

Lingua Franca and Beyond

British or American English – Should we be bothered?

We all know that while writing any text, keeping spelling consistent – British or American English – is important. Often, we are frustrated by challenges related to ensuring consistency, particularly when clients cannot make up their mind in which English version they want their documents written. Some of us recall bitter feelings while searching for language information in poorly written instructions for authors or trying to understand preferences for regulatory documents. Should we be bothered? What is behind the differences?

Leaving aside medical writing requirements, have we ever thought that the spelling differences between British and American English reflect the historical flow of human migration, and political and cultural influences? As every other language, English has changed over the centuries and has been influenced by different languages, such as: Latin, Greek, Arabic, German and above all French. It all started with the Norman invasion in 1066 when William the Conqueror took over England and became king. He introduced French, or more precisely the Norman language, as the official language not only for authorities such as the Anglo-Norman court and the government but also for literature.

It lasted for almost 300 years, until 1349 when the University of Oxford changed their teaching language from French or Latin to English. These 300 years had a very strong impact on the English that we know today. According to different sources, one-third to two-thirds of English words are of French origin.¹ However, perhaps we should consider not only the origin of words but also the way that they are spelled, for example: *queen*, *ship* and *should* according to Old English should be spelled *cwen*, *scip* and *scolde*.² Getting into British–American spelling differences, words such as the British *colour* and *humour* were adopted from Old French and then their spelling was simplified by Americans, and they became *color* and *humor*. Christa Bedwin will tell you more about these differences – understanding of which will make our lives as medical writers easier. Christa has been writing, editing, and teaching writing with scientists, engineers, and textbook publishers since 1997, and internationally since 2012. She grew up in the Canadian Rocky Mountains on a cattle ranch before travelling and living in different parts of the world. She also writes novels, teaches yoga, and loves sustainable organic farm volunteering in Europe.

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British, American, Canadian, and Australian spelling

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“If the English language made any sense, a catastrophe would be an apostrophe with fur.”

– cartoonist Doug Larson

European, Canadian, Indian, African, and Australian English normally mostly follow British spelling, with some national and regional variations. This group of Englishes is known as Commonwealth English. You might sometimes

want to submit papers to American journals, however, and that means using American English spelling.

Why and how is American spelling different?

The answer is actually more scientific than you might assume. When Americans started their country and decided on their own spelling, they decided to try to make it more sensible and scientific. Remember, this was the period of history when revolution, optimisation, industrialisation, and efficiency were the prime ideas in society.

In a nutshell, British English spelling results

from the polyglot experience of an indigenous language being revised, superseded, changed, and added to by many invaders over the centuries, for example: Picts, Celts, Gauls, Romans, Normans, Anglo-Saxons, Vikings. By contrast, American English seeks to make some phonetic sense of the craziness from a single industrial perspective. Just be glad they didn't go as far as they could have done. For example, we say you “bought” something, with that silent -ough, even though all you hear is “bot”.

So, if you are wondering why American spelling seems to be missing some letters, now you know why: industrial efficiency!



Dictionaries

You can change your Microsoft Word dictionary to English (United Kingdom), English (Canada), English (Australia), or many other English language choices. In my current version of Word, you do this under Tools → Language. If you are using a different version of Word, Google will help you solve this problem!

The most common spelling error that I have seen in scientific papers this year is for papers that are going to European sources to spell modelled and modelling with one *l*. That is the correct spelling if you are submitting to an American journal, but if you are submitting to UK,

European, or Canadian sources, modelling and modelled should use *ll*, as seen in the Oxford English Dictionary, <https://www.oed.com>, and the many spin-off localised Oxford English Dictionaries, including the Canadian one.

If you want to spell in Australian English, use the Macquarie Dictionary:

<https://www.macquariedictionary.com.au>

If you want to spell in American, the dictionary of choice is usually Merriam-Webster's dictionary: <https://www.merriam-webster.com>

Guess what the most common spelling error was that I saw in 2022 in scientific papers?

By the way, all of these dictionary pages offer amusing word games, and particularly in Macquarie's, some very entertaining and interesting articles about how words come about and other fun language topics.

I hope that answers some of your questions. I am always happy to hear from you on LinkedIn or by email.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Table 1. Typical Commonwealth versus American English spelling

Type	Typical Commonwealth spelling	American spelling
Verbs ending in ise/ize	Use <i>ize</i> , so: analyze, organize, maximize/minimize Note: this is a modern trend. Older and more British sources may still use <i>organise</i> and <i>maximise</i> , but <i>-ize</i> is becoming more and more common these days.	analyze, organize, maximize/minimize
Nouns ending in our/or	Use <i>our</i> , so: colour, favourable, neighbour, labour	color, favorable, neighbor, labor
Nouns ending in re/er	Use <i>re</i> , so: centre, kilometre, but meter for an instrument such as: pH meter	center, kilometer, meter
Single <i>l</i> /double <i>l</i> in the past tense of verbs	Use <i>ll</i> , so: fuelling, modelling, modelled, travelled	fueling, modeling, modeled, traveled
Digraphs <i>ae</i> and <i>oe</i>	Use <i>ae</i> and <i>oe</i> , so: archaeology, palaeontology, oestradiol, coeliac	archeology, paleontology estradiol, celiac