

Alternative spellings

Spelling is often thought to be either right or wrong. However, some words can be spelt correctly in more than one way. In many dictionaries you will find that acceptable alternative spellings of words are given. The preferred or more generally accepted choice is usually listed first, followed by the alternative/s.

An acceptable or preferred spelling can change over time, for a variety of reasons. Sometimes a particular spelling becomes more widely used and more generally accepted.

The lists that follow below will help you to decide when an alternative spelling is acceptable and when it is not.

One important thing to remember regarding alternative spellings is that, where two options are correct, it is best to choose one of the alternatives and stick to it within a single piece of writing. Otherwise the inconsistency in spelling may detract from the content of the writing.

Is it **ise** or **ize**?

Many verbs can be spelt with either **ise** or **ize**: for example, **finalise/finalize**, **equalise/equalize**.

However, there are some verbs that can only be spelt with **ise**: for example, **advertise**, **advise**, **despise**, **devise**, **disguise**, **improvise**, **revise**, **supervise**, **surprise**, **televise**. Rather than learning by heart the words that must use **ise**, it can be easier simply to use the **ise** spelling for all words. In US spelling, however, **ize** is the standard form.

Add **ed** or **t**?

Usually, **ed** is added to words to make the past tense. However, there is a group of words that can be spelt with **ed** or **t**: for example, **burned/burnt**, **dreamed/dreamt**, **leaped/leapt**, **learned/learnt**, **leaned/leant**, **spelled/spelt**, **spoiled/spoilt**, **kneeled/knelt**. Both spellings are correct, but the **t** spelling is generally more widely used in UK spelling. If it is possible to use the word as an adjective, the **t** spelling is usually used: for example, **I hate burnt toast**.

Plurals

Adding **s** to words ending with **o**

For nouns ending with **o**, sometimes you add **s** and sometimes **es**. Some words can be spelt only one way: for example, **photos**, **pianos**, **radios**, **kilos**, **tomatoes**, **potatoes**, **heroes**. Other words can be spelt either way: for example, **banjos/banjoes**, **flamingos/flamingoes**, **mangos/mangoes**.

(If you are adding **s** to a verb, then add **es**: for example, **goes**.)

Adding **s** or **ves** to words ending with **f**

When **s** is added to most words ending **f**, the **f** is changed to **v** and **es** is added: for example, **loaves**, **shelves**. However, there are some words where either **fs** or **ves** endings are acceptable: for example, **hoofs/hooves**, **dwarfs/dwarves**.

Other plurals with alternative endings

Some words have two plural spellings: an original spelling, usually from the Latin, and a simpler English version where **s/es** is added. Examples of such words include **radii/radiuses**, **cacti/cactuses**, **fungi/funguses**, **formulae/formulas**, **vertices/vertexes**, **indices/indexes**, **croci/crocuses**. The original spelling is often used in technical contexts. However, the simpler English **s/es** spelling is used in more general contexts: for example, **indexes** is usually used in conversation or informal writing about the parts of books, but **indices** is used in technical contexts. Please note that the following only have one correct plural spelling: **axes**, **crises**, **analyses**.

Adding other suffixes

Adding the **y** suffix to words ending with **e**

Words ending with **e** usually drop the **e** to add the **y** suffix: for example, **smoky**. However, there are a few words where both dropping and keeping the **e** are acceptable spellings: for example, **nosy/nosey**, **pricy/pricey**.

Adding other suffixes to words ending with **e**

There are some other words ending with **e** where dropping the **e** or keeping it are both correct. The preferred UK spelling usually includes the **e**: for example, **ageing/aging**, **judgement/judgment**, **acknowledgement/acknowledgment**. In **loveable/lovable**, dropping the **e** is usually preferred.

Adding **er** to words ending with **y**

When **er** is added to words ending with **y**, the **y** is sometimes changed to an **i**. In **drier/dryer**, both are correct (as they are in **dryly/drily**); however, **dryer** is usually used for the noun (for example, **hairedryer**) and **drier** for the comparative adjective. Both spellings are also correct in **shyer/shier**.

Adding **ed** to words ending with **s**

In some words it is acceptable either to double or not double the **s** before adding **ed**: for example, both **focused/focussed** and **biased/biassed** are correct.

Other words where there is more than one correct spelling – or a variant

- **among/amongst** (both variants are acceptable, although the **st** version is becoming increasingly uncommon)
- **despatch/dispatch**
- **encyclopaedia/encyclopedia**
- **enquire/inquire**
- **enquiry/inquiry** (usually **inquiry** for a legal inquiry)
- **gypsy/gipsy**
- **jail/gaol** (jail is now more common)
- **jewellery/jewelry**
- **while/whilst** (both variants are acceptable, although the **st** version is becoming increasingly uncommon)
- **yogurt/yoghurt/yoghourt**.

Computer technology

The following words have one correct spelling when used in relation to computer technology and another when used in a more general sense:

- **disk** used for a computer disk
- **disc** in relation to recordings and all other contexts
- **program** for a computer program and as the US spelling
- **programme** in all other contexts.

Hyphenate or not?

Guidelines about when to use a hyphen to link two words, or to join a prefix to a word, are often rough guides only. Some words are written both with and without hyphens: for example, **co-operate/cooperate**, **pre-arranged/prearranged**, **e-mail/email**, **ice-cream/ice cream**.

American (US) spelling

Many words have different spellings in UK English and American (US) English. Children should be taught the guidelines relating to their nationality or the country in which they live. However, they are also likely to come across the equivalent spellings used on the other side of the Atlantic. In some UK dictionaries, for example, the UK spelling is given first and the US spelling as a possible alternative. Children are also likely to come across US spellings when using the internet. It can therefore be helpful to make children aware of the differences between UK and US spellings. It is important that children are also taught to select 'UK or British English' when using a computer spell checker.

Common differences between UK and US spelling include the following:

- words ending **our** end **or** in US English: for example, **colour/color**, **harbour/harbor**, **favour/favor**, **neighbour/neighbor**
- nouns ending **re** end **er** in US English: for example, **theatre/theater**, **centre/center**, **fibre/fiber**
- words ending **ogue** end **og** in US spelling: for example, **catalogue/catalog**, **dialogue/dialog**
- nouns ending **ence** end **ense** in US spelling: for example, **defence/defense**, **licence/license**
- verbs ending **l**, where the **l** doubles if you add a suffix in UK spelling, keep the single **l** in US spelling:
for example, **traveller/traveler**, **canceled/canceled**, **labelling/labeling**, **woollen/woolen**
- as mentioned above, the **ize** spelling is standard in US spelling, whereas **ise** is often favoured in UK spelling.

Others specific words with different spellings include:

- **grey** (UK)/**gray** (US)
- **tyre** (UK)/**tire** (US)
- **aluminium** (UK)/**aluminum** (US)
- **pyjamas** (UK)/**pajamas** (US).