

chicago manual of style spelling guide

The Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide is a cornerstone for authors, editors, and publishers seeking to maintain consistency and professionalism in their written work. Navigating the nuances of American versus British English spelling, compound words, and proper nouns can be a complex task, but understanding the principles outlined in this authoritative style guide simplifies the process. This comprehensive article delves into the essential aspects of the Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS) spelling rules, offering practical advice and clear explanations to enhance your manuscript's clarity and polish. We will explore the fundamental differences in spelling conventions, address common challenges with hyphenation and word compounding, and provide guidance on specialized terminology.

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Understanding American vs. British English Spelling in CMOS

The Chicago Manual of Style primarily adheres to American English spelling conventions, a crucial distinction for writers targeting a predominantly North American audience. This means that, by default, CMOS favors spellings like "color" over "colour," "center" over "centre," and "analyze" over "analyse." Understanding this default preference is the first step in applying the manual correctly. However, CMOS also acknowledges the validity and necessity of using British English spellings in certain contexts, particularly when dealing with authors whose primary language is British English or when quoting directly from British sources. The key is consistency within a single work; once a choice is made between American and British spellings for a particular word or a category of words, it should be maintained throughout the manuscript.

When a writer needs to decide which convention to follow, the audience and the subject matter often dictate the best approach. For instance, a historical novel set in England might naturally incorporate British spellings to enhance authenticity. Conversely, a business report aimed at a global audience with a strong American presence would almost certainly adopt American English spellings. The Chicago Manual of Style provides extensive guidance on these decisions, emphasizing that the editor's or author's primary goal should be to serve the reader and ensure clarity. The manual advises against mixing spellings arbitrarily, which can lead to confusion and detract from the professional appearance of the text.

The '-or' vs. '-our' Distinction

One of the most frequently encountered differences between American and

British English spelling, and a significant focus within the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide, is the use of '-or' versus '-our' at the end of words. American English consistently uses '-or' in words such as "flavor," "labor," "neighbor," and "humor." British English, on the other hand, retains the '-our' ending in these same words: "flavour," "labour," "neighbour," and "humour." CMOS firmly directs users towards the '-or' spelling for American English publications. It's important to note that this rule is not absolute and there are exceptions, but for the vast majority of common words, this distinction holds true and is a fundamental aspect of applying the CMOS spelling guide.

The '-ize' vs. '-ise' Conundrum

Another prominent area of divergence covered by the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide is the '-ize' versus '-ise' suffix. American English generally favors the '-ize' ending, as seen in words like "organize," "recognize," and "apologize." This preference stems from the etymological roots of these words, often tracing back to Greek "-izein." British English, however, often employs the '-ise' ending for the same words: "organise," "recognise," and "apologise." While CMOS primarily endorses the '-ize' spelling for American English, it also acknowledges that the '-ise' form is acceptable, particularly in works published in the UK or by British authors. The critical directive remains: choose one form and stick with it consistently throughout your document.

Doubling Consonants: A Matter of Region

The Chicago Manual of Style also addresses the subtle yet significant differences in consonant doubling, particularly concerning suffixes added to words. For example, words ending in 'l' often double the 'l' in British English before a vowel suffix, as in "travelling" and "counselling." In American English, as guided by CMOS, these words are typically spelled with a single 'l': "traveling" and "counseling." This rule applies to many common words, and adhering to the specified convention for your target audience is vital for maintaining stylistic integrity. Ignoring this can result in minor but noticeable inconsistencies that a discerning reader might perceive.

Handling Hyphenation and Compound Words

The formation and spelling of compound words present a persistent challenge for many writers, and the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide offers detailed recommendations to navigate this often-complex terrain. Compound words can appear as a single word (e.g., "bedroom"), as two separate words (e.g., "living room"), or as a hyphenated word (e.g., "well-being"). The primary goal of CMOS in this area is to promote clarity and readability. The choice between these forms often depends on the specific word, its etymology, and how it functions grammatically within a sentence.

A key principle in the CMOS approach to compound words is that they often evolve over time. What might start as a hyphenated compound can become a closed compound (single word) through common usage. CMOS advises authors and

editors to consult dictionaries for the most current and accepted forms. However, the manual also provides general principles to guide decisions when a dictionary entry is ambiguous or when dealing with newly coined or less common compounds.

When to Hyphenate Compound Modifiers

One of the most critical aspects of hyphenation addressed by the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide concerns compound modifiers. When two or more words function together as a single adjective before a noun, they are typically hyphenated. For example, in the phrase "a well-known author," "well-known" acts as a single unit modifying "author." Without the hyphen, "well known author" could be misinterpreted, perhaps suggesting that the author is known in a well-like manner. CMOS provides clear guidelines on this, emphasizing that this rule applies when the modifier precedes the noun but is usually omitted when the modifier follows the noun (e.g., "The author is well known").

There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. Adverbs ending in "-ly" are generally not hyphenated when they form part of a compound modifier (e.g., "a brightly lit room"). Also, common established compounds that are readily understood as a unit, even before a noun, may not require hyphenation, such as "high school student." The Chicago Manual of Style encourages careful consideration of each instance to ensure the hyphen is used effectively to clarify meaning.

Open vs. Closed Compounds

The distinction between open compounds (two separate words) and closed compounds (one word) is another significant area of focus within the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide. For many common terms, established usage dictates the form. For example, "post office" is an open compound, while "bookshelf" is a closed compound. CMOS relies heavily on reputable dictionaries to determine the standard spelling for these terms. However, when faced with less common combinations or newly developing terms, the manual suggests considering clarity. If an open compound might be misread as separate words with different meanings, closing or hyphenating it might be necessary.

Consider the difference between "ice cream" (open) and "icebox" (closed). The meaning is clear in both cases due to established usage. However, for less common combinations, such as a phrase that might become a compound, careful consideration is needed. The manual's advice is practical: err on the side of clarity. If a two-word term is consistently used as a single concept, it may be evolving towards becoming a closed compound, but until it is widely recognized as such, maintaining its open or hyphenated form as per dictionary guidance is advisable.

Navigating Proper Nouns and Technical Terms

Proper nouns and specialized technical terms require careful attention to spelling, and the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide offers specific recommendations for their accurate representation. Proper nouns, including names of people, places, organizations, and specific entities, must be spelled exactly as they are officially recognized. This can sometimes involve nonstandard spellings, capitalization, or even the inclusion of accents or special characters. The core principle is adherence to the correct, established spelling for each entity.

Technical terms, especially those within scientific, medical, or academic fields, also demand precision. These terms often have specific Latin or Greek roots, and their spellings can be highly particular. Misspelling a technical term can not only be a sign of carelessness but can also fundamentally alter the meaning or lead to confusion among readers familiar with the specialized subject matter. The Chicago Manual of Style emphasizes the importance of consulting authoritative glossaries, specialized dictionaries, and style sheets relevant to the specific field being discussed.

Capitalization and Specificity of Proper Nouns

The Chicago Manual of Style's approach to proper nouns extends beyond just spelling to include capitalization. While the general rule is to capitalize words that name specific entities, there are many nuances. For instance, common nouns used as part of a formal name are capitalized (e.g., "the Library of Congress"), but when used generically, they are not (e.g., "a large library"). Similarly, titles used before a name are capitalized (e.g., "President Biden"), but titles used generically are not (e.g., "the president"). The spelling of the proper noun itself, however, remains paramount. If a person's name is spelled "Søren," for example, it must be rendered exactly that way, not as "Soren," unless the individual or their official documentation dictates otherwise. The Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide underscores the need for meticulousness in capturing these specifics.

Consistency in Technical and Scientific Terminology

When dealing with technical and scientific terminology, the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide stresses the importance of consistency and accuracy above all else. This means that if a particular scientific term has a standard spelling within its field, that spelling must be used. For example, in chemistry, terms like "sulfur" (American) vs. "sulphur" (British) are addressed, with CMOS generally favoring the American spelling. In biology, terms like "mitochondrion" (singular) and "mitochondria" (plural) must be used correctly. Authors are strongly advised to consult the style guides and glossaries specific to their disciplines. For instance, the American Chemical Society (ACS) has its own style guide for chemical nomenclature, which might supersede general CMOS rules for publications within that specific scientific community.

Common Spelling Pitfalls and CMOS Solutions

Even experienced writers can fall prey to common spelling errors, and the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide offers solutions and best practices to avoid these pitfalls. These errors often arise from homophones (words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings), easily confused words, and unintentional typographical errors. The manual's strength lies in its comprehensive approach, offering guidance that addresses both general rules and specific exceptions.

One of the most pervasive issues is the confusion between similar-sounding words. For example, "their," "there," and "they're" are frequently mixed up. Similarly, "its" (possessive pronoun) and "it's" (contraction of "it is" or "it has") are a common source of error. The Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide implicitly or explicitly guides users to understand the distinct meanings and grammatical functions of these words, thus ensuring the correct spelling is chosen based on context.

Homophones and Easily Confused Words

The Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide implicitly tackles the problem of homophones and easily confused words by promoting clarity and accuracy. While the manual may not list every single pair, its emphasis on precise language and context-dependent meaning naturally guides writers to the correct spellings. For instance, understanding the difference between "affect" (usually a verb) and "effect" (usually a noun) is crucial. Similarly, distinguishing "principal" (main, head person) from "principle" (rule, belief) requires a grasp of their distinct roles in a sentence. The CMOS approach encourages writers to verify the meaning and usage of words that are commonly confused, often by cross-referencing with a good dictionary.

Here is a list of commonly confused words that writers should be mindful of when following the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide:

- Accept vs. Except
- Than vs. Then
- To vs. Too vs. Two
- Complement vs. Compliment
- Loose vs. Lose
- Stationary vs. Stationery
- Weather vs. Whether
- Conscious vs. Conscience

Suffix and Prefix Interactions

The addition of prefixes and suffixes can sometimes alter the spelling of a base word, and the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide provides clear

rules for these situations. For example, when adding a prefix like "un-" or "re-" to a word, the original spelling of the base word is usually retained (e.g., "unhappy," "redo"). However, when adding suffixes, rules about dropping or doubling final letters come into play, as discussed earlier with consonant doubling. For instance, when adding "-able" or "-ible," the spelling of the base word might change. The CMOS provides guidance on these common suffix interactions, aiming to maintain a predictable and logical spelling system.

The Role of the Dictionary in CMOS Spelling

At the heart of adhering to the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide is the consistent and judicious use of a reputable dictionary. The manual itself does not aim to be an exhaustive dictionary of every word; rather, it provides principles and guidance for how to approach spelling. When in doubt about the spelling of a word, especially one that is less common, a technical term, or a proper noun, the first and most reliable resource is a current, authoritative dictionary. CMOS consistently directs writers and editors to consult such resources to resolve ambiguities and ensure accuracy.

The choice of dictionary is also important. For American English, dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary or Webster's Third New International Dictionary are often recommended. For British English, the Oxford English Dictionary is the definitive authority. The Chicago Manual of Style encourages the use of dictionaries that reflect the intended audience's language conventions and that are regularly updated to include new words and evolving spellings. This reliance on dictionaries ensures that the spelling used is not only consistent with the manual's guidelines but also reflects current linguistic practice.

Selecting the Right Dictionary

The Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide implicitly advises selecting dictionaries that are appropriate for the specific context of the writing. For a manuscript intended for a North American audience, a prominent American English dictionary is the primary choice. These dictionaries will reflect the preferred spellings of words like "color," "theater," and "dialogue." Conversely, if the work is intended for a British audience or has a strong connection to British English, a leading British English dictionary should be consulted for spellings like "colour," "theatre," and "dialogue." The manual emphasizes using a single, consistent source for such decisions to avoid introducing inconsistencies.

Using Dictionaries for Compound Words and Proper Nouns

Dictionaries are indispensable tools when it comes to determining the correct form of compound words and verifying the spellings of proper nouns. As mentioned earlier, many compound words have become standardized as either open (two words), closed (one word), or hyphenated. A dictionary will clearly

indicate the accepted form for these words. For example, "website" is now almost universally spelled as a closed compound, whereas terms like "decision making" may still be found in open or hyphenated forms depending on usage and context. For proper nouns, while the general rule is to use the officially recognized spelling, dictionaries can sometimes offer guidance on less common or historically significant names and places. When faced with an unfamiliar or potentially tricky proper noun, consulting a dictionary is a proactive step toward ensuring accuracy.

Style and Consistency: The Ultimate Goal

Ultimately, the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide serves a singular, overarching purpose: to ensure consistency and clarity in written communication. While the manual provides specific rules and guidelines for a vast array of spelling-related issues, from American vs. British English to hyphenation and technical terms, the underlying philosophy is one of creating a unified and professional reading experience. Inconsistency in spelling can be jarring and distracting for the reader, undermining the credibility of the author and the authority of the text.

The strength of the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide lies not only in its detailed rules but also in its emphasis on a writer's or editor's judgment. While the manual offers definitive answers in many cases, it also empowers the user to make informed decisions based on the specific needs of their project. The goal is always to produce a text that is easy to read, understand, and trust. Adhering to its principles, even for seemingly minor details like spelling, contributes significantly to the overall quality and impact of the written word.

The Authoritative Voice of CMOS

The Chicago Manual of Style has established itself as an authoritative voice in the realm of professional writing and editing. Its comprehensive nature and decades of refinement have made it a go-to resource for academics, publishers, and serious writers across disciplines. The spelling guide within CMOS is not merely a collection of arbitrary rules; it is a carefully considered set of recommendations designed to uphold clarity, precision, and uniformity in published works. By following the CMOS spelling guidance, writers signal their commitment to a high standard of professionalism and their respect for the reader's experience. This authoritative approach instills confidence in the written product, assuring readers that meticulous attention has been paid to every detail.

Achieving a Polished and Professional Manuscript

Achieving a polished and professional manuscript is the direct outcome of diligently applying the principles found in the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide. Every decision regarding spelling, from the choice between "color" and "colour" to the correct hyphenation of a compound adjective, plays a role in the final presentation of the work. A manuscript that is free from spelling errors and inconsistencies demonstrates care and attention to

detail, which in turn enhances its readability and impact. Authors and editors who master the intricacies of CMOS spelling contribute to a more effective and trustworthy communication of ideas, ensuring that the reader's focus remains on the content rather than on distracting typographical flaws. The commitment to these standards elevates the writing from merely functional to truly professional.

FAQ

Q: What is the primary English dialect that the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide follows?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide primarily follows American English spelling conventions. This means that spellings like "color," "center," and "analyze" are generally preferred over their British English counterparts like "colour," "centre," and "analyse."

Q: Are there any exceptions to the American English spelling rule in CMOS?

A: Yes, while CMOS defaults to American English, it acknowledges that British English spellings may be appropriate in certain contexts, such as when quoting directly from British sources or when an author's native language is British English. The key is consistency within a single work.

Q: How does the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide handle hyphenation for compound words?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide provides detailed recommendations for hyphenation, particularly for compound modifiers that precede a noun (e.g., "well-known author"). The general principle is to hyphenate when the combination functions as a single adjective to avoid ambiguity. It also advises consulting dictionaries for established open, closed, or hyphenated forms of compound words.

Q: What is the recommended approach for dealing with technical and scientific terms according to CMOS?

A: For technical and scientific terms, the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide emphasizes accuracy and consistency above all else. It strongly advises authors and editors to consult authoritative glossaries, specialized dictionaries, and style guides specific to the relevant field to ensure correct spellings.

Q: How does CMOS address the difference between "-ize" and "-ise" endings?

A: The Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide generally favors the "-ize" ending for verbs (e.g., "organize," "recognize") in American English.

However, it acknowledges that the "-ise" spelling is also acceptable and is often used in British English. The critical requirement is consistent usage of one form throughout the document.

Q: What is the role of a dictionary when using the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide?

A: A reputable dictionary is an essential tool when adhering to the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide. CMOS directs writers and editors to consult dictionaries for the correct spelling of words, especially less common ones, technical terms, and compound words, to resolve ambiguities and ensure accuracy.

Q: How does the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide help in achieving a professional manuscript?

A: By providing clear rules and principles for spelling, the Chicago Manual of Style spelling guide helps writers and editors maintain consistency and avoid errors. This attention to detail results in a polished, professional manuscript that enhances readability and credibility by ensuring the reader's focus remains on the content.

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