the United Kingdom, Australia, or other Commonwealth nations where British English is prevalent, using British spellings can enhance reader familiarity and reduce potential distraction.
- **Subject Matter:** Works focusing on British historical events, literature, or specific cultural contexts may benefit from the authentic use of British English spellings to maintain an appropriate tone and sense of place.
- **Authorial Preference:** If the author has a strong preference for British spellings and has consistently used them in their previous work, allowing this preference to continue can be a pragmatic choice, provided it is applied uniformly.
- **Published Works:** When collaborating with publishers or institutions that have established style guides favoring British English, adherence to those guidelines is paramount.

## The Importance of Consistency

Regardless of whether American or British English spellings are chosen, the paramount principle is consistency. The Chicago Manual of Style heavily emphasizes this point. A document that randomly mixes "theater" and "theatre," or "program" and "programme," can appear unprofessional and may even confuse readers. Therefore, once a choice is made, it should be applied throughout the entire manuscript. This extends to all forms of spelling, including word endings, letter combinations, and the presence or absence of certain letters.

# Preferred Spellings and Common Variations

Beyond the broader American vs. British distinction, the Chicago Manual of Style addresses numerous specific word spellings. These often involve words that have alternative forms, sometimes due to historical linguistic shifts or differing etymological influences. The manual typically favors the most commonly accepted and widely used spelling in American English, often as determined by major dictionaries.

For instance, the manual generally recommends spellings like "dialog" over "dialogue" (though "dialogue" is also acceptable), "gray" over "grey," and "judgment" over "judgement." It also weighs in on words with silent letters or those that have undergone simplification over time. The goal is to present a clear, unambiguous recommendation that aligns with contemporary usage in the intended linguistic sphere.

## Navigating Lexical Ambiguities

When faced with a word that has multiple acceptable spellings, the Chicago Manual of Style advises writers and editors to:

- **Consult a Reputable Dictionary:** The primary step is always to check a current, authoritative dictionary. For American English, Merriam-Webster is often the go-to. For British English, the Oxford English Dictionary is a standard.
- **Prioritize Clarity and Familiarity:** Choose the spelling that is likely to be most familiar to the target audience and least likely to cause misreading or hesitation.
- **Check for Specific Style Guide Recommendations:** If working within a specific publishing house or organization, their internal style guide might have explicit preferences that supersede general CMOS recommendations.

## Examples of Common CMOS Spelling Preferences

While not exhaustive, here are a few common examples of spellings often preferred or discussed in the Chicago Manual of Style:

- **Catalog** (vs. catalogue)
- **Defense** (vs. defence)
- **Jewelry** (vs. jewellery)
- **License** (verb and noun, vs. licence for noun in British English)
- **Offense** (vs. offence)
- **Practicing** (vs. practising for noun in British English)

- **Sulfur** (vs. sulphur)
- **Theater** (vs. theatre)

It's important to remember that the manual often notes when both spellings are considered acceptable, but it usually designates a primary recommendation for consistency.

## Hyphenation and Its Impact on Spelling

Hyphenation is a critical component of word formation and can directly influence how a word is spelled, particularly when it involves compound words or modifiers. The Chicago Manual of Style provides extensive guidelines on hyphenation, which, in turn, affect spelling. For example, when an adjective precedes a noun and forms a compound modifier, it is often hyphenated. This can change the perceived word unit and thus its spelling.

Consider terms like "state-of-the-art" technology versus "state of the art" technology. The hyphen connects the words to function as a single descriptive unit. Without the hyphen, the words might be interpreted differently. The CMOS rules on hyphenation aim to enhance readability and prevent ambiguity, ensuring that compound modifiers are clearly understood as modifying the noun that follows.

## Rules Governing Compound Words

The manual's approach to compound words, especially those formed with prefixes or that function as compound adjectives, is detailed. For instance, it addresses whether to hyphenate words with prefixes like "re-," "pre-," "anti-," and "non-." The decision often hinges on whether the prefix is joined to a proper noun or number, or if the resulting word could be misread. The guidelines evolve as language does, with some formerly hyphenated compounds becoming closed or single words over time.

For example, terms like "cooperate" (without a hyphen) are now standard, whereas historically they might have been "co-operate." Similarly, "email" is now universally accepted over "e-mail." The CMOS provides a framework for making these decisions based on established patterns and current usage, always prioritizing clarity and ease of reading.

## When Hyphens Create or Alter Spelling

The act of hyphenating can effectively create a new, composite spelling. For example, "long standing" might become "long-standing" when used as an adjective before a noun. This changes the visual presentation and the grammatical function of the word. The CMOS offers guidance on when to hyphenate, when to write compounds as single words (e.g., "website"), and when to keep them as two separate words (e.g., "world class" as a noun phrase, but "world-class" as an adjective).

The manual also addresses the use of hyphens in compound numbers (e.g., "twenty-one") and in fractions used as adjectives (e.g., "a two-thirds majority"). These rules, while seemingly minor, contribute significantly to the overall correctness and professionalism of a written work, ensuring that variations in hyphenation do not lead to unintended spelling

errors.

## **Consistency: The Golden Rule of CMOS Spelling**

The overarching principle that binds all discussions of Chicago Manual spelling variations is consistency. No matter which spelling convention is adopted—American English, British English, or a specific preference for a particular word—the critical imperative is to maintain that choice throughout the entire document. The CMOS views inconsistency in spelling as a significant flaw that detracts from the professional quality of a text.

This applies not only to individual words but also to the use of hyphens, apostrophes, and capitalization, all of which can interact with spelling. An editor working under CMOS guidelines will meticulously track these choices to ensure uniformity. The goal is to create a seamless reading experience where the reader's attention is not drawn to stylistic irregularities.

## **Establishing a Style Sheet**

For larger projects or collaborations, creating a style sheet is an essential tool for enforcing consistency in spelling and other stylistic elements. A style sheet is a document that records all the specific choices made regarding the manuscript's style, including:

- Preferred spelling of commonly varied words (e.g., "gray" vs. "grey").
- Rules for hyphenation of specific compound words or prefixes.
- Treatment of numbers, dates, and abbreviations.
- Capitalization and punctuation preferences.

By documenting these decisions, all contributors can refer to the style sheet, ensuring that everyone is working with the same set of rules. This proactive approach prevents inconsistencies from arising and makes the editing process more efficient.

## **The Role of Proofreading**

Even with meticulous planning, errors can still occur. Therefore, thorough proofreading is the final bastion of spelling consistency. A skilled proofreader will have an eye for detail and will catch any deviations from the established style. This final check ensures that the manuscript adheres strictly to the Chicago Manual's guidelines and the project's specific style choices, guaranteeing a polished and professional final product.

# Specialized Fields and Lexical Choices

The Chicago Manual of Style recognizes that certain specialized fields may have their own unique terminology and preferred spellings. While the manual provides general guidelines, it also acknowledges the importance of adhering to the conventions of specific disciplines. For example, scientific and technical writing may require adherence to the spelling conventions dictated by specific scientific bodies or dictionaries within those fields.

In such cases, the general CMOS rules might take a backseat to the established norms of the subject matter. An editor working on a scientific paper, for instance, would be expected to be familiar with the standard terminology and spelling used within that particular scientific community, consulting specialized glossaries or style guides as needed. This ensures that the text is not only grammatically correct but also lexically appropriate for its intended audience and field.

## Consulting Discipline-Specific Resources

When working with content from specialized domains, it is crucial to consult resources specific to that field. This might include:

- Scientific dictionaries and encyclopedias.
- Style guides published by professional organizations (e.g., the American Medical Association Manual of Style).
- Journals or publications within the discipline that set their own editorial standards.

The Chicago Manual of Style itself often advises writers to consult the appropriate authorities for their field. This principle of deferring to specialized knowledge is key to maintaining accuracy and credibility in niche subject areas.

## Balancing General and Specialized Conventions

The challenge lies in balancing the general principles of the Chicago Manual with the specific requirements of a specialized field. The manual advocates for a pragmatic approach: use the general rules where they apply and are most effective, but defer to specialized conventions when they are more appropriate, necessary for clarity, or dictated by the field itself. The ultimate goal remains clear, accurate, and consistent communication.

## Resources for CMOS Spelling Guidance

Navigating the intricacies of Chicago Manual spelling variations can sometimes be challenging, even for seasoned writers and editors. Fortunately, the Chicago Manual of Style itself is the primary and most authoritative resource. Its comprehensive index and clear explanations provide direct answers to many common queries.

Beyond the manual, a good quality dictionary is an indispensable tool. For American

English, Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary or unabridged versions are excellent choices. For British English, the Oxford English Dictionary is the definitive authority. These dictionaries not only provide spellings but also offer pronunciation, etymology, and usage notes, which can be invaluable in making informed decisions about spelling variations.

## **Leveraging Digital Tools**

In the digital age, various online resources can also aid in managing spelling variations. Many word processing programs include dictionaries and style checkers that can be configured to follow the Chicago Manual of Style. While these tools are helpful for catching obvious errors, they should not be relied upon exclusively. Human judgment and a thorough understanding of the CMOS principles remain essential for nuanced decisions.

Furthermore, reputable style blogs and editing forums often discuss specific issues related to CMOS spelling. These can provide additional insights and practical advice, though it's always best to cross-reference information with the official manual or authoritative dictionaries to ensure accuracy. The commitment to ongoing learning and reference is key to mastering the details of Chicago Manual spelling variations.

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## **FAQ**

### **Q: Does the Chicago Manual of Style strictly enforce American English spelling?**

A: The Chicago Manual of Style primarily advocates for American English spelling as the default for texts intended for a U.S. audience. However, it permits the use of British English spellings if the subject matter or intended audience clearly dictates this choice, provided consistency is maintained.

### **Q: How does the Chicago Manual of Style handle words with multiple acceptable spellings, like "gray" and "grey"?**

A: The manual generally favors the most commonly accepted and widely used spelling in American English, as determined by reputable dictionaries like Merriam-Webster. For "gray" vs. "grey," CMOS typically prefers "gray." The critical principle is consistency in whichever spelling is chosen.

### **Q: What is the Chicago Manual of Style's stance on**

## **hyphenation and its impact on spelling?**

A: The Chicago Manual of Style provides detailed guidelines on hyphenation, which directly affect spelling, particularly with compound words and modifiers. It advises on when to hyphenate to enhance clarity and prevent ambiguity, thus influencing the visual and grammatical form of a word.

## **Q: Is it permissible to mix American and British English spellings in a document according to CMOS?**

A: No, the Chicago Manual of Style strongly advises against mixing American and British English spellings within the same document. The paramount rule is consistency; once a spelling convention is chosen, it should be applied uniformly throughout the entire text.

## **Q: How does the Chicago Manual of Style address spelling in specialized fields like science or medicine?**

A: The manual acknowledges that specialized fields may have their own unique terminology and preferred spellings. In such cases, CMOS generally defers to the established conventions of that specific discipline, recommending consultation with field-specific resources and style guides.

## **Q: What are some common examples of spelling variations addressed by the Chicago Manual of Style?**

A: Common examples include "catalog" (vs. catalogue), "defense" (vs. defence), "gray" (vs. grey), "judgment" (vs. judgement), and "theater" (vs. theatre). The manual typically offers a preferred spelling for consistency.

## **Q: How can I ensure I am adhering to Chicago Manual of Style spelling guidelines?**

A: The best way is to consult the latest edition of The Chicago Manual of Style itself. Additionally, use authoritative dictionaries (like Merriam-Webster for American English), create a style sheet for your project, and ensure thorough proofreading to catch any inconsistencies.

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