

American and British English: Quick Guide for Scientific Writing

The noticeable differences between these two varieties of English pertain mostly to spelling and punctuation. When you use American English, the commas and the periods go inside the quotes—no matter what. (Yes, it's strange. We don't know who started this trend, maybe the early Americans wanted to be rebellious toward the British in the early years of America's history. There are also some subtle spelling differences that need to be addressed, either by changing them over (if you have the target journal) or by addressing the author asking what English conventions they prefer using. These differences can be spotted by using our handy guide to American vs. British English. Our guide below covers differences pertaining to spelling, grammar, and vocabulary.

(I) Spelling

This table, from our fellows at Oxford, should help with the spelling patterns.

British spelling	American spelling	Examples of British/American spellings	Comments
-ae-	-e-	aestivate/estivate aetiology/etiology anaesthetic/anesthetic haemoglobin/hemoglobin leukaemia/leukemia	Beware aero- words, which are the same in British and American spellings, e.g. aerofoil, anaerobic
-oe-	-e-	oestrogen/estrogen oesophagus/esophagus oedema/edema diarrhoea/diarrhea dyspnoea/dyspnea manoeuvre/maneuver	
-re	-er	centre/center fibre/fiber litre/liter metre/meter titre/titer	
-our	-or	behaviour/behavior colour/color humour/humor tumour/tumor	Note that 'tumor' is becoming the standard international spelling in gene and protein names (e.g. tumor necrosis factor)
-logue	-log	analogue/analog catalogue/catalog dialogue/dialog homologue/homolog	Note that -logue forms are sometimes used in US texts
-lyse	-lyze	analyse/analyze catalyse/catalyze hydrolyse/hydrolyze haemolyse/hemolyze	Applies only for verbs derived from 'lysis'
-ical	-ic	anatomical/anatomic biological/biologic morphological/morphologic serological/serologic	Note that -ical forms are often used in US texts

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-l	-ll	enrol/enroll distil/distill instalment/installment	But beware, e.g., install/install, compel/compel, which are spelled the same in British and American English
-lled, -lling, -eller	-led, -ling, -eler	labelled/labeled labelling/labeling modelled/modeled modelling/modeling modeller/modeler travelled/traveled travelling/traveling traveller/traveler	
-trophic, -trophin	-tropic, -tropin	adrenocorticotrophic/adrenocorticotropic gonadotrophin/gonadotropin thyrotrophin/thyrotropin	Words suffixed by 'trophic' meaning nourishment (e.g. heterotrophic) are spelled the same in British and American English, as are words suffixed by 'tropic' meaning directional growth (e.g. geotropic)

Lose the 'l'. You might've noticed from the table that the British add extra l's to certain words (e.g., **travelled** or **labelled**). But, for words that have a double-l before a suffix is added, the second l is eliminated when an **-ly** enters the picture. For example, Americans write **skillfully**, whereas the British write **skilfully**. (The word **skill** has a double-l before the addition of a suffix, thus this rule is applied to it.)

To 'z' or not to 'z'. A common issue that is seen in the transition between American and British English is **-ize vs. -ise** (or **-yze vs. -yse**). Below are some words that preserve **-ise** no matter which version of English you use.

advertise
 advise
 arise
 comprise
 compromise
 demise
 despise
 devise
 disguise
 enfranchise
 excise
 exercise
 franchise
 improvise
 incise
 merchandise
 premise
 revise
 supervise
 surmise
 surprise
 televise

Able to remain silent(e). The use of a silent 'e' in British English is common practice. You might see these pop up in spellings that have the suffix **-able** at the end. For example, **likable** (American English) vs. **likeable** (British English). This phantom 'e' also pops up in words like **aging** (American English) vs. **ageing** (British English).

Heading in the right direction. British English favors the ending **-wards** (e.g., **towards**) while Americans use **-ward** (**toward**).

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comma, while the British opt to not use it at all. Properly and carefully placed accents can change your opinion of what something means; they may be comma heathens, but just *listen* to the BBC.

Quoting the greats. There are a few things about quotes that need to be ironed out. With the exception of some scientific disciplines (like math or computer science), Americans put their commas and periods **inside the quotes**, no matter what. Your house could be attacked by rabid bears, and the great American grammarians would still not budge on this matter. On the contrary, unless it's dialogue, the Brits put their periods and commas **outside** of the quotes.

Quote-ception. What you think you know about double quotes and single quotes is not what you *actually* know about them. Leonardo DiCaprio channelling aside, Americans use **double quotes** when they quote something, and use **single quotes** when they quote something inside another quote. For example, "Sir, I'm not sure you understand, but the word 'tweet' has nothing to do with computers. Are you from the future?" However, in British English, this would be reversed: 'Sir...the word "tweet" has nothing to do...'. In other words, their default is to use single quotes, but to employ double quotes when there's a quote within a quote.

Comma-gain? The use of the comma after abbreviations like **e.g.** and **i.e.** is an American convention. For example, Americans would write the following: "The clam, i.e., a common mollusk, is definitely tasty." The British would write this: 'The clam, i.e. a common mollusk, is definitely tasty.'

The perfect present. The Brits have a thing for the present perfect tense to express an action that happened rather recently or directly affects the current moment. For example, 'I've just devoured a massive sandwich.' Note the use of 'just' in this sentence. The use of **just**, **already**, and **yet** are staples in instances of the present perfect in British English. In American English, you can get away with saying, "I devoured a massive sandwich." You may get some weird looks (usually in the flavor of "Who cares? I ate a salad."), but it's correct for manuscripts utilizing American English.

No stopping us now. Americans put periods (full stops) after abbreviations like **Mr., Mrs., St., Dr.,** and so on. Not so for British English folks: **Mr, Mrs, St, Dr, ...**

(III) Vocabulary

This is *Spelling: The Sequel*, but with an added twist.

Below is a handy table we've adapted to fit our need-to-know terms. Perhaps you are editing a cover letter or are working on a paper in transportation engineering; either way, these are often the terms that slip through the cracks.

British	American
aluminium	aluminum
anti-clockwise	counterclockwise
At weekends	On weekends
grey	gray
plough	plow
programme	program
transport	transportation
tyre	tire
Yours faithfully	Yours truly / Respectfully yours
Yours sincerely	Sincerely yours

Putting it mildly. A cultural habit, in both America and Britain, that directly affects writing in a scientific manuscript is the use of euphemisms. Scientific papers should *not* have them, no matter which version of English you are applying to the paper. No