

Some differences between US and UK English

Note that I started keeping these notes some twenty to thirty years ago, and much of the usage may be a little outdated.

4. Spelling

Working with my Apple Mac over the years has shown me quite clearly the main differences between US and UK spelling. Summarizing (or UK *summarising*) we can make the following observations:

1. US uses *-or* where UK uses *-our* in words like *favor-favour, color-colour*.
2. US uses *-er* where UK uses *-re* in words like *center-centre, liter-litre*.
3. US often uses *-ize* where UK uses *-ise*, (I shall say more about this in a minute).
4. Consonant doubling before *-ed, -ing, -or, -er* as in *kidnaped-kidnapped, traveling-travelling, councilor-councillor, traveler-traveller* (US spelling first in each case). This is quite a complex area and I shall look at it in more detail in a future article in this series.
5. US uses *-ense* where UK uses *-ence* in words like *defense-defence*, (although some Americans also use the *-ence* form). But both countries use the *-ense* form in some words, e.g. *immense, incense* and *intense*.
6. Some words ending in *-l* in US English end in *-ll* in UK English. Compare *instal-install, instalment-installment*. (US spelling first in each case.) Not all Americans, however, accept the single *-l* in words like *instal, skilful*, etc.
7. Many words beginning in *in-* in US English begin with *en-* in UK English, e.g. *insure-ensure*. (US spelling first in each case.) Again, not all Americans accept this. Many British speakers distinguish between *inquiry* and *enquiry*, giving the two words separate meanings, the first being a tribunal and the second a request for information.
8. Words which are usually spelled with *ae* and *oe* spelling in British English (*diarrhoea, haemorrhage, manoeuvre*) are often spelled with a single vowel in US English (*diarrhea, hemorrhage, maneuver*).
9. US English has *-am* and *-og* endings where British has *-amme* and *-ogue*, e.g. *program-programme, dialog-dialogue*. (US spelling first in each case). However, when talking about computers, the British write *program* and they also write *disk* instead of the usual *disc* when referring to any other flat, circular object.
10. Hyphenating, always a problem for everybody, is more common in word compounding in US English than in British English. For example, where the American is likely to write *co-operate* the British usually write *cooperate*. I shall look at the question of hyphens in more detail in a future article.
11. Informal American sometimes uses words like *nite, thru, tho, sox*, etc, especially in advertising, which are not common in British English, where we would usually write *night, through, though, and socks* in both formal and informal English. There is clear evidence here that UK usage is embracing the US forms.

‘-ise’ or ‘-ize’ ?

It is common in English to add the letters *-ise* or *-ize* to a noun or adjective in order to form a verb. This ending comes from Greek and if we add it we get words like *brutalise, hospitalise, legalise* and *transistorise*. As I shall show in a moment the *-ize* ending is equally possible in these cases, and I use the British form throughout this article (in fact I always use it) not because I feel it to be ‘better’ but

because I have to choose one and I happen to be British.

This suffix is often applied to words which come from Greek, like the Greek word *eidolon*, (a phantom), which gives us the word *idolise*. However it can just as well be applied to words which come from Latin. The word *computerise*, for example, comes from the Latin *computare* (to count), and words like *mesmerise*, (after Dr F.A.Mesmer), use the same pattern even though they have been invented spontaneously.

Some purists don't like to make words like this and object to words like *finalise* and *politicise* because they either say something that other verbs (*finalise* = conclude, end, finish, etc.) say just as well or are 'jargon' words and should only be used in a technical context. However, whether you like it or not, it seems to be a process that is here to stay.

Some words **must always** be spelled with the *-ise* ending, and never with *-ize*. These include the following:

arise	advertise	chastise	circumcise	comprise	compromise
despise	devise	disguise	enterprise	excise	exercise
improvise	incise	merchandise	promise	revise	supervise
surmise	surprise				

The reason for this is usually that the root to which the ending is added is not a word in itself. There is no constituent word **ar* or **comprom* for example, in *arise* and *compromise* as there is a word *final* in *finalise*. (It is true that there is a word *advert* which might appear to give rise to *advertise*, but it should be remembered that *advert* is an abbreviated form of *advertisement*, and the verb *advertise* was in common use before the word *advert* was used as an abbreviation).

Apart from the words in the box above, the choice of *-ise* or *-ize* depends on the person writing. Generally speaking, those who follow the British tradition use the *-ise* form while those who are influenced by American usage prefer the *-ize* version. However, more people in the United Kingdom now seem to be beginning to use the *-ize* ending. In fact many people are not consistent about this, and different speakers will group different sets of words under the *-ise* and *-ize* categories, some even spelling the same word in different ways on different occasions. My advice to my students is to choose one form, 'learn' it and then use it consistently.

Perhaps in a generation or so the *-ize* form will be used for all words except those in the box above, but British die-hards (like me) will probably not change in their lifetimes so the process may be a slower one. It is hard to change what you learned at school, especially in matters of spelling, which English speakers have 'drilled' into them.

We should also remember the words *paralyze* and *analyze*, where the letters *y* and *z* are accepted by all speakers of English. And of course noun/verb contrasts like *practice* / *practise* are different in American and British English; there seems to be no general agreement on whether to use the *-ice* or *-ise* forms for verbs or nouns.

Spelling is important because people are often judged by the way they write. However, please remember that one 'variety' of spelling is not 'better' than any other, although it is better to try to be consistent. Choose the way you want to spell, and then try to follow the guidelines of either one way or the other.