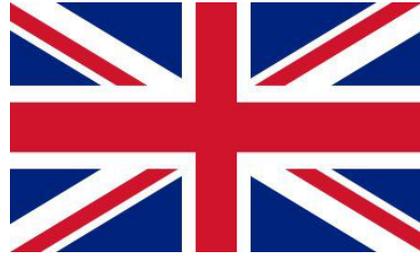


Differences Between American and British Writing



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Introduction

When we read what appears to be improper spellings or misplaced quotation marks, we must not assume it is wrong.

Americans may see text interspersed with seemingly misspelled words such as colours instead of colors, organisation instead of organization, theatre instead of theater, and so on. The former words are more commonly used in Britain.

British writers very well know how to write, and they know their language. What appears odd, improper, or an error to Americans is completely correct on their side of the pond.

This ebook presents a different writing style from what Americans are taught. Most of the examples shown are of how British use their written language. Would an American have to change their writing style if they moved out of the States to Britain and adopt the UK way of writing? Most likely yes, if their writing is targeted to a British audience.

American English is my native language. The examples herein have been found in books and on-line. As I haven't personally interviewed non-American writers, there may be some mistakes.

Henceforth, throughout the text, AE = American English, BE = British English.

Vlad Ostapowicz

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British and American Punctuation Differences

Basic punctuation tips:

- While BE often favors hyphenated compounds, such as counter-attack, AE discourages the use of hyphens where there is no compelling reason.
- In BE, writers typically use two spaces after a semi-colon. AE encourages writers to use just one space.
- While AE has commas and periods placed inside of quotation marks, BE punctuation marks are typically outside of quotation marks.

Quotes with direct speech

AE = "x." BE = 'x'.

AE: Double quotes are obligatory.

AE: Commas and periods go inside of double quotation marks.

AE Example:

"Let's go outside," Mary said.

"I can't understand," she interjected, "why the deadline has been moved up."

BE: Single quotes are *usually* used.

BE: Commas and periods go outside of quotation marks.

BE Example:

'Let's go outside', Mary said.

'I don't understand', she interjected, 'why the deadline has been moved up'.

Note: In BE, quotation marks are sometimes called inverted commas. Single quotes are used more frequently than double quotes for direct speech.

Quotes with other marks

AE & BE properties of question marks, exclamation marks, colons, and semicolons remain pretty much the same in relation to placement of quotation marks.

Periods & Titles of People

AE still uses periods:

Mr., Mrs., and Ms., Dr.

BE omits periods:

Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr

Note:

The use of periods is diminishing in American technical writing and sciences. "AMA style tends not to use periods when other style sources might. Omit the period from honorifics, scientific terms, and abbreviations" (AMA Manual of Style, 9th ed., 1997, p 200).

Examples from the AMA Manual of Style guide:

Dr Hussey

George Hussey, MD

E coli

AMA

Calendar Dates

Take December 2, 2010 for example. Here are a few ways to write it:

12/2/10 (American)

12/2/2010 (American variation)

2/12/10 (British, International)

2010-02-12 (ISO)

A tip on placing a date on international manuals.

I often had to format reference sheets and manuals in different languages. Among those languages, each date format seemed slightly different and confusing, more so since months are sometimes capitalized--and maybe not.

Despite the different ways capitalization is used in other countries, I simplified this task. I kept the date format consistent, yet I used that country's convention on capitalization. I never heard any complaints.

Examples: [month] [date], [year]

décembre 2, 2010 (French)

december 2, 2010 (Danish)

Dezember 2, 2010 (German)

十二月 2, 2010 (Chinese simplified)

Some languages do not capitalize months, week day names, countries, nationalities, or religions.

<http://french.about.com/library/writing/bl-capitalization.htm>

<http://blogs.transparent.com/swedish/the-days-of-the-week-in-swedish/>

<http://www.europa-pages.co.uk/lessons/german-dates.html>

<https://quizlet.com/45748121/italian-months-days-and-seasons-flash-cards/>

Apostrophes

AE still uses the apostrophe, but is becoming less popular when used with acronyms, corporate names, and dates. As stated on-line, referencing "certain plurals": "In general, you should not use an apostrophe for...*abbreviations, or numerical dates.*" (Italics mine.)

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/words/apostrophe-american>

Acceptable:

IBMs General Systems Division was...

The BRICs nations are....

UCLAs tuition over the years....

The 1990s...; or, The '90s.... ('90's looks too awkward. Avoid it.)

Comparison:

AE: Typically we see 1990's (for example)

BE: Typically we see 1990s (for example)

British usage omits the apostrophe in the plural form of dates (e.g., 1980s), whereas the American practice more often includes it (e.g., 1980's). The British style is becoming more popular in America.

Time

AE uses a colon for time:

11:23

BE uses a period for time:

11.23

<http://www.thepunctuationguide.com/british-versus-american-style.html>

Colon

A colon is used for ratios, time (AE), and for introducing a series or an example.

AE places the colon directly after the a word introducing a series.

We need to take the following: a flashlight, batteries, and matches.

BE places a space between the word introducing a series and the colon.

We need to take the following : a flashlight, batteries, and matches.

Note: Another variant is Denmark, which doesn't use any spaces (p 28).

http://beta.visl.sdu.dk/info/world_of_grammar.pdf

Comma vs. decimal point with numbers

AE uses a comma to separate three or more whole numbers.

Cleveland had approximately 390,000 residents during the 2013 census.

BE uses a decimal (or, decimal comma) to separate three or more whole numbers.

London had approximately 8.539 million residents during the 2014 census.

Slash (Virgule)

The slash [/] is a punctuation mark most commonly used to:

- 1) Substitute for *or*, or
- 2) Is used to separate related items of information.

AE: No spaces between a slash and the connected words.

He loves Mexican/American food.

BE: Spaces between a slash and the connected words

He loves Mexican / American food.

1. In BE and Canadian English, a slash is also called a solidus (solidi, pl.).
2. Style note: AMA Manual of Style states, "Use the virgule in dates *only* [my italics] in tables and figures to save space" (9th ed., 1997, p 215).

Paper Size

This is a bit off topic for this e-book and might seem insignificant, but it's important.

Understand where your copy is going to and inform your writing and graphic arts department of who your audience will be.

If writing to an international audience, American letter size paper is *not* the de facto across the globe. A4 is “generally” accepted. (It’s not the same as U.S. legal size paper.)

<http://www.papersizes.org/a-paper-sizes.htm>

In brief: U.S. Letter Size = 8.5” x 11”; A4 = 8.3” x 11.7” (210 x 297mm).

Writers that have mostly plain text in their copy needn’t worry about this too much. Word processing programs can modify the page content easily enough. But if you’re working with more specialized formatting (columns, graphics), you may have to take into consideration the time to convert the paper so the content will “fit” right.

Graphic artists who like to perfect their layout might freak if they find out on the last day of a deadline that they’ll have to place their work on a longer page with narrower (A4) margins.

More sophisticated software like InDesign's CS6 has “Liquid Layouts” (*non-paid endorsement*) offer more control over this conversion. Regardless of how you resize the page(s), be sure your target audience will be able to print your final copy on their own paper/printers without problems. The last thing any company needs is complaints.

Differences in Spelling and Word Use

Subtle spelling differences (by no means complete)

American - British

analyze - analyse

fiber - fibre

apologize - apologise

fulfill - fulfil

behavior - behaviour

gray - grey

canceling - cancelling

labor - labour

capitalized - capitalised

license - licence

capitalization - capitalisation

organization - organisation

center - centre

plow - plough

check - cheque

savior - saviour

color - colour

theater - theatre

favorite - favourite

Word use (by no means complete)

American - British

lawyer = solicitor

pharmacist = chemist

rent = hire

soccer = football

cookie = biscuit

eraser = rubber

Basic spelling changes to remember

- a) Words ending in "-re" in BE have been changed to "-er" in AE. (theatre - theater)
- b) Words ending in "our" in BE have been changed to "or" in AE. (colour - color)
- c) Words ending in "iour" in BE have been changed to "ior" in AE. (saviour - savior)
- d) Words containing the silent letters "ough" in BE have been changed in AE to be spelled phonetically. (plough - plow)
- e) Many words ending in "yse" or "ise" in BE, the S has been changed to Z in AE, although there are exceptions. (analyse - analyze; capitalised - capitalized; capitalisation - capitalization)

Additional Sources

Decimal comma vs. decimal point in Danish punctuation:

https://books.google.com/books?id=Nt5AgAAQBAJ&pg=PA245&lpg=PA245&dq=danish+time+period+colon+comma&source=bl&ots=8x_4nTaX_r&sig=6ktuIwQYFz55FidkNTqJb4GKp2o&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CEIQ6AEwCGoVChMIILqW3YXiyAIVg-wmCh3AJQpy#v=onepage&q=danish%20time%20period%20colon%20comma&f=false

<http://www.gsbe.co.uk/grammar-quotation-marks.html>

<http://grammar.yourdictionary.com/spelling-and-word-lists/correct-spelling-of-words.html>