

Effective Writing in English

A Sourcebook

Spelling guidelines

Mike Hannay
J. Lachlan Mackenzie

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Uitgeverij Coutinho

Postbus 333

1400 AH Bussum

info@coutinho.nl

www.coutinho.nl

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Spelling guidelines

1 Introduction

Nowadays, every important text is written with the help of a word processor. Amongst the standard support on offer is a spelling checker, which can be used either to remove typing errors or to correct spelling mistakes and inconsistencies in the spelling. But it is important to remember that spelling checkers do only a part of your work as far as spelling correction is concerned. The best way to use them is as a first rough correction device. Afterwards you still need to go through the text by hand, because there will often be mistakes that your spelling checker has been unable to detect. A simple example is the form *to* when what you wanted to write was *too*. In other words, there is enough reason for advanced students and professional users of English to have a clear idea of what the major spelling problem areas are, particularly where there are options available and where Dutch usage and English usage differ.

This set of guidelines identifies these areas and gives clear advice on each problem. In identifying the problem areas we have again relied on our collection of essays to determine what actually goes wrong in practice. You will also notice that we have adopted a broad definition of spelling to include problems relating to suffix options, hyphenation and punctuation at word level.

2 A or an?

Although the basic rule for when to use *a* and when to use *an* is straightforward, many advanced users of English become confused when having to decide between *a* and *an* before a word that starts with *h*, and in some cases also *e*, *o* or *u*. For the vowels the rule is that if the word is pronounced as if the first letter were a consonant, specifically *w* or *y*, then you should write *a*; otherwise you should write *an*. This rule has no exceptions:

a ewe	an early-warning system
a one-off arrangement	an only child
a united front	an understandable mistake

Actually, the rule for *h* is equally straightforward: if the *h* is silent, you use *an*; otherwise you use *a*:

an hour	a horrifying thought
an honest man	a hopeless case
an heiress	a happy thought

However, some learners become confused when they see texts which include expressions like *an historic occasion*, *an habitual grin*. This is due to an old-fashioned convention which holds that *an* is used before a non-silent *h* if the first syllable of the word is unstressed. But

since the convention has now almost fallen into disuse, we can say that, like the rule for the vowels, the basic rule for *h* has no exceptions.

A second problem concerns abbreviations that begin with a consonant but which are pronounced as if they begin with a vowel, as in MA (Master of Arts). There might appear to be a choice here. An argument in favour of *a* MA is that M is a consonant and the article must therefore be *a*. An argument in favour of *an* MA is that the pronunciation decides the spelling: because you say *an* MA, you write *an* MA. This second form is definitely the more popular one.

A third and final point relates to mistakes like these:

- ✗ *a* interactive frame
- ✗ *an* too insistent member

For advanced users these are serious mistakes, of course, in that the most basic of rules has been broken. Yet they do occur. What presumably happens here is that you start with, say, *a highly interactive frame* and *an insistent member*, and then decide to remove *highly* and add *too*, respectively. This process has become such a mechanical one that you may well forget that the form of any indefinite article in the immediate vicinity has to be adapted accordingly.

3 Abbreviations

Whether or not it is advisable or acceptable to use abbreviations in a text for normal words and expressions of the language (in contrast to names of institutions etc.) depends to a considerable extent on the type of text. In formal text it is advisable to restrict abbreviations to an absolute minimum. There are a small number of abbreviations which are known as such rather than by the full version, the most common one being without doubt *i.e.*, which stands for *id est*, the Latin for *that is*. Also very frequent is *e.g.*, which stands for *exempli gratia*, the Latin for *for example*. *i.e.* can be used anywhere in a text, but we advise you to reserve *e.g.* for use in note-like sections, such as lists or information in running text given between brackets. Otherwise we recommend that you use *for example* or *for instance*.

In British English there is quite a strong convention that if the last letter of the abbreviation of a single word is the last letter of the word, then there is no full stop at the end of the abbreviation. Thus you write:

Dr	Doctor	Tues.	Tuesday
Mr	Mister	Dec.	December
Mrs	[originally mistress]	para.	paragraph
eds	editors	ed.	editor
St	Saint	St.	Street [the <i>t</i> is the first <i>t</i>]

A notable exception is *no.*, the abbreviation for *number* (from the French *numéro*). This is more often than not written with a full stop to distinguish it from the word *no*, and thus to ease comprehension.

Another problem related to punctuation concerns abbreviations of multi-word expressions. Is it AD or A.D. for *Anno Domini*; is it MA or M.A. for *Master of Arts*?; is it *eg* or *e.g.* for *for example*? The answer is that you will see both, but that there is a very strong tendency nowadays to refrain from punctuation in all these cases. If the abbreviations are just as well known as the expressions they stand for, or perhaps more so, then this tendency is particularly strong, as in *KLM* and *BBC*. Possible exceptions would again be motivated by the desire for disambiguation and hence ease of comprehension. Thus one might still find *U.S.* for *United States*, rather than *US*.

A third and final point concerns a particular problem that Dutch writers have: the use of English abbreviations which unfortunately just do not exist in English. Here are the four big offenders:

- ✕ a.o. among others
- ✕ w.r.t. with regard to
- ✕ f.i. for instance
- ✕ f.e. for example

Note also that none of these four expressions has any standard abbreviated form.

4 **Accents**

As far as accents are concerned, we can be brief and to the point: with the exception of borrowings and proper nouns, accents are not used in English (cf. also Chapter 1 Section 6 of the book). This means not only that they do not occur in the spelling of English words, but also that they cannot be used as a means of showing in writing that there is a word you would like to stress. This is a common technique in Dutch, but is simply unavailable to the writer of English. The following is thus unacceptable:

- ✕ Some patients, however, dó express satisfaction.

Rather, we recommend that you choose a formulation that will allow the reader to readily identify the intended stress pattern, as in:

Some patients, however, certainly do express satisfaction.

If you cannot find an acceptable formulation, then you may as a last resort use italics or underlining.

5 American forms

Unless you are totally confident about all features of American English which differ from British English, or your text is specifically geared towards an American readership, we advise you to adopt British English spelling. Here are some common differences between the two systems:

British English		American English	
ae-	aesthetic	e-	esthetic
-yse	analyse	-yze	analyze (see Section 12 below)
-re	centre	-er	center
-ence	defence	-ense	defense
-our	flavour	-or	flavor
-ll-	marvelled	-l-	marveled (see Section 9 below)
-ou-	mould	-o-	mold
-ogue	catalogue	-og	catalog

There are also individual words which are spelled differently, such as *grey* and *sceptical* in British English versus *gray* and *skeptical* in American. The word *programme* is a special case. If you wish to refer to a 'computerprogramma' then the word you need in both British and American English is *program*; for all other meanings, the British English spelling is *programme*, while the American form is invariably *program*.

6 Apostrophes

In Dutch, apostrophes are used to form plurals with *s* when the noun concerned ends in *a*, *i*, *o*, *u* or *y*, as in *ski's*, *foto's* and *hobby's*. By contrast, English just has a straightforward plural with *s* in these cases: *skis*, *photos*, *visas* etc. An apostrophe here would simply be wrong.

There is one clear exception, and that is the letters of the alphabet when not capitalized. For example, you must write *i's* rather than *is* in a sentence like *there are three i's in 'intelligible'*. The function of the apostrophe in such cases is to facilitate comprehension.

There are also a number of cases where both options, with and without the apostrophe, are available. The main categories are abbreviations and decades. Thus one may find *CFC's* as well as *CFCs*, *CD's* as well as *CDs*, *1960's* as well as *1960s*.

Where ease of comprehension is not a problem, the choice between the two forms might be seen as a matter of style, with the apostrophe being the more conservative and the form without the apostrophe being the more modern option. Our advice is not to use an apostrophe if you can help it. In other words, we urge you to follow the strongly emerging general convention that apostrophes (except to mark genitives), full stops and hyphens are predominantly used in the spelling of words to ease comprehension (see Sections 3 and 10) and should otherwise be avoided.

7 Capital letters

Speakers of Dutch are sometimes uncertain about the Dutch spelling of words relating to countries, languages and nationalities, hesitating about whether *Nederlands* in *de Nederlandse inzending* should be written with a capital or not. In fact, all words in Dutch relating to the categories of country, language and nationality always have a capital, and the situation in English is exactly the same: words like *Latvia*, *Czech*, and *Portuguese* are always capitalized.

However, there are areas where English and Dutch differ. The well-known areas are the days of the week and the months of the year, all of which are spelled with a small letter in Dutch and a capital letter in English, as in *Monday*, *December* etc. By contrast, religious feasts and public holidays are capitalized in both languages. But then another difference arises with compound expressions: while Dutch compounds relating to days, months, feasts and holidays do not receive a capital in Dutch, the capitals remain in English:

English	Dutch
Easter Sunday	eerste paasdag
Whit Monday	pinkstermaandag
Christmas holidays	kerstvakantie

English and Dutch conventions also differ with regard to titles. While in Dutch it is customary to write titles, including abbreviated forms, with a small letter, in English a capital letter is essential.

English	Dutch
Archbishop Desmond Tutu	aartsbisschop Tutu
Queen Elizabeth	koning Willem-Alexander
President Macron	president Macron
Dr W.M. Smits	dr. W.M. Smits
Professor Anna Cale	prof. Anna Cale

Note also that prepositions and articles in Dutch names are spelled in English according to the same conventions that apply in Dutch. This means that if the preposition or article is preceded by a first name or by an initial, then it is not written with a capital letter. However, if it is the first part of the name to be given, or if it is immediately preceded by a title, such as *Mr* or *Mrs*, then a capital letter is necessary. In the case of a preposition followed by an article, as in *van der*, it is only the preposition that is capitalized.

Mr Jan de Wit	De Wit
Mrs R. van der Laan	Mrs Van der Laan
Dr R. in 't Veld	In 't Veld

A final question relating to capitals is what to do after a colon: do you need a capital letter or not? The basic convention is that no capital is required. However, in American texts one often finds a capital letter if what comes after the colon is a full independent clause. Our advice here is to follow the basic convention and not use capitals.

8 Dates

People write dates in different ways, but there are two very strong conventions which are currently applied, one for British English and one for American English. In American English you write

August 25th, 1995

whereas in British English the numbers are more clearly separated:

25 August 1995

Note that no comma is used in the British English version.

A recent trend is to write dates as they are spoken. An example would be *the 16th of July* rather than just *16 July*. While this usage is gaining ground, we advise you to avoid it in formal writing.

One final thing to note about dates is that the specifications *st*, *nd*, *rd* and *th* are gradually disappearing in British English. We advise you to follow the trend and keep dates simple.

9 Double consonants

Many spelling errors are made because the writer does not know whether one or two consonants are needed. As far as verb forms are concerned, the basic rule is that if a suffix such as *-ed*, *-ing*, *-able* and *-er* is added to the stem, then the final consonant is doubled if it follows a stressed vowel:

begin	beginning
omit	omitted
refer	referred
occur	occurring

If the final vowel is unstressed, then there is no doubling of the consonant:

focus	focusing
differ	differed
benefit	benefiting
combat	combated

There is one exception to the latter part of the rule: in British English, *-l* is also doubled after an unstressed vowel, though not in American English:

travel	travelled [BE] traveled [AE]
--------	---------------------------------

In addition to gaining an active command of the rule, it is also important that you recognize single vs double consonants as a major error type in general. Hence we recommend that you commit to memory as many problem words as possible. Common mistakes include:

✗ accomodate	SHOULD READ	accommodate
✗ adress	SHOULD READ	address
✗ agresive	SHOULD READ	aggressive
✗ committment	SHOULD READ	commitment
✗ developpment	SHOULD READ	development
✗ develloped	SHOULD READ	developed
✗ dramaticaly	SHOULD READ	dramatically
✗ professionnal	SHOULD READ	professional
✗ skilfull	SHOULD READ	skilful
✗ succesful	SHOULD READ	successful

10 Hyphens, and one word or two?

It is of great importance to gain a general picture of what kind of language English is with regard to compound expressions. While German is a language where nouns are written together as one word to form a compound, English goes the other way: the words making up a compound expression are usually written as separate words. Dutch would appear to be somewhere in between German and English in that there is a preference for compounds being written as one word, but there is also a fast growing tendency to use the hyphen or even write words separately, possibly under influence from English.

Not surprisingly, Dutch writers of English make two kinds of mistake: they write too many compounds as one word, and they have a tendency to overhyphenate:

✗ the Opiumact	SHOULD READ	the Opium Act
✗ textdata	SHOULD READ	text data
✗ winterseason	SHOULD READ	winter season
✗ research-project	SHOULD READ	research project
✗ group-interaction	SHOULD READ	group interaction
✗ minimum-income	SHOULD READ	minimum income

However, the situation is by no means straightforward. English does indeed make use of all three options: one word, two words, and hyphenation. The best way to look at them is as a reflection of the increasing frequency of an expression. *Schoolteacher*, for instance, started off life as two words; then it came to be written with a hyphen; and finally it was written as one word. The same has presumably happened with *doorbell* and *gunfire*, as well as nouns formed from phrasal verbs, such as *splashdown* and *turnout*. A common feature of these words is that they very rarely have more than three syllables and there is only one stressed syllable, namely the first one.

Our basic advice is to write compounds as separate words in English, unless you have good reason to do otherwise. This means that you should not hyphenate words just

because you believe that they belong together in some way. Rather, you should restrict their use to (a) words hyphenated in the dictionary, and (b) cases where the text becomes much easier to understand. For example, compound adjectives made up of adjective + noun or noun + adjective or participle are always spelled with a hyphen:

a nineteenth-century novel
poverty-stricken neighbourhoods
habit-forming activities

The same goes for when you make a compound verb; here, too, a hyphen is needed to ensure that the two words are taken together by the reader:

to air-condition
to water-cool

Second, a hyphen is valuable when you wish to modify a noun by an expression which is itself a compound:

medium-term developments	BUT	developments in the medium term
a case-study approach	BUT	an approach involving a case study

A rather unfortunate problem for Dutch users arises because of the lack of an equivalent in English for the handy use of the hyphen in Dutch expressions such as *in- en uitvoer*. You just cannot write * *im- and export* in English. And extravagant formulations such as * *Sun- and holidays*, as spotted on an Amsterdam parking meter, are definitely out. Rather, you have to either spell out both words in full, or refrain from signalling the meaning relation altogether and hope that the reader will be alert enough to work out the meaning from contextual clues:

in- en uitvoer	import and export
spannings- en rekvelen	tension and strain fields
groot- en kleinschalige ontwikkelingen	small and large-scale developments
fruitmes en -schaal	fruit knife and (fruit) bowl

An important exception to this rule concerns prefixes which are normally hyphenated anyway. Thus it would not be considered wrong to write *pre- and post-industrial*.

These are troublesome suffixes for Dutch users of English. The main problems relate to differences in meaning and in frequency, and there is also a contrastive problem.

The first problem relates to *-ist* and *-istic*. In Dutch *-ist* is a noun suffix: *Marxist, capitalist* etc. But in English it is both a noun and an adjectival suffix, so that *alongside he is a Marxist/capitalist* you have *Marxist tendencies, capitalist plot* etc. Many Dutch writers will

nevertheless translate words ending in *-istisch* by words ending in *-istic* in English, even when it is not necessary.

The forms *Marxistic* and *capitalistic* do indeed exist but they are less frequent than *Marxist* and *capitalist*. Moreover, there may even be a slight difference in meaning between the two forms, with for example *Marxistic* being slightly less Marxist than *Marxist*. The idea is that the addition of the further suffix with the meaning of 'resembling' reduces the force of the expression.

On top of this, there can be stronger differences in meaning when the *-ist* and *-istic* options in principle exist alongside each other. These differences may be reflected in how the words are used. For example, *nationalist* means roughly 'believing in nationalism' and mainly occurs attributively, with nouns like *movement*, *party* and *beliefs*. By contrast, *nationalistic* means 'having great love for one's country' or even 'fanatically patriotic' and is often used predicatively: one might say of an individual *he is very nationalistic*, but not ✗ *he is very nationalist*.

Then there is the distinction between *-ic* and *-ical*. First of all there are adjectives that only allow one of the two suffixes:

specific
athletic
sceptical
critical
logical

In some cases there is an option:

genetic	genetical
logistic	logistical
problematic	problematical

One form is usually more frequent than the other; for instance, *genetic* is much more common than *genetical*, and is the form used in set expressions such as *genetic code* and *genetic engineering*. There may also be a stylistic difference; for instance, *problematical* is more formal while *problematic* is stylistically neutral. If in doubt about the form to choose, consult a dictionary and choose the first option given.

The outcome of all this is that you really have to commit all the frequent *-ist*, *-istic*, *-ic* and *-ical* adjectives to memory. Here is a short list of words from our essay collection which were spelled wrongly or with the less common form:

✗ authentic	SHOULD READ	authentic
✗ etymologic	SHOULD READ	etymological
✗ linguistical	SHOULD READ	linguistic
✗ scientific	SHOULD READ	scientific
✗ sociologic	SHOULD READ	sociological
✗ syntactical	SHOULD READ	syntactic
✗ touristic	SHOULD READ	tourist

Finally, there are a number of well-known adjectives ending in both *-ic* and *-ical* but with a very distinct difference in meaning:

classic/classical

Both these words have a number of meanings. *Classic* first of all means 'archetypal'; common expressions are *a classic case*, *a classic illustration* and *a classic example* ('schoolvoorbeeld'). It is also used to describe things of great quality, such that they have become the archetype; examples are *a classic analysis* and *the classic works of art*. Finally, in expressions like *a classic design* and *a classic style* it means 'simple and attractive'. By contrast, the main meaning of *classical* is 'relating to ancient Greek and Roman civilization', as in *classical mythology*. Further, *classical* is of course used in the expression *classical music*.

economic/economical

The word *economic* means simply 'concerning the economy', whilst *economical* means 'not wasteful':

economic decisions	→	economische besluiten
an economical style	→	een geserreerde stijl

electric/electrical

The difference between *electric* and *electrical* is a subtle one. If a specific machine works on electricity, then one says that it is *electric*. However, if one is talking about machines in general that work on electricity, or wishes to describe something in general as having to do with electricity, then one uses *electrical*.

an electric fire	→	een elektrische haard
electrical appliances	→	elektrische apparatuur
an electrical fault	→	een elektrische fout
an electrical engineer	→	een elektrisch ingenieur

Note also that *electric*, but not *electrical*, has the additional meaning of 'very exciting'.

graphic/graphical

The pair *graphic/graphical* is a special case because the two words are partly synonymous and partly not. While *graphic* has two basic meanings, namely 'vivid' and 'related to writing', *graphical* has only the latter:

a graphic description	→	een levendige beschrijving
graphic(al) symbols	→	grafische symbolen

Note also that *graphic* is the more common of the two forms.

historic/historical

The word *historic* means ‘very important’ or ‘famous’ from the point of view of history. If you say that someone has scored a historic victory (‘een historische overwinning’) then you see the victory as very important when seen in the context of other relevant victories. The word *historical*, on the other hand, means simply ‘concerning history’. Thus the expression *historical events* refers to events in history, while *historic events* refers to very important events.

politic/political

The word *political* means simply ‘related to politics’, while *politic* is used to refer to someone’s actions or words that are prudent and seen to be to that person’s advantage. Thus *a politic choice* is a prudent or shrewd choice, while *a political choice* is a choice motivated by political considerations.

12 -ize or -ise?

A simple way of explaining the difference between the *-ize* and *-ise* forms in the spelling of verbs like *nationalise/-ize* and their derived nominal forms would be to note that *-ize* is American and *-ise* British English. But that would be too simple. In recent years so many words have come into British English from American English – *energize, optimize, systematize* to name just a few – that the *-ize* form has come to be accepted by many people as the basic form. For instance, if you look up the above examples in an up-to-date dictionary, either English-Dutch or English-English, then you will find *-ize* as the first spelling variant and *-ise* as the second. Fifty years ago this would have been the other way around.

Although there are still very many British people who use the *-ise* form (just read a few different newspapers or read the news online), we advise you to follow the modern tendency, supported by the lexicographical authorities, and use the *-ize* form as the basic form. You should definitely do so if you are writing a text that is specifically for an American readership. Finally, if you are bent on using *-ise*, then make sure you are consistent.

The story would also not be complete without the exceptions. There is one major group, consisting of words where *-is-* belongs to the stem rather than being part of a suffix. These verbs are written with *-ise* in both British English and American English:

advertise	advise	arise	apprise
chastise	circumcise	comprise	compromise
demise	despise	devise	enfranchise
enterprise	exercise	improvise	revise
supervise	surmise	surprise	televisé

There is also a small group of verbs ending in *-yse*, notably *analyse, catalyse* and *paralyse*, which are spelled with the *-yse* suffix in British English but with *-yze* in American.

13 Numbers

English and Dutch differ radically concerning the use of punctuation in numbers and amounts of money. In fact, the rule is quite simple: where Dutch uses a comma, English uses a full stop; and where Dutch uses a full stop, English uses a comma:

Dutch	English	
€ 6,50	£4.10	four pounds 10 pence
120.000	120,000	one hundred and twenty thousand
3,561	3.561	three point five six one

Note incidentally that in current spoken Dutch one quite often hears *twee punt drie* alongside *twee komma drie*, presumably under influence of the computer. In English there is of course no variation: *two point three* is the only possibility.

14 Problem pairs

There are a considerable number of words in English that look very similar and sound very similar; in fact sometimes they sound exactly the same (that is to say, they are homophones). Not surprisingly, many of them are regularly confused by even advanced users of English, including native speakers. In some cases the matter is compounded because the two words have related meanings. Here are the most common troublemakers:

adapt ('(zich) aanpassen')	adept ('bedreven')
advice ('advies')	advise ('adviseren')
affect ('beïnvloeden')	effect ('teweegbrengen', 'effect')
choose ('kiezen')	chose ('koos')
compliment ('compliment')	complement ('aanvulling')
council ('raad')	counsel ('advies')
dependent ('afhankelijk')	dependant ('een afhankelijke')
desert ('woestijn')	dessert ('dessert')
discreet ('discreet')	discrete ('afzonderlijk')
insure ('verzekeren')	ensure ('veilig stellen')
lie ('liggen')	lay ('leggen')
live ('leven', 'rechtstreeks')	life ('het leven')
lose ('verliezen')	loose ('los')
moral ('moraal', 'deugdzaam')	morale ('mentale veerkracht')
practice ('oefening')	practise ('oefenen')*
precede ('voorafgaan')	proceed ('verder gaan')
prescribe ('voorschrijven')	proscribe ('verbieden')
principle ('principe')	principal ('rector', 'hoofd-')
prophecy ('voorspelling')	prophesy ('voorspellen')
stationary ('stationair')	stationery ('kantoorbenodigdheden')
then ('toen')	than ('[groter] dan')

*Note that in American English *practice* is used for both noun and verb.

15 Representing unstressed syllables

One of the greatest difficulties in working out the spelling of an English word on the basis of its sound concerns the unstressed syllables. Is it *responsable* or *responsible*, *devide* or *divide*? Often one cannot tell from listening to how the word is pronounced. In some cases the difficulty is compounded by interference: it is *responsabel* in Dutch and *responsable* in French but *responsible* in English; it is *assistent* in Dutch but *assistant* in English.

This unclarity means that you will be wise to commit a number of highly frequent words to memory. Here is a list:

✗	devide	SHOULD READ	divide
✗	seperate	SHOULD READ	separate
✗	devine	SHOULD READ	divine
✗	responsable	SHOULD READ	responsible
✗	assistent	SHOULD READ	assistant

In addition to individual words, problems tend to lie with certain pairs of suffixes: *-able* vs *-ible*, *-ant* vs *-ent*, and *-ary* vs *-ory* vs *-ery*.