

*The* **HUTCHINSON**

# Pocket Dictionary of English Usage



*"This is the sort of English up with which I will not put."*  
grammar; punctuation; spelling; American English

pronunciation; style; essay and report writing

'Yours sincerely' or 'Yours faithfully'?

'To boldly go' or 'To go boldly'?



Helicon

# The Hutchinson Guide to English Usage

## Preface

This guide sets out to give clear, straightforward advice on avoiding errors in spoken and written English.

Most people are at some time uncertain or confused about which word to use in a particular context, how to pronounce or spell a word, or whether they are using a word in the correct meaning. The guide aims to help you choose the right word or the most appropriate way of expressing yourself.

The entries cover the following areas of usage:

**meanings** Is it correct to use the word *aggravate* to mean 'make worse' or to use *locate* to mean 'find'?

**confusibles** What is the difference between *complement* and *compliment*? Or between *flaunt* and *flout*?

**grammar** Is it *different from*, *different to*, or *different than*? Why do some people regard it as wrong to split infinitives?

**punctuation** What are the rules about using the comma, the apostrophe, quotation marks, etc.?

**parts of speech** What exactly is a preposition? Or a participle?

**style** What is the right way to set out a business letter? How can you ensure that your writing is non-sexist?

**spellings** Should it be *-ise* or *-ize*? What is the US spelling of *pyjamas*?

**pronunciation** What is the right way to pronounce such words as *controversy*, *lichen*, and *macho*?

All entries in the guide are arranged alphabetically, whether dealing with individual words or topics.

While recommendations are given wherever possible, the entries generally avoid making a simplistic and didactic distinction between correct and incorrect usage. Language is changing all the time, and some usages that were once disapproved of are now widely accepted as perfectly good English. Equally, some uses that are natural and common in informal contexts may be considered inappropriate in formal contexts.

The entries attempt to explain where there is some dispute surrounding a particular word or construction and to state clearly which usages are acceptable in formal English, which are acceptable in informal English, and which are still generally considered to be wrong. Where there are significant differences between British and American usage these are clearly explained.

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## Table of contents

### A

abbreviations  
abdicate, abrogate, arrogate or derogate  
aberration  
abhor  
abhorrent  
abjure or adjure  
-able or-ible  
abominable  
abridgement or abridgment  
abrogate  
abscess  
abstemious  
abstinent or abstemious  
abuse or misuse  
abysmal  
abyss  
accede or concede  
accelerate  
accept or except  
accessory or accessory  
accommodation  
accord or accordance  
accrue  
accumulate  
accusative case  
acknowledgement or acknowledgment  
acoustic  
acquainted  
acquiesce  
acquire  
acronym  
acrylic  
active  
actually  
acuity  
acumen or acuity  
address  
adjacent or adjoining  
adjective  
adjoining  
adjourn  
admirable  
admit  
ad nauseam  
adolescent  
adverb  
adversary  
advisable  
aerial  
aesthetic or ascetic

affect or effect  
aficionado  
ageing or aging  
aggravate  
aggressive  
aging  
agnostic or atheist  
agoraphobia  
agreement  
aisle  
alias or alibi  
alibi  
align  
allay, alleviate, or assuage  
allege  
alleviate  
alliteration  
all right or alright  
alternately or alternatively  
alternative  
alternatively  
aluminium  
ambiguous or ambivalent  
ambivalent  
amen  
amend or emend  
America  
American English  
among or amongst  
amoral  
an  
analogous  
ancillary  
and/or  
annex or annex  
anorexia  
antarctic  
ante- or anti-  
anticipate  
any  
a or an  
apartheid  
aplomb  
apostasy  
apostrophe  
appal  
apparatus  
appearance  
appetite  
apposition  
appraise or apprise  
apprise  
appurtenance  
apt  
aqueduct

Arab, Arabian, or Arabic  
archetypal  
arctic  
aristocrat  
arrogate  
artefact or artifact  
article  
artifact  
artisan  
artiste  
artist or artiste  
as  
as ... as  
ascetic  
Asian or Asiatic  
Asiatic  
asinine  
asphalt  
assassin  
assiduous  
assimilate  
assonance  
assuage  
assure, ensure, or insure  
asthma  
atheist  
atrophy  
attach  
attenuate  
aural or oral  
autumn  
auxiliary  
auxiliary verb  
averse or adverse  
avow or vouch  
awake, awaken, wake, or waken  
axe

## **B**

bachelor  
bail or bale  
baited  
bale  
balk or baulk  
balloon  
balmy or barmy  
baluster  
banal  
banister or baluster  
bankruptcy  
basically  
bated or baited  
battalion

balk  
beautiful  
becomes  
beginning  
beg the question  
behalf  
behoves or becomes  
beleaguered  
believe  
benefited  
bequeath  
bereaved or bereft  
bereft  
berserk  
beseige  
beside or besides  
between or among  
between you and me  
biannual or biennial  
biased or biassed  
bicycle  
biennial  
bilious  
billion  
biscuit  
bisect  
bi-weekly, bi-monthly  
bizarre  
black  
blanch  
blasé  
blatant or flagrant  
blench or blanch  
blond or blonde  
bludgeon  
bolero  
bona fide  
born or borne  
bourgeois  
bracket  
breach or breech  
breech  
Britain, Great Britain, United Kingdom, British Isles  
British Isles  
Brittany  
broach or brooch  
broccoli  
brooch  
Buddha  
budgeted  
bulrush  
buoy  
bureaucracy  
bursar  
business or busyness

## C

caddie or caddy

cajole

calendar

calibre

callipers

callous or callus

callus

camaraderie

camellia

camouflage

candelabra

cannon

canon or cannon

can or may

canvas or canvass

capital letter

capital or capitol

capitol

carat or karat

carcase or carcass

careen

career or careen

Caribbean

caricature

carp

cartilage

case

case, upper and lower

cassette

caster or castor

catalyst

catarrh

catch 22

catechism

caterpillar

catholic or Catholic

caviare or caviar

cavil or carp

ceiling

cemetery

censor or censure

censure

centre around

centrifugal

ceremonial or ceremonious

ceremonious

cervical

chafe or chaff

chaff

chair(person)

chamois

changeable



charade  
cheque  
chilblain  
chilli  
chiroprapist  
chivy or chivvy  
cholesterol  
chord  
chrysalis  
cinnamon  
cipher or cypher  
circumstances  
cirrhosis  
civic  
civil, civic, or civilian  
civilian  
claim  
clandestine  
classical  
classic or classical  
clause  
claustrophobia  
clayey  
clematis  
clichés, pretentious language, and jargon  
climax  
cluster  
coccyx  
coconut  
cocoon  
colander  
collateral  
collective noun  
colon  
colonnade  
coloration  
colossal  
colosseum  
coloured  
comical  
comic or comical  
comma  
commemorate  
commence  
commiserate  
committee  
common  
communal  
comparable  
comparative  
compare  
competent  
competition  
complacent, complaisant, or compliant  
complaisant

complement  
complement or compliment  
compliant  
compliment  
compose  
compound subject  
compound word  
comprise  
compulsive, impulsive, or impetuous  
concede  
concise  
conditional clause  
condole or console  
condone  
conduit  
confidant  
confident  
conjunction  
conjurer or conjurer  
connection or connexion  
connoisseur  
conscientious  
consensus  
consist, comprise, constitute, or compose  
console  
consonant  
constitute  
consummate  
contagious  
contemporary  
contemptible or contemptuous  
contemptuous  
continual, continuous, or constant  
continuous  
contrary or converse  
contribute  
controversial  
controversy  
converse  
convince and persuade  
cord or chord  
co-respondent  
corporal or corporeal  
corporeal  
correlate  
correspondent or co-respondent  
coruscating  
cosiness  
cosy  
council or counsel  
counsel  
counterfeit  
courteous, courtesy  
cousin  
covert

crape or crêpe  
credence or credit  
credible, creditable, or credulous  
credit  
creditable  
credulous  
crêpe  
crescendo  
crevasse  
crevice or crevasse  
culminate  
curb or kerb  
currant  
current  
curriculum  
curriculum vitae  
cynical or sceptical  
cypher or cipher  
czar, tsar, or tzar

## D

dais  
dangling participle or hanging participle or unattached participle  
dash  
data  
dates  
deadly or deathly  
deathly  
debar or disbar  
debtor  
decade  
decimate  
decrepit  
defence  
definite article  
definitely  
definite or definitive  
definitive  
deity  
delicatessen  
delineate  
delusion or illusion  
demonstrable  
demur  
denouement  
dependant  
dependent or dependant  
depraved or deprived  
deprecate or depreciate  
depreciate  
depredation  
deprived  
derisive or derisory

derisory  
derogate  
descendant  
desert or dessert  
desiccated  
designer  
despatch  
desperate  
despicable  
dessert  
detach  
determiner  
developing  
dexterous or dextrous  
diagram  
diarrhoea  
dichotomy  
dietician or dietitian  
different  
dike  
dilapidated  
dilatory  
dilemma  
dilettante  
dinghy  
dingy  
diphtheria  
diphthong  
disappear  
disappoint  
disapprove  
disbar  
discomfiture  
discomfort or discomfiture  
disc or disk  
discreet or discrete  
discrete  
disingenuous  
disinterested or uninterested  
disk  
dismissal  
dispatch or despatch  
dispirited  
dispute  
dissatisfied  
dissect or bisect  
disseminate  
dissension  
dissentient  
dissenting, dissident, or dissentient  
dissent or dissension  
dissertation  
dissident  
dissipate  
dissociate

distil  
distinctive  
distinct or distinctive  
distracted  
distract  
distraught, distracted, or distrait  
distribute  
distrust or mistrust  
divers  
diverse or divers  
Domesday or doomsday  
doomsday  
double negative  
doubling letters  
doubtful or dubious  
douse or dowse  
dowse  
draft or draught  
draught  
dual or duel  
dubious  
duel  
due to  
duffel or duffle  
dyke  
dynasty  
dysentery

## E

each  
easiness  
eatable or edible  
ebullient  
eclectic  
economical  
economic or economical  
ecstasy  
eczema  
edible  
effect  
effective, effectual, efficacious, or efficient  
effectual  
effeminate or effete  
effete  
efficacious  
efficient  
egoist or egotist  
e.g. or i.e.  
egotist  
egregious  
either  
elder or older  
embarrass

embodiment  
emend  
emotional or emotive  
emotive  
empathy  
enervate or invigorate  
enforceable  
England and English  
enormity  
enormousness or enormity  
enquire or inquire  
ensure  
enthuse  
envelope  
envisage  
epigram, epigraph, epitaph, or epithet  
epigraph  
epitaph  
epithet  
equable or equitable  
equally  
equitable  
erupt or irrupt  
Eskimo  
esoteric or eclectic  
essay and report writing  
et al  
etc  
ethnic  
evenness  
evince or evoke  
evoke  
exacerbate  
exaggerate  
exalt or exult  
excellent  
except  
exceptionable  
exceptional or exceptionable  
exception proves the rule, the  
exciting  
exclamation mark or exclamation point  
exercise or exorcize  
exorcize  
expatriate  
explicable  
extraordinary  
extrovert  
exult

## F

facia or fascia  
Fahrenheit

faint or feint  
famous or infamous  
farther or further  
fascia  
fascinating  
fascism  
fashion  
fatal or fateful  
fateful  
faze  
feasible  
February  
feign  
feint  
feisty  
ferment  
fervent or fervid  
fervid  
fewer or less  
fiancé or fiancée  
fifth  
filament  
filthiness  
finally  
finance  
fiord or fjord  
first or firstly  
fizziness  
fiord  
flaccid  
flagrant  
flammable  
flaunt  
fleshly or fleshy  
floatation or flotation  
floor  
flotation  
flotsam or jetsam  
flounder or founder  
flout or flaunt  
fogginess  
foment or ferment  
forbid or prohibit  
foreign  
foresee  
foreword or forward  
forfeit  
formally  
former, latter  
formerly or formally  
formidable  
for- or fore-  
fortuitous  
forty  
forward

founder  
Frances or Francis  
freight  
friend  
friendliness  
frigid  
friskiness  
frolic  
fruitiness  
fuchsia  
fulfil  
full stop  
-ful or-full  
fulsome  
fungous or fungus  
funniness  
further  
fussiness  
fuzziness

## G

Gaelic or Gallic  
gaiety  
gala  
Gallic  
gamble or gambol  
gambol  
gaol or jail  
garage  
gaseous  
gauge  
gay  
genealogy  
gerund  
geyser  
gherkin  
gibe, gybe, or jibe  
gill  
gipsy or gypsy  
girl  
glamorous  
glisten  
goddess  
gourmand or gourmet  
gourmet  
government  
graceful or gracious  
gracious  
graffiti  
grammar  
grandad or granddad  
granddaughter  
grand- or great-



great-  
Great Britain  
greengrocer's apostrophe  
Greenwich  
grey  
grievance  
grisly or grizzly  
grizzly  
guarantee  
guerrilla  
guitar  
gybe  
gypsy

## H

haemorrhage  
hairiness  
half  
handicraft  
handkerchief  
hanged or hung  
happiness  
harass  
harassment  
hasten  
haughtiness  
have or have got  
Haydn  
haziness  
healthiness  
heartiness  
heaviness  
hegemony  
heifer  
height  
heinous  
heir  
hence  
heroin or heroine  
he/she/they  
heyday  
hiccough  
hiccup or hiccough  
Hilary  
Hindi or Hindu  
historical  
historic or historical  
hitchhike  
hoard or horde  
hoi polloi  
Holborn  
holiness  
holy

homage  
homeliness  
homogeneous or homogenous  
homosexual  
hopefully  
horde  
horrific  
houmous or houmus  
humerus  
humorous  
humus  
hygiene  
hypercritical  
hyphen  
hypocrisy  
hypocrite

I

-ible or-able  
iciness  
icon or ikon  
idiosyncrasy  
idyllic  
ikon  
ilk  
illegal or illicit  
illicit  
illusion  
immaculate  
immediately  
immigrant  
imminent  
immoral or amoral  
impact  
impetuous  
imply or infer  
impresario  
impulsive  
inapt  
in behalf of  
incredible or incredulous  
incredulous  
incurred  
indebted  
indefinite article  
indefinite pronoun  
independent  
Indian  
indictment  
indigenous  
indispensable  
ineffective  
ineffectual or ineffective

inept or inapt  
inequity or iniquity  
infamous  
infectious or contagious  
infer  
infinitive  
inflammable  
inflection  
ingenious, ingenuous, or disingenuous  
ingenuous  
inhumane  
inhuman or inhumane  
iniquity  
innate  
innocuous  
innovate  
innumerable  
inoculation  
inquire  
inseparable  
insidious or invidious  
install  
instantaneous  
instant or instantaneous  
instil  
insure  
intense or intensive  
intensive  
intercede  
interface  
interment or internment  
internment  
interrelated  
intransitive verb  
introvert  
inveigle  
inventory  
invidious  
invigorate  
ironic  
irradiate  
irregular  
irrelevant  
irrespective or regardless  
irrupt  
-ise or -ize  
Islam  
I/me; we/us; you  
its and it's  
-ize or -ise

J

jail  
jargon  
jeiune  
jetsam  
jewellery  
jibe  
Jocelyn, Joscelin  
journey  
judgement or judgment  
judicial or judicious  
judicious  
junta

## K

kaleidoscope  
Kenya  
kerb  
key  
kilometre  
kindliness  
kind, sort, or type of

## L

lady or woman  
lamentable  
languor  
last (Tuesday, etc)  
latter  
lawful  
lay or lie  
laziness  
league  
lecherous  
legalese  
legal or lawful  
lend or loan  
leopard  
Leslie or Lesley  
liable, apt, likely, and prone  
liaise  
libel or slander  
library  
licence or license  
lichen  
lie  
lieutenant  
lighted or lit  
lightening or lightning  
lightning  
likelihood  
likely  
like or as

liquefy  
liqueur  
liquor  
lit  
litany  
literally  
literature  
liturgy or litany  
livelihood  
liveliness  
loan  
loathe or loathe  
locale  
locality  
locate  
location, locality, or locale  
loneliness  
longevity  
longitude  
loveliness  
lower case  
luxuriant  
luxurious or luxuriant

## M

machination  
macho  
macrocosm  
magical  
magic or magical  
maintenance  
major  
majority, minority  
malign  
manageable  
mandatory  
manikin  
man, mankind  
mannequin or manikin  
manœuvre  
mantle or mantel  
margarine  
marital or matrimonial  
maroon  
marquess  
marquis or marquess  
mastectomy  
masterful  
masterly or masterful  
matrimonial  
mattress  
may or might  
media

medicine  
Mediterranean  
metallurgy  
metre or meter  
metrical  
metric or metrical  
microcosm or macrocosm  
might  
mightiness  
migraine  
mileage or milage  
militate  
millennium  
millepede or millipede  
mineralogy  
miniature  
minority  
minuscule  
minute  
mischievous  
misspell  
mistrust  
misuse  
mitigate or militate  
moat  
moccasin  
modal verb  
Mohammedan  
mollusc  
mortgage  
Moslem  
mote  
mould  
moult  
moustache  
Ms  
mucous or mucus  
murkiness  
muscle  
Muslim  
mussel  
mutual or common  
myself  
mysterious, mystic, or mystical  
mystic  
mystical  
mythical or mythological  
mythological

## **N**

naive or naïve  
nastiness  
naturalist or naturist

naturist  
naughtiness  
naught or nought  
naval or navel  
navel  
necessary  
Negro  
neither  
nephew  
next ( *Tuesday, etc*)  
nice  
niche  
niece  
noisiness  
nominative case  
none  
non-flammable  
nonwhite  
not  
noticeable  
nought  
noun  
number  
number *a number of*  
numerable  
numerous, numerable, or innumerable

## O

obelisk  
object  
obscene  
observant  
observatory  
occasion  
occupy  
occurrence  
odorous  
offence  
officialese  
official *or* officious  
officious  
often  
older  
omelette  
omitted  
on behalf of  
one of  
one *or* you  
only  
on the part of  
on to *or* onto  
openness  
ophthalmic

opossum  
opponent  
opportunity  
oppress  
oral  
ordinance or ordnance  
ordinarily  
ordnance  
orient and orientate  
oscillate  
outspokenness  
overrated  
overreact  
override  
overrule  
overrun  
owing to

## P

pageant  
palate or palette  
pallor  
panacea  
panache  
paprika  
paradigm  
paraffin  
paragraph  
parallel  
parallelogram  
parameter  
parenthesis  
parliament  
participles  
part, on the part of, on someone's part  
passive  
past or passed  
patent  
pathetic  
patisserie  
pavilion  
peaceable  
peaceful or peaceable  
pedal or peddle  
peddle  
pejorative  
pendant  
pendent  
penicillin  
peninsula or peninsular  
penniless  
per cent or percentage point  
perceptive, percipient, perspicacious, or perspicuous



percept  
perennial  
permanent  
person  
-person  
personnel  
perspicacious  
perspicuous  
persuade  
pessimist  
pettiness  
pharaoh  
Philippines  
phlegm  
phoenix  
pianissimo  
picaresque  
piccolo  
picturesque or picaresque  
piteous  
pitiable  
pitiful, pitiable, or piteous  
placid  
plague  
plain  
plain English  
plainness  
plane or plain  
plaque  
platypus  
playwright  
plethora  
pleural  
plimsoll or plimsole  
plough  
plumbing  
Plurals  
pneumatic  
pneumonia  
poignant  
poltergeist  
pomegranate  
pore  
Portuguese  
possess  
possessive pronoun  
potato  
pour or pore  
practicable  
practical or practicable  
practice or practise  
practitioner  
pray or prey  
precede  
predilection

predominantly  
prefix  
prejudice  
premise or premiss  
premiss  
preposition  
prerogative  
prescribe or proscribe  
presently  
pretence  
pretentious language  
prettiness  
prevent  
preventive or preventative  
prey  
primarily  
principle or principal  
pristine  
privacy  
privilege  
proceed or precede  
prodigy or protégé  
profession  
professor  
program or programme  
prohibit  
project  
prone  
prone  
pronoun  
pronunciation  
prophecy or prophesy  
proportion  
proscribe  
prostrate, prone, or supine  
protagonist  
protégé  
proved or proven  
provided and providing  
providing  
psalm  
pseudonym  
pterodactyl  
purposefully  
purposely or purposefully  
pyjamas

## Q

quantitative  
quantum leap  
quasi  
queasiness  
queer

question  
question mark  
questionnaire  
queue  
quotation marks

## R

rabid  
raccoon or racoon  
racialist or racist  
racket or racquet  
rack or wrack  
raccoon  
racquet  
raise  
rancorous  
rarefied  
rase or raze  
raspberry  
rateable or ratable  
ravage or ravish  
ravish  
raze  
realm  
reason  
rebuff, rebut, refute, repudiate  
rebut  
recede  
receipt  
receive  
recommend  
reconnaissance  
recourse or resort  
recurrent  
redoubtable  
referred  
reflexive pronoun  
refrigerator  
refute  
regardless  
register office or registry office  
regretfully or regrettably  
reign or rein  
rein  
relative clause  
renege  
repertoire or repertory  
repertory  
replica  
repudiate  
rescind  
research  
resign

resort  
restaurant  
restaurateur  
resurrection  
resuscitate  
retch  
review or revue  
revue  
rhapsody  
rheumatism  
rhinoceros  
rhombus  
rhyme  
rhythm  
rigid  
rigorous  
risotto  
rogue  
rural or rustic  
rustic

## S

saccharin or saccharine  
sachet  
sacrament  
sacrilegious  
Sagittarius  
sake, saké, or saki  
salmon  
satellite  
sauciness  
Saudi  
scallop  
scantiness  
scenario  
sceptic  
sceptical  
sceptre  
schedule  
scheme  
schism  
schizophrenic  
scholar  
science  
scissors  
scone  
scorch  
Scottish, Scots, or Scotch  
scourge  
scrimmage, scrummage, or scrum  
scruffiness  
scrum  
scrummage

scythe  
seasonable  
seasonal or seasonable  
secede  
secretary  
seize  
self-deprecating  
selvage or selvedge  
semicolon  
sensual or sensuous  
sensuous  
separate  
sergeant  
sexism in language  
shabbiness  
shall or will  
shapeliness  
sheik or sheikh  
shepherd  
sheriff  
shiftiness  
shininess  
shoddiness  
should or would  
sieve  
silhouette  
silicon or silicone  
silliness  
sincerely  
singular or plural verb?  
situation  
skein  
skilful  
slander  
sleigh  
sleight  
smoulder  
sobriquet  
sociable  
social or sociable  
soldier  
solecism or solipsism  
solemn  
solipsism  
somersault  
sort  
soulless  
sovereign  
spaghetti  
speciality  
spectre  
spelling rules  
spiciness  
spinach  
split infinitive

spokesperson  
sponsor  
spoonful  
sprightliness  
squalid  
squalor  
staccato  
stalactite or stalagmite  
stalagmite  
stammer or stutter  
stanch or staunch  
Standard English  
stationary or stationery  
stationery  
status  
staunch  
steadiness  
stealth  
sternness  
stickiness  
stiletto  
stinginess  
storey  
straight or strait  
strait  
stress  
stupefy  
stupor  
sturdiness  
stutter  
stye or sty  
subject  
subjunctive  
subordinate clause  
subpoena  
subsidence  
substantial or substantive  
substantive  
substitute or replace  
subtle  
succeed  
success  
succinct  
suddenness  
suede  
suffix  
sullenness  
sulphate  
sulphide  
sulphur  
superintendent  
superlative  
supersede  
supine  
suppress

surfeit  
surliness  
susceptible  
swap or swop  
swath  
swop  
syllable  
syllabus  
symmetry  
sympathy or empathy  
syndrome  
synonym  
syrup

## T

tableau  
taboo or tabu  
tacit  
tailless  
taramasalata  
tardiness  
targeted  
tariff  
tarot  
tarragon  
tassel  
tastiness  
tattoo  
tautology  
temporary  
tenet  
tense  
tepid  
terrific  
thankfully  
their or they're  
thence  
they're  
they/their/theirs  
this (Tuesday, etc)  
threshold  
thriftiness  
tidiness  
timid or timorous  
timorous  
titillate  
tobacco  
toboggan  
tomato  
torpor  
torque  
tortuous or torturous  
torturous

touchiness  
toward or towards  
Tracey or Tracy  
trait  
transcend  
transferred  
transshipment  
transitive verb  
transparent  
trauma  
tremor  
trestle  
tricycle  
trooper or trouper  
troop or troupe  
troupe  
trouper  
truculent  
truism  
truly  
trustworthiness  
tryst  
tsar  
tubbiness  
twelfth  
type  
tyranny  
tyre  
tzar

## U

ugliness  
ukulele  
umbilical  
underrated  
unduly  
uneasiness  
unevenness  
unfriendliness  
uninterested  
unique  
United Kingdom  
unlike  
unnamed  
unnatural  
unnecessary  
unnerving  
unsightliness  
unskilful  
unsociable or unsocial  
unsocial  
until  
unusual



unwanted or unwonted

unwonted

upper case

Uranus

used to

utilize

## V

vaccinate

vacillate

vacuum

vague

valet

vanilla

vaporous

variegated

vegetable

venal

vendor

venial or venal

venue

veranda or verandah

verb

vermilion

veterinary

vice

vicious

victuals

vigorous

vilify

villain or villein

villein

vineyard

violoncello

virulent

viscount

visor or vizor

Vivian

vizor

vol-au-vent

vouch

vowel

## W

waive

wake, waken

walnut

wanness

wantonness

wariness

was or were

wave

weariness  
wearisome  
Wednesday  
weightiness  
weir  
weird  
were  
whence  
whetstone  
which or that  
while and whilst  
whir or whirr  
whisky or whiskey  
whither  
whizz or whiz  
wholly  
whooping  
who orwhom  
who's  
whose or who's  
wildebeest  
wilful  
wiliness  
wiriness  
-wise  
wistaria or wisteria  
wither  
withhold  
woke, woken  
woman  
wondrous  
woodenness  
woollen  
woolliness  
wrack  
wraith  
wrath  
wreak  
wretch

## X

xenophobia  
xerox  
Xmas  
xylophone

## Y

yacht  
yearn  
yeoman  
yoghurt, yoghourt or yogurt  
yoke

volk  
you're  
your or you're  
yours

## Z

zaniness  
zealous  
zephyr  
zoology  
zucchini

## abbreviations

Abbreviations are used to save time and space, and to make long names of organizations and long technical terms easier to remember and less tedious to refer to repeatedly in an extended piece of writing such as a newspaper article or textbook. In such contexts, if the abbreviation is not a very common one, the long name or technical term is often given in full at the first mention, with the abbreviation in brackets after it. After that just the abbreviation is used.

Every day more and more abbreviations appear, and old ones die. No sooner had we learned to refer to the Common Market as the EC rather than the EEC, than it became the EU.

Generally it is acceptable to write abbreviations either with or without full stops, but the trend is towards leaving them out, as in *BBC*, *Dr*, *HoD*, *H E Bates*, *Prof E Potter*. Punchy writing such as that found in advertisements tends to leave out full stops, whereas formal non-technical writing is more traditional, and full stops are often used.

There are various kinds of abbreviation. The most common is the set of initials, for example *DIY* for Do It Yourself, *DSS* for Department of Social Security, *gbh* for grievous bodily harm, *JCB* for a machine invented by Joseph Cyril Bamford.

Some abbreviations are the first part of a longer word and are pronounced as words, not said as a sequence of letters of the alphabet. Examples are *ad* and *advert* from advertisement, *bra* from brassière, *gym* from gymnasium, and *limo* from limousine.

Other abbreviations made by cutting off the end of the word are not used in speech, for example *adv* for adverb and *cont* for continued. If these need to be read aloud, they are read as the unabbreviated full forms.

Some words lose bits in the middle. *Bdg* stands for building; *Chas* for Charles. *Dr*, *ft*, *Mr*, and *Mrs* are other examples. These are read aloud as their unabbreviated full forms.

A few words lop off the first part, for example *bus* and *plane*, though these are now so well established that they are really no longer thought of as reduced forms, but as words in their own right.

There is a significant proportion of abbreviations which it is possible for an English speaker to pronounce as words rather than as sequences of letters of the alphabet. For example, *NATO* is said [**nay**-toe] and never [en eh tee oh]. Sets of initials like *NATO*, and new forms made up of the first parts of two or more words, such as *OXFAM*, are called **acronyms**. Further examples are *UNESCO*, *Amstrad*, *GATT*, *ACORN*, *dinky*, *Aids*, *laser*, *ERNIE*, and *CLEAR*. A few abbreviations are pronounced both ways, *VAT* being the prime example.

Acronyms are often new words. The word *Nato* did not exist before it began to be used as a quick way of referring to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. It is not, in fact, a very typical English word, although it is easy enough for English speakers to pronounce. *COHSE*, the Confederation of Health Service Employees, looks un-English, but is pronounced [cosy].

*Laser*, on the other hand, looks thoroughly at home in English. There are probably many people who are quite unaware that it is an acronym, derived from: light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation. The fact that it is not written in capital letters, and is a common noun rather than the name of an organization, also helps to disguise it. This is the sort of acronym that easily makes its way into a dictionary. *Yuppie*, from: young upwardly mobile professional; and *radar*, from: Radio Detection and Ranging, are other examples.

Some acronyms are existing words taken over as more easily used alternatives to full forms, *ACORN*, for example, which stands for: A Classification of Residential Neighbourhoods, a sampling system based on different kinds of dwelling; or *AIDS*, from: acquired immune deficiency syndrome; or *WASP*, from: White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

Some organizations deliberately choose terms for products, projects, or equipment so that the initials will make an existing name. An example of this is *ERNIE*, from: Electronic Random Number Indicator Equipment. This is the machine that chooses the winners of Premium Bonds. A *TESSA* is a Tax Exempt Savings Bond. These short and friendly-sounding names suggest something pleasant and accessible. Another case of image manipulation by acronym is the choice of the title Fast Reactor Experiment, Dounreay to give *FRED*.

Campaigning organizations, in particular, choose names to yield an acronym that is suggestive of their aims. *ASH*, Action on Smoking and Health wants people to stop smoking; *GASP* is the Group Against Smog Pollution; *SCUM*, the Society for Cutting Up Men, wants to attract your attention.

The form in which acronyms are written varies. The small number that are common nouns rather than names are often found in small letters, and become indistinguishable from words. These are nouns such as *laser*, *radar*, and *aids*. The plural is made, as with most ordinary words, by simply adding **s**, for example *KOs*, *JCBs*, *lasers*. No apostrophe is needed.

Names of organizations are most often written as a string of capital letters without full stops, but practice is variable, and you may see *Unesco* or UNESCO as well as *UNESCO*. You may even see *U.N.E.S.C.O.*.

Note that not all abbreviations that could be acronyms are so in fact. *BA*, for example, is always said [bee eh] and never [bar]. A particularly interesting case is *ETA*. When it means 'Estimated Time of Arrival' it is an abbreviation, and is pronounced [ee tee eh], but when it stands for the Basque separatist group it is an acronym, and is pronounced [etter], to rhyme with *better*.

One problem with abbreviations that are pronounceable as words is that when you meet a new one in print, you may not know which way to say it. This is more of a problem now that all abbreviations, not just acronyms, tend to be written without full stops. A full stop after each letter usually means that the abbreviation is pronounced as a string of letters.

---

**abdicate, abrogate, arrogate or derogate**

To **abdicate** is to renounce formally, especially a monarch the throne: *Edward VIII abdicated in order to marry a divorcee; She abdicated her rights to a pension.* To **abrogate** a law is to cancel or annul it: *The old law on Sunday trading has been abrogated.* To **arrogate** a thing is to claim it presumptuously or without right: *He arrogated special privileges for the staff.* To **derogate** a thing is to lessen or detract from it in some way: *It would derogate from the park's attraction to compare it to a playground.*

---

## aberration

Spelling: remember one **b** and two **rs**.

---

## abhor

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## abhorrent

Spelling: remember the **h** and the ending **-ent**.

---

## abjure or adjure

To **abjure** something is to renounce it or abstain from it, with the implication that this is done publicly: *Members of the sect were required to abjure all alcoholic drink.* To **adjure** someone to do something is to request them solemnly to do it: *The magistrate adjured the witness to tell the truth frankly.*

---

## -able or-ible

See spelling rules.

---

## abominable

Spelling: note the single **b** and **m**.

---

## abridgement or abridgment

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## abrogate

See abdicate.

---

## abscess

Spelling: remember the **sc** in the middle.

---

## abstemious

See abstinent.

---

## abstinent *or* abstemious

See abstinent.

---

## abuse *or* misuse

To **abuse** something is to use it badly or wrongly: *The bank manager abused the confidence of his customers.* To **misuse** a thing is to use it in a way for which it was not intended, whether wrongly or not: *'A horse misused upon the road/Calls to Heaven for human blood'* (William Blake).

---

## abysmal

Spelling: remember **y**, not **i**.

---

## abyss

Spelling: remember **y**, not **i**.

---

## accede *or* concede

To **accede** to something is to agree to it: *I accede to your request* (I accept it); to **concede** something is to accept it grudgingly or reluctantly: *I concede your superiority* (I have to admit you are better). Spelling: remember the ending **-cede**.

---

## accelerate

Spelling: note the two **cs** and one **l**.

---

## accept or except

To **accept** something or someone is to take them: *Credit cards are accepted* (you can use them to pay); to **except** them is to exclude them: *Credit cards are excepted* (you'll have to pay by cash or cheque).

---

## accessory or accessory

**Accessory** is the normal spelling of the word to mean something extra or additional: *The vacuum cleaner had several accessory parts*. In the legal sense, however, the spelling **accessary** is sometimes found: *She was charged with being an accessary to the crime* (she had taken a part in it). In the USA, **accessory** is the spelling for both senses.

---

## accommodation

Spelling: note the double **c** and double **m**.

---

## accord or accordance

If a thing is in **accord** with something else, it is in agreement with it: *The contract is in full accord with company policy* (it agrees with it). If a thing is in **accordance** with something else, it obeys or follows it: *The contract was drawn up in accordance with your instructions* (as you directed).

---

## accrue

This is sometimes used to mean simply 'grow' or 'increase'. It actually means 'to grow or increase by regular increments'; interest **accrues** in a bank account as amounts are added to it at set intervals.

---



## accumulate

Spelling: note the two **cs** and one **m**.

---

## accusative case

The case of a noun or pronoun that is the object of a verb or is governed by a preposition. *Me, him, her, us, and them* are the accusative forms of the pronouns *I, he, she, we, and they*.

---

## acknowledgement or acknowledgment

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## acoustic

Spelling: note the single **c**.

---

## acquainted

Spelling: remember the **c**.

---

## acquiesce

Spelling: remember the **c** at the beginning and the **sc** at the end.

---

## acquire

Spelling: remember the **c**.

---

## acronym

A word formed from the initial letters and/or syllables of other words, intended as a pronounceable abbreviation; for example *NATO* (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and *radar* (radio detecting and ranging). See [abbreviations](#).

---

## acrylic

Spelling: note the **y**.

---

## active

The form of a verb, where the subject of the sentence performs the action: *Alan caught the dog* (rather than *The dog was caught by Alan*). See also passive.

---

## actually

This can be used for emphasis or to express indignation: *He actually called me a liar*. It is also used instead of *really*: *He may seem a bit simple, but actually he's quite shrewd*. Avoid using it unnecessarily where no emphasis is called for: *Actually, I've never met the Queen*.

---

## acuity

See acumen.

---

## acumen or acuity

See acumen.

---

## address

Spelling: remember the double **d** and double **s**.

---

## adjacent or adjoining

If one thing is **adjacent** to another, it is next to it without necessarily making physical contact: *The car park was adjacent to the sports hall*. An **adjoining** object, however, has a common point of contact with another: *The offices are to the left, with a canteen adjoining*.

---

## adjective

This is a grammatical part of speech for words that describe nouns (for example, new and beautiful, as in *a new hat* and *a beautiful day*). Adjectives generally have three degrees (grades or levels for the description of relationships): the positive degree: *new, beautiful*, the comparative degree: *newer, more beautiful*, and the superlative degree: *newest, most beautiful*.

Some adjectives do not normally need comparative and superlative forms; one person cannot be *more asleep* than someone else, a lone action is unlikely to be *the most single-handed action ever seen*, and many people dislike the expression *most unique* or *almost unique*, because something unique is supposed to be the only one that exists. For purposes of emphasis or style these conventions may be set aside: *I don't know who is more unique; they are both remarkable people*.

Double comparatives such as *more bigger* are not grammatical in Standard English, but Shakespeare used a double superlative: *'the most unkindest cut of all'* (*Julius Caesar*). Some adjectives may have both comparative and both superlative forms *commoner and more common; commonest and most common*; shorter words usually take on the suffixes **-er/ -est** but occasionally they may be given the *more/most* forms for emphasis or other reasons: *Which of them is the most clear?*

When an adjective comes before a noun it is attributive; when it comes after noun and verb (for example, *It looks good*) it is predicative. Some adjectives can only be used predicatively: *The child was asleep*, but not: *the asleep child*. The participles of verbs are regularly used adjectivally: *a sleeping child; boiled milk*, often in compound forms: *a quick-acting medicine; a glass-making factory; a hard-boiled egg; well-trained teachers*. Adjectives are often formed by adding suffixes to nouns: *sand: sandy; nation: national*.

---

## adjoining

See adjacent.

---

## adjourn

Spelling: note the **d**, and the **ou** as in *journey*.

---

## admirable

The standard pronunciation is with the stress on the first syllable [**add**-mruh-ble].

---

## admit

It used to be considered incorrect to use *to* after *admit* in the sense 'confess', but it is now widely accepted when referring to an action: *he admitted the crime* or *he*

*admitted to the crime. To should be avoided when referring to a quality or when admit is followed by a verb: she admitted her guilt; I admit lying about this matter.*

---

## ad nauseam

Spelling: note the ending **-eam**, not **-eum**.

---

## adolescent

Spelling: note the **c**.

---

## adverb

This is a grammatical part of speech for words that modify or describe verbs: *she ran quickly*, adjectives: *a beautifully clear day*, and adverbs: *they did it really well*. Most adverbs are formed from adjectives or past participles by adding **-ly**: *quick: quickly* or **-ally**: *automatic: automatically*.

Sometimes adverbs are formed by adding **-wise** as in *moving clockwise*; (in the phrase *a clockwise direction*, *clockwise* is an adjective). Some adverbs have a distinct form from their partnering adjective, for example, *good/well: it was good work; they did it well*. Others do not derive from adjectives, for example *very*, in *very nice; tomorrow*, in *I'll do it tomorrow*. Some are unadapted adjectives, for example *pretty*, as in *It's pretty good*. Sentence adverbs modify whole sentences or phrases: *Generally, it rains a lot here; Usually, the town is busy at this time of year*.

Adverbs are divided into four types, depending on whether they express manner, degree, time, or place. Overuse of adverbs should be avoided. For example, in the sentence *He swiped wildly and the ball whizzed quickly*, the adverbs are redundant, since the verbs contain their meanings already. See also tautology.

---

## adversary

The standard British pronunciation is with the stress on the first syllable [**add**-vuh-sree]. The US pronunciation also has the stress on the first syllable, but both **rs** are pronounced, and the end is pronounced [serry] to rhyme with *sherry*.

---

## advisable

Spelling: remember the ending **-able**.

---

## aerial

Spelling: remember the **ae** as in aeroplane.

---

## aesthetic or ascetic

Spelling: remember the **ae** as in aeroplane.

---

## affect or effect

To **affect** something is to have an effect on it: *Smoking can affect your health.* To **effect** something is to make it happen: *The doctor's treatment effected an immediate improvement in the patient's health.* *Affect* is often used instead of *effect*, so take care when you are writing.

---

## aficionado

Spelling: remember there are no double letters.

---

## ageing or aging

This word can be spelled either way, although **ageing** is more common.

---

## aggravate

The main meaning of this word is 'make worse': *Such remarks only serve to aggravate the situation.* It is also commonly used to mean 'annoy' or 'exasperate': *It really aggravates me the way you always interrupt.* Although this second use dates back to the 16th century, some people still disapprove of it.

---

## aggressive

Spelling: note the double **g**.

---

## aging

See ageing.

---

## agnostic or atheist

An **agnostic** is someone who holds that it is impossible to know whether there is a God or not. An **atheist** holds that there is no God. The word agnostic was invented by the 19th-century biologist T H Huxley.

---

## agoraphobia

Spelling: remember the **ora**.

---

## agreement

In grammar, the harmony whereby parts of a sentence agree in number, gender, and case. The form of a verb depends on the nature of its grammatical subject. This can vary in two basic ways: number – it can be singular or plural; and person – it can be first person, second person or third person. To find out more about these, look at the entries for number and person.

---

## aisle

The **s** is silent, and the word rhymes with *smile*. Spelling: remember the **s**.

---

## alias or alibi

An **alias** is a false name, not a false description or personation: *His real name was John Smith but he ran his business under the alias of Joe Bloggs*. An **alibi** is properly a statement that a person was somewhere else at the time a crime was committed: *His alibi was supported by his sister, who had been visiting him that evening*. It can also be used of a general excuse: *My alibi is that the train was late*. However, this is thought unacceptable by some people.

---

## alibi

See alias.

---

## align

Spelling: note the single **l** and the **g**.

---

### allay, alleviate, or assuage

To **allay** something is to make it less or get rid of it altogether: *She allayed my fears by saying that she also had heard nothing; I want to allay any doubts you may have about this.* To **alleviate** is to relieve something unpleasant or painful by making it less severe: *The ointment soon alleviated the discomfort; Volunteer workers did their best to alleviate the situation.* To **assuage** is similar, but is mainly used of unpleasant emotions or bodily sensations: *I tried to assuage the old man's terror; The crew were desperate to assuage their fearful thirst.*

---

### allege

Spelling: note that there is no **d**.

---

### alleviate

See allay.

---

### alliteration

Spelling: note the double **l** and single **t**.

---

### all right or alright

*The answers are all right* may mean that all of them are correct or that they are satisfactory on the whole. Some people would like to use **alright** to avoid confusion, but **all right** is considered correct. It is possible that *alright* will one day be accepted (as *already* and *altogether* have been), but for now it is better to rewrite the sentence: *all the answers are right or the answers are satisfactory.*

---

### alternately or alternatively

*The answers are all right* may mean that all of them are correct or that they are satisfactory on the whole. Some people would like to use **alright** to avoid confusion, but **all right** is considered correct. It is possible that *alright* will one day be accepted (as *already* and *altogether* have been), but for now it is better to rewrite the sentence: *all the answers are right or the answers are satisfactory.*

---

## alternative

Some people feel that, because it is derived from the Latin *alter*, meaning 'one or the other of two', *alternative* should be used only when the choice is between two things or courses of action. But **alternative** and **alternatively** can be used with more than two: *There are several alternatives; Come to lunch. Alternatively, I could come to your house, or we could meet somewhere.*

---

## alternatively

See alternately.

---

## aluminium

US spelling: *aluminum*.

---

## ambiguous or ambivalent

If something is **ambiguous** it has more than one possible meaning, and so is obscure or difficult to understand: *When I asked Stuart if he condemned my action he gave me an ambiguous answer; The message was perfectly clear and not in the least ambiguous.* If a person is **ambivalent** they have an uncertain attitude or feeling towards someone or something: *The French are ambivalent about royalty: they abolished their own monarchy but are very interested in the British royal family.* A common error is to use *ambivalent* instead of *ambiguous*.

---

## ambivalent

See ambiguous.

---

## amen

The standard pronunciation in Britain is [ah-**men**], although Roman Catholics tend to favour a pronunciation in which the first syllable rhymes with *day*. In the USA this is the usual pronunciation, but [ah -**men**] is used in singing.

---

## amend or emend



To **amend** something is to alter it, usually for the better: *The referee amended certain rules to make it easier for the new players.* To **emend** something is to correct it, especially a printed text: *The editor emended the text, which was full of errors.*

---

## America

To **amend** something is to alter it, usually for the better: *The referee amended certain rules to make it easier for the new players.* To **emend** something is to correct it, especially a printed text: *The editor emended the text, which was full of errors.*

---

## American English

In July 1994 a British MP proposed in the House of Commons a bill banning the use in English of words borrowed from French. There was laughter in the House as he spelled out the implications: no more croissants or baguettes, no hors d'œuvres, no visits to cafés or brasseries; in fact, no restaurants. No more rendez-vous, affaires, or ménages à trois.

The point of the MP's proposal, made tongue in cheek, was that the French were being chauvinist and absurd in their attempts to keep English expressions out of French. Words taken from other languages can be useful if they label aspects of our experience not already named, or if they provide an enlivening or entertaining metaphor, or an attention-grabbing phrase. Borrowings can enrich a culture. No language is an island, and where two cultures meet, words cross over.

**1. Vocabulary** The British MPs laughed at the proposal to ban French words from English, but would they have responded with such hilarity to a proposal to ban Americanisms from British English? American English, like French, has given us many useful words. Surely British English would be the poorer without *boarding house*,; *commuter*, *flashpoint*, *gimmick*, *punchline*; *snoop*; *teenager*, or expressions such as *face the music*; *be out on a limb*; *pull the wool over someone's eyes*; *take a back seat*.

Which of the following words or expressions have come into British English from American English? *influential*; *reliable*; *grapevine*; *to advocate*; *to bark up the wrong tree*; *hangover*; *to knuckle down*; *lengthy*; *live wire*; *immigrant*; *hot air*; *to make up your mind*? Well, all of them, actually.

The assimilated words remain because they are useful; and the process of transfer goes on. There are various reasons for this. The USA is the dominant world power. It exports its way of life – so we gained *burgers* and *chewing gum*, *motels* and *BLTs* (bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwiches), *gameshows* and *chatshows*.

The USA leads the world in many technologies. Thus we gained many computer terms, for example *GIGO*, an acronym that stands for 'Garbage In, Garbage Out', and sums up a basic principle of computer use.

Political events in the USA are news in most countries. From *Watergate* we gained the combining form *-gate*, which can be added to any name around which a public

scandal centres. For example, for a brief period British newspapers were full of *Dianagate* when an alleged tapescript of a private conversation of Princess Diana's was published.

The USA has a flourishing literature, which is widely read in other English-speaking countries. It is a big producer of English-language films and television programmes, which it sells abroad. The USA is a dynamic culture, creating new words because it is constantly creating new products and new ideas.

Some words are easily recognized as American: *bimbo*, *cop out*, and *guy*, for example. The word *scam*, meaning a swindle, was felt to be sufficiently foreign to be put inside quotation marks when it was used in an article in the Times in 1994. *Rubbernecking* is an American coinage that means turning your head and staring, especially when you are a driver. Traffic news on British radio sometimes now mentions *rubbernecking accidents*, that is, new accidents caused by drivers turning their heads to look at accidents on the other carriageway.

Most of us know certain American words not used in British contexts, words for everyday things having a different British word. There are, however, many more words that are quite run-of-the-mill words for Americans, but which are unknown to most British people. Are you familiar with *the boondocks* (an uninhabited area where the vegetation is thick) or a duplex (an apartment on two floors with stairs to connect them).

Words which exist in British English, but which have a different meaning in American English, can be very confusing. For a British person a *purse* is a small container for coins, not a handbag, as it is in the USA. In the USA *pants* are trousers, not underpants. A word which is a particularly nasty trap is *billion*, which means a hundred thousand in the USA. In Britain it used to mean a million million, but British usage is now increasingly following American.

British English has always taken words from one word class and made them work in another. Nouns often become verbs. We *bottle* fruit, *catalogue* goods, and *floor* our opponents. But it is thanks to American facility in this kind of word formation that people *park* their cars, journalists *interview* people, and politicians *advocate* sanctions.

Some words have entered American English from the languages of its non-British settlers. The Spanish *patio* came into American English in the 1820s, *macho* in the 1920s. Italian has given much to American cooking, and the borrowings from Italian reflect this. *Bologna*, for example, is a cooked and smoked sausage made from minced beef and pork. French has given *chowder*, a soup containing fish, milk, and potatoes.

**2. Grammar** Grammatical differences between British and American English are minimal. Perhaps the main one is the American use of the past tense where British English would use the present perfect tense. An American might ask, *Did you collect your ticket yet?* where a British person would ask, *Have you collected your ticket yet?*

The present subjunctive is used more in American English than in British English, for example *He proposed that she remain in charge*. A British person would be more likely to use *He proposed that she should remain in charge*.

A few verbs are different: American English has *snuck* where British English has *sneaked*, and *dove* where British English has *dived*. And everybody knows about *gotten*, which for most senses of *get* is an alternative to *got* as the past participle of *get* in American English, although its use is criticized by some Americans.

In British English the general personal pronoun *one* is used, by the upper classes and educated people, as in this example: *One doesn't like to interfere. After all, one wouldn't like to be accused of exceeding one's brief.* American English would start with *one* in the same way, but would follow it with *he* and possessive *his*.

Americans say *Do you have ...?* where many British people say *Have you got ...?* And there are a few differences in the use of prepositions. American English has *different **than*** and *meet **with*** where British English has *different **from*** and simply *meet* (someone).

**3. Spelling** There are a few regular differences between British and American spelling. American English keeps a single consonant where British English doubles in all forms derived from words ending in *l*: *traveled; traveling; traveler*. However, the following words have double *l*: *enroll; enrollment; fulfill; installment*.

British English **-our** is American English **-or**: *color; humor*. Words that end in **-re** in British English have **-er** in American English: *center; theater*. However, **-re** is used to show the hard sound of a preceding **c** or **g**: *acre; ogre*.

Americans are more inclined than British people to use **e** rather than **ae** or **oe**: *hemoglobin; peony*. They prefer **-ize** to **-ise** at the end of verbs: *organize*. They are less likely to use hyphens in compound nouns: *lookout*.

**4. Summary** American English should not be regarded as a corrupt form of British English. Since the major settlement of the USA by English speakers, the two varieties have evolved separately to some extent, though continue to influence each other. The USA has its own standard grammatical forms, spellings, and pronunciations, and these are taught to young Americans with rather more conviction than standard English is taught to young Britons. In some cases, the word *gotten* for example, it is American English which has retained old usages, and British English which has changed.

---

## among or amongst

Some people make a distinction between these, using **amongst** with verbs that imply movement: *we stood among the trees* but: *we walked amongst the trees; the money was shared out amongst the members*. There is no need to do so; either form can be used in any context. See also [between](#).

---

## amoral

See [immoral](#).

---

## an

See a.

---

## analogous

The main stress is on the second syllable. The **g** is hard as in *go*, and should not be pronounced like the **j** in [jam].

---

## ancillary

Spelling: note the double **l**, and no **i** after the **ls**.

---

## and/or

This is useful where it is essential to save space; *dogs and/or cats* is much shorter than *dogs or cats, or both*. It is quite at home on forms, but looks out of place in ordinary writing.

---

## annex or annexe

Spelling: remember that **annex** is a verb, and **annexe** is a noun.

---

## anorexia

Spelling: note the **o**.

---

## antarctic

The **c** in the middle of this word should be pronounced and should not be forgotten when the word is spelled.

---

## ante- or anti-

The **c** in the middle of this word should be pronounced and should not be forgotten when the word is spelled.

---

## anticipate

The primary meaning of this is to foresee an event and to take some action to prepare for it or to prevent it: *He had anticipated the question, and had his answer ready.* The meaning 'expect', 'look forward to', although it has been in use since the 18th century, is still considered by some people to be incorrect.

---

## any

When the pronoun *any* refers to a single thing, it takes a singular verb: *Is any of that jelly left?* When it is used with reference to a group of people or things, it is usual to use a plural verb: *Are any of your friends coming?* It is perfectly correct and acceptable to use a singular verb, but this tends to sound rather stiff and formal: *Is any of your friends coming?*

When the adjective *any* is applied to a singular noun referring to a person, it may not be clear whether the person is male or female. Traditionally, the pronoun *he* has been used in such contexts: *Any member who wishes to renew his subscription should go to the office,* but in present-day English it is widely felt to be invidious to implicitly exclude women in this way, and it is becoming increasingly common to use *they* instead: *Any member who wishes to renew their subscription should go to the office.* The same applies to the pronouns **anybody** and **anyone**: *I can't believe that anyone would willingly spend their holidays there.*

---

## a or an

**A** is used before consonants, **an** before a vowel sound. **A** comes before words that begin with a **u**, but are pronounced as though they began with a **y**: *a union; a useful gadget.* **An** comes before a silent **h**: *an heir; an honour.* Some people still use **an** before **h** in words from French, where the **h** was silent: *an hotel.* This is rather old-fashioned. There is no reason to use **an** before an **h** which is sounded.

---

## apartheid

The standard British pronunciation is [a-**part**-hate], though pronunciations of the last syllable as [height], [eight], [ite], and [ide] are also heard. Americans pronounce the **r** but do not pronounce the **h**.

---

## aplomb

Spelling: remember the silent **b**.

---

## apostasy

The stress is on the second syllable [uh-**poss**-tuh-see]. Spelling: note the ending -**asy**, not -**acy**.

---

## apostrophe

This is a punctuation mark (') used to indicate either a missing letter *mustn't* for 'must not' or grammatical possession *John's camera; people's houses; dogs' collars*.

The latter usage (to indicate possession) causes widespread difficulty and the apostrophe crops up in all kinds of incorrect and unlikely places. The apostrophe to indicate possession should be placed on the owner, not the owned; for example, *those boys' bikes*, not *those boys bike's*.

When used to show possession, there is one infallible rule for deciding where the apostrophe goes on the owner. If a final **s** is used for plural, the apostrophe goes outside: *Her coat was left in the ladies' locker room*. When the plural is formed without **s**, the apostrophe goes on the inside: *women's hats; men's shoes; children's swings*.

Apostrophes are not used to form the plural of words: *Keep These Door's Shut; Apple's 56p* – this kind of error is sometimes known as the 'greengrocer's apostrophe'.

---

## appal

Spelling: note the double **p** and single **l**, but remember **appalled** and **appalling**.

---

## apparatus

Spelling: remember the double **p**.

---

## appearance

Spelling: remember the double **p**.

---

## appetite

Spelling: remember **e** not **a** after the double **p**.

---

## apposition

In grammar, the placing of a noun or noun phrase next to another that refers to the same thing: *We'll take the easiest route, **the east ridge**, to the top.* The word or phrase in apposition is marked off from the thing to which it refers by a pair of commas.

---

## appraise or apprise

To **appraise** is to evaluate or assess: *The project was appraised as being viable.* To **apprise** is to inform: *We were apprised of the committee's decision.* Be especially careful not to write *appraised of*.

---

## apprise

See appraise.

---

## appurtenance

Spelling: remember the **ur**.

---

## apt

See liable.

---

## aqueduct

Spelling: note the **e** (not **a**) in the middle.

---

## Arab, Arabian, or Arabic

As adjectives, **Arab** is used mainly of the Arabs and their modern countries, **Arabian** of Arabia (the peninsula between the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf), and **Arabic** of the languages and literature of the Arabs: *The Arab nations now include countries*

*outside the natural limits of the Arabian Peninsula, and the Arabic language has adopted many forms in those countries.*

---

## archetypal

Spelling: remember the **e** in the middle, not an **i**.

---

## arctic

The **c** in the middle of this word should be pronounced and should not be forgotten when the word is spelled.

---

## aristocrat

The standard British pronunciation is with the stress on the first syllable. The beginning of the word rhymes with **Harry**. Americans stress the second syllable [er-**wrist**-tercrat].

---

## arrogate

See abdicate.

---

## artefact *or* artifact

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## article

In grammar, this is a part of speech. There are two articles in English: the definite article **the** and the indefinite article **a** or **an**. The definite article identifies a particular noun: *the book I need* and the indefinite article indicates an unidentified noun: *bring me a book*. The indefinite article *an* is used in front of a vowel: *an owl*.

---

## artifact

See artefact.



---

## artisan

The main British pronunciation is with the stress on the last syllable. Americans and some British speakers stress the first syllable.

---

## artiste

See artist.

---

## artist or artiste

An **artist** is anyone engaged in the fine or performing arts, such as a painter, sculptor, actor, or entertainer: *Les Dawson was a popular pantomime artist*. An **artiste** is usually a singer or dancer, or else a person skilled in a special craft: *The hotel chef has trained professionally and is a real artiste*.

---

## as

See like.

---

## as ... as

*There is in Georgia a mafia as powerful as or even more powerful than the Sicilian one*. It is quite common, especially in spoken English, to leave out the second **as** in sentences like this: *There is in Georgia a mafia as powerful or even more powerful than the Sicilian one*. But this is not regarded as acceptable in standard English. Keep the second **as**.

This construction can sound rather stilted or awkward. If you want to avoid it, you can switch the sentence around, like this: *There is in Georgia a mafia as powerful as the Sicilian one, or even more powerful*.

It is perfectly acceptable in colloquial English to leave out the first of a pair of **as** in comparisons: *I was (as) pleased as Punch to get the job*.

---

## ascetic

See aesthetic.

---

## Asian or Asiatic

A British person referring to an Asian will probably mean someone from the Indian sub-continent, or whose ancestors came from there. An American will probably mean someone whose roots lie further east, in the area between the Indian and Pacific Oceans (the Vietnamese, Koreans, Thais, Japanese, etc). See also Indian.

---

## Asiatic

See Asian.

---

## asinine

Spelling: remember the single **s**.

---

## asphalt

The first syllable is *as*, not *ash*, and is pronounced like the **a** at the beginning of *apple*. Some people pronounce *phalt* as [felt], but this is not standard. Spelling: remember there is no **h** before the **p**.

---

## assassin

Spelling: remember the two double **ss**.

---

## assiduous

Spelling: remember the double **s**.

---

## assimilate

Spelling: remember the two **ss** and one **m**.

---

## assonance

Spelling: remember the double **s** and single **n**.

---

## assuage

See allay.

---

## assure, ensure, or insure

To **assure** something is to make certain it will happen: *Victory is assured for the younger, fitter boxer as he has the advantage.* To **ensure** something is to take steps to make sure that something happens: *Seat belts should ensure that you will be unhurt in an accident.* To **insure** something is to take precautions against something undesirable happening: *The concertgoers insured against disappointment by buying their tickets early.*

---

## asthma

Spelling: remember the **th**.

---

## atheist

See agnostic.

---

## atrophy

The stress is on the first syllable, and the word is pronounced [**at**-ruh-fee]. Note that the end of the word is pronounced [fee], not [fie].

---

## attach

Spelling: note the ending **-ch**, not **-tch**.

---

## attenuate

Spelling: remember the double **t** and single **n**.

---

## aural or oral

Anything **aural** relates to the ear and so to hearing: *The doctor arranged an aural examination for his patient; Many teachers work with both aural and written material.* Anything **oral** relates to the mouth and so to speaking: *The French exam was in two parts: first written, then oral; Many of the stories were passed down by oral tradition, and had never been written down before.*

---

## autumn

Spelling: remember the **mn**.

---

## auxiliary

Spelling: note there is only one **l**.

---

## auxiliary verb

A verb that, when used with other verbs, expresses a particular grammatical function or meaning. In the sentences *I might have attended; You must have known; You do see; That can be arranged*, the auxiliary verbs are: *might have, must have, do, and can be*.

---

## averse or adverse

A person who is **averse** to something does not like it or is not keen on it: *Are you averse to shopping? He's not averse to a tippie now and then.* A thing that is **adverse** to someone or something is hostile or harmful to them: *Many campaigners saw the election result as adverse to the cause of democracy.*

---

## avow or vouch

To **avow** something is to admit or declare it publicly: *He avowed his determination to get his own back; She avowed herself to be a loyal supporter of the party.* To **vouch** for someone or something is to produce evidence in support of them: *I can vouch for her honesty; Can you vouch for the truth of that?*

---

## awake, awaken, wake, or waken

**Awaken** and **waken** are slightly old-fashioned words, used in writing, usually meaning 'rouse someone from sleep': *He crept in, trying not to waken his wife; She was awakened by the sound of the door opening.* Note the difference in the tenses of these verbs: *Wake* has the past tense *woke* and past participle *woken*. *Awake* is similar: *she awakes, she awoke, she has awoken*. The past tense and past participle of *waken* is *wakened*. *Awakened* is similar: *he awakens, he awakened, he has awakened*.

---

## axe

US spelling: *ax*.

---

## bachelor

Spelling: note that there is no **t**.

---

## bail or bale

To **bail** someone out is to provide cash to get them out of prison, or more generally to help them out of a difficult situation, especially a financial one: *I had to borrow £500 to bail John out, If you hadn't bailed me out last year I don't know what I would have done.* To **bail** water out is to scoop it out with a bucket or other container: *We bailed out the water that was coming into the boat.* To **bale** out is to jump from an aircraft: *The pilot had to bale out when the engine failed.* However, **bail** is also used in this last sense, especially in the US: *The pilot bailed out.*

---

## baited

See bated.

---

## bale

See bail.

---

## balk or baulk

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## balloon

Spelling: remember the double **l** and double **o**.

---

## balmy or barmy

Remember that **balmy** means pleasant or soothing, and **barmy** means mad.

---

## baluster

See banister.

---

## banal

The word is pronounced with the stress on the second syllable [buh -**narl**]. The first syllable is the same as the first syllable of *banana*.

---

## banister or baluster

A **banister** is one of the upright rails supporting the handrail in a staircase: *Most children like to slide down the banisters if they get a chance.* A **baluster** is one of the short pillars supporting the rail or stone coping round a balcony, terrace or the like: *Many balusters are narrow at the top and bottom and swell out in the middle.*

---

## bankruptcy

Spelling: remember the **t**.

---

## basically

This can be used to introduce a simplified explanation containing only the most essential point: *It's basically a matter of finance* (although there is more to it than just a lack of money). It is often used as a meaningless filler: *Basically, I'm going tomorrow.* This is best avoided.

---

## bated or baited

This can be used to introduce a simplified explanation containing only the most essential point: *It's basically a matter of finance* (although there is more to it than just a lack of money). It is often used as a meaningless filler: *Basically, I'm going tomorrow*. This is best avoided.

---

## battalion

Spelling: remember the double **t**, as in *battle*, and a single **l**.

---

## baulk

See balk.

---

## beautiful

Spelling: remember the **eau**.

---

## becomes

See behoves.

---

## beginning

Spelling: remember the one **g** and two **ns**.

---

## beg the question

This is often used to mean 'evade the question', 'avoid giving a straight answer'. It actually means to assume the truth of something which has yet to be proved, and to base a conclusion on this assumption, evading the question in the sense of failing to ask rather than failing to answer.

---

## behalf

To act or speak **on behalf of** someone or **on** someone's **behalf** is to do so as their representative. *On behalf of* should not be confused with *on the part of*: a speech *on*

*behalf* of the Chairman is made by someone else, expressing the Chairman's thoughts: a speech *on the part* of the Chairman is one he makes himself.

In American English *behalf* is also used with *in*, to mean 'in someone's interest', 'for someone's benefit': *Several people argued in his behalf*.

---

## behoves or becomes

To act or speak **on behalf of** someone or **on** someone's **behalf** is to do so as their representative. *On behalf of* should not be confused with *on the part of*: a speech *on behalf of* the Chairman is made by someone else, expressing the Chairman's thoughts: a speech *on the part of* the Chairman is one he makes himself.

In American English *behalf* is also used with *in*, to mean 'in someone's interest', 'for someone's benefit': *Several people argued in his behalf*.

---

## beleaguered

Spelling: note the **ue** after the **g**.

---

## believe

Spelling: remember the **ie**.

---

## benefited

Spelling: note the single **t**, which is because the syllable is unstressed.

---

## bequeath

Spelling: note there is no **e** on the end.

---

## bereaved or bereft

Spelling: note there is no **e** on the end.

---

## bereft



See bereaved.

---

## berserk

Spelling: remember the first r.

---

## beseige

Spelling: note this is an exception to the rule *i before e except after c*.

---

## beside or besides

Spelling: note this is an exception to the rule *i before e except after c*.

---

## between or among

**Among** is usually preferred to **between** when more than two parties are involved: *The money is to be divided between the two brothers, or among their descendants.* However, *between* is used when speaking about a relationship involving two or more parties: *a contest between Britain, France and Germany.* It is also used when describing the position of something: *The house lies between the motorway, the factory and the railway.*

---

## between you and me

*Between you and me* is acceptable in standard English; *between you and I* isn't. This is because *between* is a preposition, and pronouns that come after prepositions are in the accusative case (here, *me*), not the nominative case (not *I*).

The same applies to a pair of pronouns that is the object of a verb: *They've invited you and me to dinner* is acceptable, *They've invited you and I to dinner* isn't.

The reason why expressions like *between you and I* have become so common is that people are aware that the accusative case is not correct for the subject of a verb ( *You and I have been invited* is acceptable; *You and me have been invited* is not), so they make the mistake of thinking it is not correct anywhere, and always use the nominative case.

If you are in any doubt, try leaving out the first pronoun of the pair. That will show you what case the second one should be: *between I* and *they've invited I* are clearly ungrammatical.

---

## biannual or biennial

A **biannual** event happens twice a year: *We make a biannual visit to the in-laws: once at Christmas and again in the summer.* A **biennial** event happens every two years: *The school was due for its biennial inspection.* (A *biennial* plant lasts two years.)

---

## biased or biassed

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## bicycle

Spelling: remember it as **bi** (meaning 'two') plus **cycle**.

---

## biennial

See biannual.

---

## bilious

Spelling: note the single **l**, as in *bile*.

---

## billion

In British English *billion* has traditionally meant a million million. The American meaning of *billion* (a thousand million) has become standard in technical and financial use, and it is now better to use it in all circumstances.

---

## biscuit

Spelling: remember the **ui**.

---

## bisect

See dissect.

---

## bi-weekly, bi-monthly

**Bi-weekly** can mean either 'every other week' or 'twice a week'. The same problem arises with **bi-monthly**. The only way to avoid the ambiguity is not to use the words at all.

---

## bizarre

Spelling: note the single **z** and double **r**.

---

## black

**Black** is the term preferred by most black people. *Negro* is disliked by many, and *Negress* is felt to be particularly insulting, especially by American blacks. *Coloured*, as a term for all people who are not white, should also be avoided, as most black and brown people dislike it; *nonwhite* is acceptable.

---

## blanch

See blench.

---

## blasé

The British pronunciation has the stress on the first syllable [**blah**-zay] but the US pronunciation has the stress on the second syllable.

---

## blatant or flagrant

A **blatant** offence or injustice is a glaring or obvious one: *She said she was out, but that's a blatant lie as I saw her through the window.* A **flagrant** offence is similar but stronger, implying a deliberate flouting of a law or code of behaviour: *The judge's verdict was thought to be a flagrant miscarriage of justice.*

---

## blench or blanch

To **blench** is to go pale through fear or some strong emotion: *The nurse blenched when she saw the first victim.* To **blanch** is similar, but is often used of the part of the body that turns pale: *His cheeks blanched in horror.*

---

## blond or blonde

Spelling: use **blond** if you are writing about a boy or a man, and **blonde** if writing about a girl or a woman.

---

## bludgeon

Spelling: remember the **d** before the **g**.

---

## bolero

This word has two pronunciations. A [**bol**-uh-roe] is the short sleeveless jacket worn by Spanish dancers, and a [**bull-air**-roe] is the Spanish dance or music.

---

## bona fide

The phrase is pronounced [boner-**fi**-dee].

---

## born or borne

The phrase is pronounced [boner-**fi**-dee].

---

## bourgeois

Spelling: remember especially the **e** after the **g**.

---

## bracket

This is another word for parenthesis. Brackets separate a word or phrase from the rest of the sentence. You can use them to add information without breaking up the main sentence, which still remains intact if the words in the brackets are removed: *How could Jim (a man he had known for years) behave towards him in such a*

*despicable manner?* The information in brackets is not crucial to the structure and meaning of the sentence.

A pair of commas can be used in the same way as brackets when the subsidiary piece of information has a stronger link with the main sentence; for example: *The horses, which had been toiling all morning, were given an hour's break at noon.* A pair of dashes can also be used parenthetically. See also [dash](#).

---

## **breach or breech**

This is another word for parenthesis. Brackets separate a word or phrase from the rest of the sentence. You can use them to add information without breaking up the main sentence, which still remains intact if the words in the brackets are removed: *How could Jim (a man he had known for years) behave towards him in such a despicable manner?* The information in brackets is not crucial to the structure and meaning of the sentence.

A pair of commas can be used in the same way as brackets when the subsidiary piece of information has a stronger link with the main sentence; for example: *The horses, which had been toiling all morning, were given an hour's break at noon.* A pair of dashes can also be used parenthetically. See also [dash](#).

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## **breech**

See [breach](#).

---

## **Britain, Great Britain, United Kingdom, British Isles**

See [breach](#).

---

## **British Isles**

See [Britain](#).

---

## **Brittany**

Spelling: note the double **t**, unlike *Britain*.

---

## **broach or brooch**

Remember that to **broach** something is to open or introduce it, whereas a **brooch** is an ornament.

---

## broccoli

Spelling: note the two **cs** and one **l**.

---

## brooch

See broach.

---

## Buddha

Spelling: note the double **d**.

---

## budgeted

Spelling: note the single **t**.

---

## bulrush

Spelling: note the single **l**.

---

## buoy

This word (as in *life buoy*) is easy to misspell. Remember the **u**. Related words are *buoyant* and *buoyancy*.

---

## bureaucracy

Spelling: note the **eau**.

---

## bursar

Spelling: note the ending **-ar**, not **-er**.

---

## business or busyness

Spelling: note the ending **-ar**, not **-er**.

---

## caddie or caddy

**Caddie** is the usual spelling in golf, although *caddy* may also be used, both as a noun and a verb. A **caddy** is a box for storing tea.

---

## cajole

Spelling: note there is no **d** before the **j**.

---

## calendar

Spelling: note the single **l**, and the ending **-ar**.

---

## calibre

Spelling: note the single **l**. US spelling: **caliber**.

---

## callipers

Spelling: note the double **l** and single **p**. US spelling: *calipers*.

---

## callous or callus

Spelling: note the double **l** and single **p**. US spelling: *calipers*.

---

## callus

See callous.

---

## camaraderie

Spelling: note the **a** after the **m**, not an **e**.

---

## camellia

Spelling: note the single **m** and double **l**.

---

## camouflage

Spelling: note the single **m**.

---

## candelabra

Spelling: note the **el**, not **le** as in *candle*.

---

## cannon

See canon.

---

## canon or cannon

Both words are related to *cane*. The use of a cane as a measuring rod gave **canon** in the sense of 'rule', 'standard', and from that the sense of 'priest' (who lives under a church rule). The cane as a tube gave **cannon** as a gun or piece of artillery. The word takes no plural **s**: '*Cannon to right of them,/Cannon to left of them,/Cannon in front of them/Volley'd and thunder'd*' (Tennyson).

---

## can or may

There is still some controversy over the use of these words. Both **can** and **may** express the idea of giving or requesting permission: *Can I come in? May I come in?* This use of *can* is comparatively recent (it is first recorded in the 1870s), but over the past hundred years or so it has decidedly overtaken *may*, and now it is a perfectly normal part of standard English.

There are rare cases where the use of *can* creates genuine ambiguity. When *can* can in theory mean either 'be able to' or 'be allowed to' (as in *What if she asks me what he can do?*), in practice the context usually makes it clear which is meant.



There is always the option of using *may* instead, but remember that even in questions it sounds quite formal: *May I come in?* In positive and negative sentences its natural habitat is official pronouncements: *Persons under 16 may not use this facility.*

However, **may** is more often the cause of real ambiguity than *can*: does *They may not go until Thursday* mean that they are not allowed to go, or that it is possible that they will not go?

---

## canvas or canvass

There is still some controversy over the use of these words. Both **can** and **may** express the idea of giving or requesting permission: *Can I come in? May I come in?* This use of *can* is comparatively recent (it is first recorded in the 1870s), but over the past hundred years or so it has decidedly overtaken *may*, and now it is a perfectly normal part of standard English.

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---

## capital letter

This is an upper-case letter; see [case, upper and lower](#).

---

## capital or capitol

A **capital** is the town or city that is a country's seat of government: *Berlin is now again the capital of Germany.* A **capitol** is a statehouse in the USA, i.e. the building that houses a state's legislature: *One of the USA's best known buildings is the Capitol, the meeting place of the Congress of the United States of America in Washington, DC, the US capital.*

---

## capitol

See capital.

---

### carat or karat

This word (meaning a unit of weight, especially a unit for measuring gold) can be spelled either way.

---

### carcase or carcass

This word can be spelled either way but American English uses only *carcass*.

---

### careen

See career.

---

### career or careen

To **career** is to go rapidly and even dangerously: *I held the strap tight as the taxi careered down the steep hill.* To **careen** is to sway or tilt dangerously to one side: *The amusement park train careened first to one side then to the other as it hurtled round the track.*

---

### Caribbean

When British people talk about the *Caribbean* the word is usually pronounced [carry-**bee**-yun] but in expressions such as *Caribbean island* the main stress shifts back on to the first syllable. A few speakers always pronounce the word [k' **rib**-ian]. The US pronunciation is [ke-**rib**-ian].

Spelling: remember the single **r** and double **b**.

---

### caricature

Spelling: note that there is no **h** after the first **c**.

---

### carp

See cavil.

---

## cartilage

Spelling: note the single **l** and the ending **-age**, not **-ege**.

---

## case

In grammar, case indicates the differing functions of nouns and pronouns in their sentences. In English, six pronouns have one form when they are the subject of the verb, and a different form when they are either objects of the verb or governed by a preposition. The six are: *I/me, he/him, she/her, we/us, they/them, who/whom*. See accusative case, nominative case.

---

## case, upper and lower

These are the two possible forms taken by letters of the alphabet in typescript: capital letters (upper case) and small letters (lower case). Capitals are used to begin proper nouns: *John; Concorde; Dr Smith*; at the beginning of a sentence: *The cat sat on the mat*; at the beginning of a sentence of direct speech: *He said: 'Come here!'*; and for the principal words in a title: *Far from the Madding Crowd*.

In the days when typesetting was done by hand, printers used to keep letters in a low case, near to hand; the less often used capitals were stored in a higher (upper) case.

---

## cassette

Spelling: remember that it has double **s** and double **t**.

---

## caster or castor

Spelling: remember that it has double **s** and double **t**.

---

## catalyst

A **catalyst** is a substance which encourages chemical changes in other substances without being changed itself. The word is often used figuratively to mean something or someone that precipitates change without being directly involved in it: *The war was a catalyst for social change*. It should not be used simply to mean 'cause'.

---

## catarrh

Spelling: remember the **rrh**, as in *haemorrhage* and *diarrhoea*.

---

## catch 22

This refers to a predicament from which there is no escape because of conditions which contradict or exclude each other. It comes from Joseph Heller's novel *Catch22* in which a bomber pilot pretends to be insane so that he will be grounded, but his wish to avoid danger shows his sanity.

---

## catechism

Spelling: note the single **t**, and no **r** after the **e**.

---

## caterpillar

Spelling: remember the one **t** and two **ls**.

---

## catholic or Catholic

With a small letter, **catholic** is used of something general or universal: *She has very catholic tastes*. With a capital letter, it refers to the Roman Catholic Church: *The Catholic population is smaller than the Protestant*. Even in a religious context, and with a capital letter (as used in a former style of English), *Catholic* may still mean universal: *'And I believe one Catholick and Apostolic Church'* (Book of Common Prayer: Nicene Creed).

---

## caviare or caviar

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## cavil or carp

To **cavil** is to raise irritating or trivial objections: *He cavilled when I proposed a trip to London, saying the journey bored him*. To **carp** is to find fault, often pettily and unreasonably: *The music critic carped at the conductor's flamboyant style*.

---

## ceiling

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## cemetery

Spelling: remember there are three **es**.

---

## ensor or censure

To **ensor** something is to ban or suppress it, often on moral grounds: *The publisher censored part of the play because of its bad language.* To **censure** something is to criticize it or find fault with it: *The tennis player was censured for his unsporting behaviour on court.*

---

## censure

See ensor.

---

## centre around

Some people still maintain that **centre**, when it is used figuratively to mean 'be concentrated in', 'be taken up by', should be followed only by **on** or **in**: *Her interests are centred on her career.* However, *centre round* or *around* have been in use for many years and there is no reason to avoid them; if you wish to, use *revolve*: *His whole life revolves around football.*

---

## centrifugal

British speakers say mainly [sentry-**phew**-gle] when the adjective stands alone and is not followed by a noun: *It's centrifugal*, but they shift the main stress on to the first syllable [**sen**-trif-yougle] if the word comes before a noun: *centrifugal force*. The US pronunciation is [sen-**trif**-yer-gle].

---

## ceremonial or ceremonious

If something is **ceremonial** it is proper for a ceremony: *The victory was marked by a ceremonial parade; The best china was brought out only on ceremonial occasions.* If it is **ceremonious** it is done with great ceremony, that is, extremely politely or formally: *He gave my wife a ceremonious bow, as if she were a princess.*

---

## ceremonious

See ceremonial.

---

## cervical

The pronunciation [sir-**vy**-kle] is the one mainly used in British English, but [sir-vickle] is also used. The US pronunciation has the stress on the first syllable.

---

## chafe or chaff

The pronunciation [sir-**vy**-kle] is the one mainly used in British English, but [sir-vickle] is also used. The US pronunciation has the stress on the first syllable.

---

## chaff

See chafe.

---

## chair(person)

Formerly anyone, male or female, who took the chair at a meeting was called the *chairman*. Some people did not like this, and invented *chairwoman* for a female, and *chairperson* or *chair* for either sex. There is now no generally accepted term, and the usage depends very much on the feelings of the participants. A woman chairing a meeting may still be correctly addressed as *Madam Chairman* if she does not object (she may prefer it to the alternative *Madam Chair*). *Mr* or *Madam Chairperson* and *Mr Chair* are not generally used as forms of address, although there is no logical reason to avoid them.

---

## chamois

With the meaning 'wash leather' this word is pronounced [shammy], but with the 'animal' meaning (a kind of goat antelope) it is pronounced [**sham**-wah], more like the French original.

---

## changeable

Spelling: remember that the **e** of *change* remains.

---

## charade

The standard British pronunciation is [shuh **-rard**]. The US pronunciation [shuh**-raid**] is sometimes heard in Britain.

---

## cheque

US spelling: *check*.

---

## chilblain

Spelling: note the single **l**.

---

## chilli

(pepper) US spelling: *chili*. Do not confuse it with the name of the South American country, *Chile*.

---

## chiropodist

The recommended British pronunciation is [ki**-rop**-uhdist] with a **k** sound at the beginning. The US pronunciation is similar. In Britain a pronunciation beginning with **sh** is also heard.

---

## chivy or chivvy

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## cholesterol

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## chord

See cord.

---

## chrysalis

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## cinnamon

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

## cipher or cypher

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## circumstances

*under the circumstances* is well-established and quite acceptable, although it is sometimes objected to because *circumstance* comes from the Latin *circum*, meaning 'around'. Some people prefer to use **in the circumstances** to indicate a simple state of affairs and **under the circumstances** when the circumstances compel someone to do something, but there is no real need to make this distinction. *In* or *under* can be used in (or under) any circumstances.

---

## cirrhosis

Spelling: note the **rrh** as in *catarrh*.

---

## civic

See civil.

---

## civil, civic, or civilian



See civil.

---

## civilian

See civil.

---

## claim

Be careful when using *claim* to mean 'say', 'state', or 'declare'. The primary meaning of *claim* is to demand something that you are entitled to or to assert your right to it, in this case the right to be believed, and it implies that you may not be. *He said he had been burgled* is neutral: there is no reason to question the statement. *He claimed he had been burgled* suggests that he may not be telling the truth.

---

## clandestine

The standard pronunciation is with the stress on the second syllable [clan-**dess**-tin] but many people stress the word on the first syllable [**clan**-dess-tine] or [**clan**-dess-tin].

---

## classical

See classic.

---

## classic or classical

See classic.

---

## clause

A part of a sentence that contains a subject and a verb, and is joined to the rest of the sentence by a conjunction. In English, if the conjunction is *and*, *but*, or *or*, the clause is a coordinating clause; with any other conjunction it is a subordinating clause.

---

## claustrophobia

Spelling: remember **au** first, and then **o**.

---

## clayey

Spelling: note the ending **-yey**.

---

## clematis

The standard British pronunciation is with the stress on the first syllable and with a weak second syllable [**cl**em-uh-tiss]. However, [cluh-**may**-tiss] is also heard. The US pronunciation is [**cl**em-ertus].

---

## clichés, pretentious language, and jargon

Many specialist terms are pretentious jargon from the start. Does a *human resources manager* really need to ask that a sales director be *results orientated*? Will the new appointee really prefer a *rewards package* to the salary with other benefits that he had in his previous company.

See also plain English, legalese, officialese, and entries at actually, basically, commence, interface, key, parameter, and situation.

---

## climax

**Climax** comes from a Greek word meaning 'ladder' and as a technical term in rhetoric means the arrangement of ideas in a series in which each is more impressive than the one before. In general use it means 'a culmination', 'a peak of intensity'. Some people disapprove of *climax* used as a verb meaning 'come' or 'bring to a climax', but this is now well-established and there is no good reason to avoid it.

---

## cluster

Spelling: note the ending **-er**, not **-re**.

---

## coccyx

Spelling: note the **ccy** in the middle.

---

## coconut

Spelling: remember that there is no **a** in the middle.

---

## cocoon

Spelling: note the single **c** in the middle.

---

## colander

Spelling: note the **o**, and the ending **-er**.

---

## collateral

Spelling: note the double **l**.

---

## collective noun

A collective noun, or group noun, is a noun which designates a group of people or animals. *Crew, committee, gang, government, audience, family, and herd* are all collective nouns.

When such a group is considered as a single unit, its collective noun is used with a singular verb and singular pronouns: *The committee has reached its decision*. But when the focus is on the individual members of the group, British English tends to use a plural verb and plural pronouns with its collective nouns: *The committee have been arguing all morning over what they should do*. American English usually uses a singular verb and pronouns in these circumstances.

A determiner in front of a singular collective noun is always singular: *this committee*, never *these committee* (but of course when the collective noun is pluralized, it takes a plural determiner: *these committees*).

---

## colon

This is a punctuation mark (:) commonly used before a direct quotation: *She said: 'Leave it out'* or a list, or to add detail to a statement: *That is his cat: the fluffy white one*.

---

## colonnade

Spelling: note the single **l** and double **n**.

---

## coloration

Spelling: remember that there is no **u** before the **r**.

---

## colossal

Spelling: note the single **l** and double **s**.

---

## colosseum

Spelling: note the single **l** and double **s**. An alternative spelling is *coliseum*.

---

## coloured

See black.

---

## comical

See comic.

---

## comic or comical

See comic.

---

## comma

This is a punctuation mark (,) most commonly used to mark off a phrase or noun in apposition: *Billy, the last man, did not let us down*, mark off a subordinate clause or phrase: *Old Mrs Parsons, who had lived there all her life, could not remember such a thing happening before*, or separate items in a list: *The box was full of nails, screws, pins, string, and tape*.

Commas are also used to mark off sentence connectors such as *however, nevertheless, moreover*. *Nevertheless, I can say, without any doubt, that he deserved his success*. There are other occasions where a comma is needed to indicate a pause or a slight change of direction in the sentence. For example, *I certainly won't see him again, although I can't help liking him*. Commas are often incorrectly used where a stronger stop is required: *We saw John last night, it was good to see him again*. Although the meaning is clear, the use of a comma here is grammatically incorrect. A full stop or semicolon should be used.

---

## commemorate

Spelling: note the double **m** first, then a single **m**.

---

## commence

**Commence** is a formal word for 'start' or 'begin'. It is not generally used in conversation, and looks pompous in all but the most formal writing.

---

## commiserate

Spelling: note the two **ms** and one **s**.

---

## committee

Spelling: remember the three double letters **m**, **t**, and **e**.

---

## common

See mutual.

---

## communal

The preferred British pronunciation is [**kom**-yer-nal] with the stress on the first syllable, but some people say [ker-**myoo**-nal]. This is also the US pronunciation.

---

## comparable

The preferred British pronunciation is with the stress on the first syllable and with a weak second syllable [**com**-prable]. A pronunciation that starts with a weak syllable and then sounds the same as *parable* is also heard. The US pronunciation is [**car**m-prable].

---

## comparative

The form of an adjective usually ending in *-er*, indicating the greater of two qualities being compared. For example, *she is older, wiser and happier than her brother*. The comparative of some adjectives is formed by preceding them with *more* instead of the *-er* ending: *He is more beautiful and more generous than his sister*. See also superlative. Spelling: note the second **a**.

---

## compare

*Compare* is used with *to* to suggest similarity: *She compared him to* (she said he was like) *a knight in shining armour*. Followed by *and*, *with*, or a plural, *compare* refers to an analysis of similarities and differences: *Compare Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra and Shaw's Caesar and Cleopatra; The Ford Escort was compared with other cars in the same price range; a survey comparing opinions about smoking*. If it is used without an object, meaning 'compete' or 'be compared with', *compare* is followed by *with*: *Tinned strawberries can't compare with fresh ones*. *Compared* can be followed by *to* or *with*: *Compared to* (or *with*) *her, I'm a genius*.

---

## competent

Spelling: remember the two **es**.

---

## competition

Spelling: remember it has **ti** twice.

---

## complacent, complaisant, or compliant

**Compliant** refers to an actual complying or obliging, whether willingly or not: *All the courtiers were compliant with the royal will*.

---

## complaisant

See complacent.

---

## complement

In grammar, a word or phrase that follows the verb and tells us about the subject: *John was **an accountant**; Jane appeared **bored***. Noun and adjective complements follow verbs such as *to be*, *to seem*, *to become*.

---

## complement or compliment

To **complement** something is to suit it or complete it: *That shirt complements your suit nicely*. To **compliment** someone is to praise them or approve of them: *She complimented the child on his good manners*. If you think of the first five letters of *complete* when you are trying to spell *complement*, it will help you spell these two words correctly.

---

## compliant

See complacent.

---

## compliment

See complement.

---

## compose

See consist.

---

## compound subject

A compound subject, or coordinate subject, consists of two or more nouns or pronouns joined by a conjunction or preposition, which together form the subject of a single verb. It can be difficult to decide whether this verb should be singular or plural.

If the nouns or pronouns are joined by *and*, the verb is usually plural: *My mother and I are going to Weston-super-Mare for our holidays*. This applies even if one of the nouns is omitted: *Both red wine and white are made in the area*. But when the two nouns refer to the same person or thing, the verb is singular: *My flatmate, and fellow team member, has broken his leg*. And when the two linked nouns have become a fixed phrase, representing a single entity, the verb is singular: *Fish and chips is all he ever eats*.

If the nouns or pronouns are joined by *or* or *nor* (usually preceded by *either* or *neither*), the verb depends on the nouns or pronouns themselves. If both are singular, the verb is singular: *The guard or his assistant has locked the gate.* If both are plural, the verb is plural: *Neither the Americans nor the Russians want this policy to succeed.* If one is singular and one is plural, the verb agrees with the noun or pronoun closest to it: *Either the twins or Bob is going to come round to help you;* *Neither the time nor the resources are available.* If the two pronouns conflict in person, the verb should agree with the second pronoun: *Either you or I am likely to be chosen.* But this usually sounds awkward, and it is probably better to rewrite the sentence to avoid the choice: *Either you or I will probably be chosen.*

If the nouns or pronouns are joined by prepositions such as *as well as*; *in addition to*; *rather than*; *with*, the verb is singular: *Determination as well as skill is needed in this job.*

---

## compound word

Two or more words linked to create a new one: *boyfriend*; *long-winded*; *motorbike*; *meeting room*. The two words can be merged, separated by a space, or hyphenated.

---

## comprise

See consist.

---

## compulsive, impulsive, or impetuous

A **compulsive** action is one done involuntarily: *He was so nervous that he gave a compulsive laugh whenever she spoke to him.* An **impulsive** action is one done on the spur of the moment, without hesitation, often as a consequence of a 'gut feeling' that it is right: *She gave him an impulsive kiss.* An **impetuous** action is a rash or impulsive one, often performed with some vigour: *He gave an impetuous flick of his hand to motion the beggar away.*

---

## concede

See accede.

---

## concise

Spelling: remember the **c** in the middle, not **s**.

---



## conditional clause

In a sentence, a clause where the action proposed in the main clause is dependent on the fulfilment of the subordinate clause: *If you are good, you can go to the party; You can't go unless you have a ticket.* Conditional clauses are introduced by the conjunctions *if* or *unless*.

---

## condole or console

To **condole** with somebody is to express sympathy with them; to **console** someone is to give them sympathy or comfort them: *When her mother died, I first condoled with her on her loss then did my best to console her.*

---

## condone

This means to overlook or forgive bad behaviour, or to treat it as unimportant; a woman is said to *condone* her husband's adultery if she continues to live with him as his wife although she knows what is going on. It can be used to mean 'agree to' (perhaps reluctantly), or 'acquiesce'. If using *condone* in this sense note that it implies a certain amount of shared guilt in failing to punish or prevent something: *Nixon may not have planned the Watergate break-in, but he certainly condoned it.*

---

## conduit

The most common British pronunciation is with the stress on the first syllable [**con**-jewit]. The US pronunciation is [**car**n-do-it].

---

## confidant

See confident.

---

## confident

An adjective meaning trusting or bold. Note the ending *-ent*. A *confidant* (male) or *confidante* (female) is someone that you confide in.

---

## conjunction

This is a grammatical part of speech that serves to connect words, phrases, and clauses. Coordinating conjunctions link parts of equal grammatical value; *and*, *but*, and *or* are the most common. Subordinating conjunctions link subordinate clauses to the main clause in a sentence; among the most common are *if*, *when*, and *though*.

In the sentence *He ran but he could not hide*, the coordinating conjunction *but* links the two main clauses. In the sentence *He hid when he could*, the subordinating conjunction *when* links the subordinate clause to the main clause, *He hid*. Other common subordinating conjunctions are *because*, *unless*, *after*, *than*, and *where*.

---

### conjuror or conjurer

This word may be spelled either way.

---

### connection or connexion

This word can be spelled either way.

---

### connoisseur

The standard British pronunciation is with the stress on the first syllable and a weak second syllable [**con**-uh-sir]. The American pronunciation also has the stress on the first syllable, and the final *r* is pronounced.

---

### conscientious

Spelling: remember the **sc**.

---

### consensus

Spelling: remember the three **ss**.

---

### consist, comprise, constitute, or compose

To **consist** of something is to be made up of it: *The programme consisted of two short plays*. To **comprise** something has the same meaning, often implying that the whole is regarded from the point of view of its individual parts: *The programme comprises two short plays* (they were chosen to make it up). To **constitute** something is to form a whole, especially of dissimilar components: *Wealth and health do not necessarily constitute happiness*. To **compose** means the same, but implies

that the components have something in common: *Water is composed of hydrogen and oxygen*. A common mistake is to confuse *consist* and *comprise*, saying, for example: *The programme is comprised of two short plays*.

---

## console

See condole.

---

## consonant

Any of the twenty-one letters of the English alphabet that are not vowels.

---

## constitute

See consist.

---

## consummate

This word may be pronounced differently depending on whether it is an adjective, as in *a consummate victory*, or a verb, as in *to consummate a marriage*. Whereas the verb is pronounced with the stress on the first syllable and has a weak second syllable [**con**-ser-mate], the adjective may be pronounced with the stress on the second syllable [k'n-**sum**-mit] .

---

## contagious

See infectious.

---

## contemporary

This is often used to mean 'modern', especially when referring to style or design. Its main meaning is 'belonging to the same time'. Strictly speaking a Victorian house with *contemporary* furniture would be furnished in Victorian, not modern, style.

---

## contemptible or contemptuous

This is often used to mean 'modern', especially when referring to style or design. Its main meaning is 'belonging to the same time'. Strictly speaking a Victorian house with *contemporary* furniture would be furnished in Victorian, not modern, style.

---

## contemptuous

See contemptible.

---

## continual, continuous, or constant

Something is **continual** if it happens repeatedly: *Our holiday was ruined by the continual rain* (it rained often but not all the time). It is **continuous** if it goes on without a break: *Our holiday was ruined by the continuous rain* (it rained all the time). If something is **constant** it happens many times in the same manner: *Ruth suffered from constant colds as a child*.

---

## continuous

See continual.

---

## contrary or converse

If a thing is **contrary** it either differs or disagrees: *I took the contrary view, that we should go by train rather than drive*. If something is **converse** it is the opposite: *I held the converse view: that museums should be privatized, not nationalized*.

In the sense 'differing' *contrary* is pronounced with the stress on the first syllable. In its other sense, 'perverse', it is pronounced with the stress on the second syllable, so that the end rhymes with *Mary*.

---

## contribute

The standard British pronunciation is with the stress on the second syllable [con-**trib**-yoot]. The pronunciation with the stress on the first syllable [**con**-trib-yoot] is increasingly heard, but is widely disapproved of. The US pronunciation has the stress on the second syllable.

---

## controversial

Spelling: note the **o** in the middle, not an **a**.

---

## controversy

The most educated British speakers prefer the pronunciation with the stress on the first syllable. The pronunciation with the stress on the second syllable is widely used, but disapproved of by some people. The US pronunciation has the stress on the first syllable.

---

## converse

See contrary.

---

## convince *and* persuade

These can often be used interchangeably: *I persuaded (or convinced) him that we needed a new car*; *He was convinced (or persuaded) of the need for a new car*. However, **convince** means specifically 'to persuade someone to believe something', so it should not be used with a verb referring to an action: *I convinced him that he should buy a new car* (I made him believe that he should), but: *I persuaded him to buy a new car*.

---

## cord or chord

A **cord** is strong string or something resembling it: *I'll tie the door back with this cord*; *The choirmaster was testing the soloist's vocal cords*. A **chord** has various specialized senses, such as a straight line in mathematics or a simultaneous sounding of musical notes. (It can also be used of vocal chords.) Figuratively, it has the musical sense when referring to an emotional response: *The mother's TV appeal struck a deep chord with many viewers*.

---

## co-respondent

See correspondent.

---

## corporal or corporeal

See correspondent.

---

## corporeal

See corporal.

---

## correlate

Spelling: remember that the beginning is **cor-** (Latin 'with'), not **co-**.

---

## correspondent or co-respondent

A **correspondent** is a person one writes to regularly: *My pen friend and I have been correspondents since we were teenagers.* A **co-respondent** is (or was) a person (usually a man) accused of committing adultery in a divorce case, the other person (usually a woman) being the respondent: *He was cited as co-respondent.*

---

## coruscating

(meaning 'sparkling'). Spelling: note the single **r**.

---

## cosiness

Spelling: the **y** in *cosy* changes to an **i**.

---

## cosy

US spelling: *cozy*.

---

## council or counsel

US spelling: *cozy*.

---

## counsel

See council.

---

## counterfeit

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## courteous, courtesy

Both these words are stressed on the first syllable, which is pronounced [cʊrt].

---

## cousin

The word **cousin** is used loosely to refer to any relative of the same generation, other than brothers and sisters. Your *first cousins* are the children of your parents' brothers and sisters. Your *second cousins* are the children of your parents' first cousins; their children will be *third cousins* to your children.

The term *removed* can be used when referring to the children or parents of cousins. Your first cousins' children are your *first cousins once removed*, their children will be your *first cousins twice removed*. Your second cousins' parents are your *second cousins once removed*, their parents are *twice removed*, and so on.

It is seldom necessary to specify the exact relationship; in everyday use any cousin's children are called simply *nieces* and *nephews* and their parents *uncles* and *aunts*. The term *cousin-in-law*, to refer to your partner's cousins or your cousins' partners, exists but is seldom used. It is just as easy, and more specific, to say *my husband's cousin* or *my cousin's wife*.

---

## covert

The traditional pronunciation is like *covered* except that it ends with a **t** sound, but an alternative pronunciation [**koh**-vert], in which the second syllable rhymes with *Bert* is increasingly heard, especially in contexts of espionage and other clandestine activities.

---

## crape or crêpe

The traditional pronunciation is like *covered* except that it ends with a **t** sound, but an alternative pronunciation [**koh**-vert], in which the second syllable rhymes with *Bert* is increasingly heard, especially in contexts of espionage and other clandestine activities.

---

## credence or credit

To give **credence** to something is to believe it: *I find it hard to give credence to his explanation* (I don't believe it). To give **credit** to something is to believe in it: *I don't give any credit to that theory* (I don't trust it); *Would you credit it!* (Would you believe such a thing).

---

## credible, creditable, or credulous

To give **credence** to something is to believe it: *I find it hard to give credence to his explanation* (I don't believe it). To give **credit** to something is to believe in it: *I don't give any credit to that theory* (I don't trust it); *Would you credit it!* (Would you believe such a thing).

---

## credit

See credence.

---

## creditable

See credible.

---

## credulous

See credible.

---

## crêpe

See crape.

---

## crescendo

*Crescendo* is a term in music meaning a passage which gradually increases in volume (it comes from an Italian word meaning 'to increase or grow'). *Crescendo* can also be used for any gradual increase in force or effect, leading up to a climax: *a crescendo of excitement which culminated when the Queen appeared on the balcony*. It is often used as though it meant the climax itself, in phrases such as *rise to a crescendo*, *reach a crescendo*, although many people consider this to be incorrect.

---



## crevasse

See crevice.

---

## crevice or crevasse

A **crevice** is a narrow opening in something such as a wall or a rock: *The birds had built their nests in the crevices of the cliff.* A **crevasse** is a deep open crack in the ice of a glacier: *The polar explorers had to negotiate several dangerous crevasses.*

---

## culminate

This means 'to reach the highest or final point', and is usually used figuratively. It implies a gradual development, not a sudden act: *A history of bad luck and bad management which culminated in bankruptcy.*

---

## curb or kerb

Use **curb** to mean 'restrain' or 'restraint', and **kerb** to mean the edge of the pavement. In American English, however, *curb* is used for all meanings.

---

## currant

This word, meaning a small fruit, and ending **-ant**, should not be confused with *current* which has several meanings including 'running', 'flowing', and 'present'.

---

## current

See currant.

---

## curriculum

Spelling: note the double r.

---

## curriculum vitae

This Latin expression is the full formal term for a written summary of a person's education, qualifications, skills, and job history. The word *vitae* is pronounced [vee-tie]. The abbreviation *cv* is usually used in conversation, and is also very common in writing. Americans are more likely to use *biodata* or *résumé*, and make less use of the form in any case. You may be asked to supply a *cv* when you apply for a job, or if you apply for a place on a course.

Do not aim to produce an all-purpose *cv*. Rather aim to produce one suitable for the present application. Select the information that is relevant to the requirements of the particular job. If you are given a job description, use it to help you select and give weight to certain pieces of information. Your aim is to show what makes you eligible for this particular job. Unless you are sure that your place in the county hockey team is relevant, leave it out.

You will need to organize the information you provide in your *cv*. Put your name and the title *curriculum vitae* or *cv* at the beginning with the date. A typical *cv* might be organized into seven or eight sections. Start with a section headed *Personal Details*. Give your address, telephone number, nationality, if relevant, and date of birth.

The thing which is most important to a possible employer is your most recent work and responsibilities, so the second section might be headed *Present Work*. Next in importance may be your qualifications, so in the third section you could list them. If you are at the beginning of your working life, you may want to mention the secondary school(s) you attended.

A prospective employer will want to have an outline of your job history. Organize this by giving for each job firstly the starting and finishing dates. Give the title of the post. If you had experiences, responsibilities, or special training that would help you to do the job that you are applying for, describe them. Account for the whole of your working life. Do not leave gaps that may make the employer wonder if you are reliable.

Employers usually ask for referees, and specify how many and who they should be. The last section of your *cv* should give details of them. They will be people who can bear witness to your abilities in fields relevant to the job you are applying for. They should be able to say how your personal qualities make you suitable. One will usually be your present employer. As well as names, give the positions in their organizations of your referees, and their current addresses.

Other things that you might mention in a *cv*, if relevant, are the languages you speak, the fact that you hold a driving licence, any part you have played in the social organization of your workplaces, and your outside interests.

---

## cynical or sceptical

A **cynical** person is one who sneers or mocks, especially about someone or something normally held in high esteem: *Whenever my father visits the doctor he makes some cynical remark about 'seeing the quack'*. A **sceptical** person is dubious or mistrustful: *She seemed sceptical when I said we'd be back by teatime*.

---

## cypher or cipher

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## czar, tsar, or tzar

This word can be spelled in all three ways.

---

## dais

This word has two syllables, and is pronounced [**day**-iss]. Spelling: note the **ai**.

---

## dangling participle or hanging participle or unattached participle

*Walking back home yesterday, a tree nearly fell on my head.* If strict logic is applied to that sentence, it should mean that the tree was walking back home: the subject of the main clause of a sentence (here, *a tree*) is assumed to be the subject of a phrase attached to the main clause – as in *Being shy, she never said a word.*

But language does not always keep to the tramlines of strict logic, and it is quite common to find attached phrases applying to some other part of the main clause (here, the 'I' implied by *my head*). Such phrases usually contain participles: they are called dangling participles, or hanging participles, or unattached participles. In the sentence above, the dangling participle is a present participle *walking*, but you can also have a dangling past participle: *If properly secured, you shouldn't be able to remove the cover.*

Dangling participles are not considered acceptable in standard English, so they should be avoided in writing. Recast offending sentences so that the subject of the attached phrase is clear: *As I was walking back home yesterday a tree nearly fell on my head; If the cover is properly secured, you shouldn't be able to remove it.*

---

## dash

This is a punctuation mark (–) that can be used singly or in pairs (as a type of parenthesis, to mark off a clearly subordinate part of a sentence). A single dash is used to represent a sudden break or interruption in dialogue or an abrupt change of subject.

A sentence should not have more than one pair of dashes. For marking off a clause or phrase integral to the structure of the sentence, commas are preferred: *Then Alan, who is always hungry, decided it was time for lunch.*

In dialogue, dashes represent a sudden break or interruption, whereas hesitation is usually indicated by ellipsis (three dots). *I think I know – now, don't tell me. It's next to ... to – no, that's the other – I give up.*

A dash can also give a special emphasis to the end of a sentence. *Seeing the door slightly ajar, he gave it a push and it opened to reveal Agnes – in the arms of Fred!*

---

## data

Strictly speaking, *data* is the plural of *datum*, and means 'a fact', 'a piece of information'. It is often used as another word for information, followed by a singular verb: *Data is stored on the computer.* This is now regarded as acceptable, especially in American English and in the language of information technology.

By far the most general pronunciation is [**day**-ter], though a few people prefer the traditional Latin pronunciation [**dar**-ter].

---

## dates

To express a date as day-month-year, the preferred British style in formal writing is: *On 10 July 1994 the parliament sat for the first time.* The other British style, also used in the USA, is: *On July 10, 1994, the parliament sat for the first time.*

In informal notes, official forms, invoices etc, people sometimes use an all-figure form of the date, for example, 12.9.94. Do not use this form in international contexts, because British and American practice is different. In Britain the date is read as day-month-year, whereas in the USA it is read as month-day-year. So, while in Britain 2.9.94. would be read as the second of September 1994, in the USA it would be read as the ninth of February 1994. If you meet an all-figure form of the date in an international context, be aware that it is likely to need the American interpretation.

Material produced on a computer often has an all-figure form of the date. Note that in this the numbers 1 to 9 are preceded by zero, and only the last two digits of the year are used. In Britain the second of September 1994 would have the form 02 09 94. However, many computer programs are designed in the USA, and some automatically put the day's date on a document. In this case it will be the American form, with month before day, unless you change it.

If the year is not given, the preferred style is to spell out the day of the month: *the session of the tenth of July.* The alternative is: *the session of 10 July.* When only month and year are given, the preferred style is without punctuation: *July 1994.*

When **centuries** are mentioned, spell them out without using capital letters: *the fourteenth century; the mid-twentieth century; nineteenth-century reforms.* In cases such as the last example, where the century comes before a noun, hyphens are used by some British writers, but the current trend is towards the American practice of leaving them out.

There are two ways of referring to a **decade**. In an essay or report use the number of the year plus **s**: *in the 1940s*. It is no longer usual to put an apostrophe before the **s**. In informal writing and newspaper features the abbreviated form of the word is often used: *in the forties*.

The abbreviations <sup>AD</sup> and <sup>BC</sup> stand for *Anno Domini*, which is Latin for 'the Year of Our Lord', and *Before Christ*. These abbreviations may be written with or without full stops. <sup>AD</sup> always goes before the number of the year, and <sup>BC</sup> goes after it. *Tiberius lived from 42 <sup>BC</sup> to <sup>AD</sup> 37*.

For information on quoting the dates of publications, see [essay and report writing](#).

---

## deadly or deathly

If something is **deadly** it is either literally fatal or, less commonly, suggests death: *The insect is well known for its deadly sting; She was deadly pale*. If something is **deathly** it may be literally fatal but is more likely to suggest a dead state: *His face was deathly pale*.

---

## deathly

See [deadly](#).

---

## debar or disbar

To **debar** someone is to bar or exclude them from a place or prevent them from exercising a right: *Women are debarred from some London clubs; People under 18 are debarred from voting*. To **disbar** someone means the same, but the word is used mainly in a legal context: *The barrister was disbarred (expelled from the Bar)*.

---

## debtor

Spelling: note the **b** as in *debt*, and the ending **-or**.

---

## decade

The standard way of saying it is [**deck**-aid] with the stress on the first syllable. A pronunciation the same as that of *decayed* is widely used but disapproved of.

---

## decimate

This comes from the Latin *decimare*, meaning 'take the tenth man', and means 'kill or remove one in ten of'. It is now often used to mean 'damage severely', 'destroy or kill most of': *Tuberculosis decimated the population; Cheap imports decimated the coal industry*. Many people deplore this, both because of the meaning and because of the use of decimate with a single entity: you cannot destroy one in ten of the coal industry, although you may close one pit in ten. However, this usage is now very common, and seems likely to become accepted.

---

## decrepit

Spelling: note the **t** on the end, not a **d**.

---

## defence

US spelling: *defense*.

---

## definite article

See [article](#).

---

## definitely

It is easy to misspell this word. Remember the two **is** in the middle.

---

## definite or definitive

If something is **definite** it is certain or clear: *There was a definite chill in the air; I'll give you a definite answer tomorrow* (a straight one). If a thing is **definitive** it is final and authoritative: *This is the definitive version of the story; I'll give you a definitive answer tomorrow* (one that will settle it).

---

## definitive

See [definite](#).

---

## deity

Both [**day**-uh-tee] and [**dee**-uh-tee] are common and accepted pronunciations.

---

### delicatessen

Spelling: note the single **l** and **t**.

---

### delineate

Spelling: note the single **l** and the **e** after the **n**.

---

### delusion *or* illusion

A **delusion** is a strong belief that a thing is really other than it is: *The patient was under the delusion that the potatoes they gave him were rocks* (they were obviously not). An **illusion** is a deception caused by a thing appearing to be other than it really is, as in a magician's trick.

---

### demonstrable

The most common British pronunciation begins like the word *delight* and is stressed on the second syllable [di-**mon**-strable]. The pronunciation with the stress on the first syllable [**dem**-n-strable] is preferred by purists. Americans only use the form stressed on the second syllable.

---

### demur

Spelling: note the ending **-ur**, not **-er**.

---

### denouement

Spelling: remember the **e** after the **ou**.

---

### dependant

See dependent.

---

## dependent or dependant

See dependent.

---

## depraved or deprived

Someone who is **depraved** is morally bad or corrupt: *He was utterly depraved, and had a bad influence on many of his colleagues.* Someone who is **deprived** lacks the normal benefits of food, clothing, housing, and the like: *The council was particularly concerned about the number of deprived children on the estate.*

---

## deprecate or depreciate

**Deprecate** means to deplore something, **depreciate** means to belittle something or to treat it as unimportant. However, *self-deprecating*, in the sense 'disparaging oneself', 'modestly understating one's own abilities' has become firmly established, although some people deprecate this usage.

---

## depreciate

See deprecate.

---

## depredation

Spelling: remember the **e** after the **r**.

---

## deprived

See depraved.

---

## derisive or derisory

See depraved.

---

## derisory

See derisive.



---

## derogate

See abdicate.

---

## descendant

Spelling: remember the **-ant** at the end.

---

## desert or dessert

Spelling: remember the **-ant** at the end.

---

## desiccated

Spelling: think of **de** plus **siccated** so that you remember it has one **s** and two **cs**.

---

## designer

This has been used since the 1960s to refer to items, particularly fashionable clothing, bearing the name of a famous designer, with the implication that they were superior and expensive: *Designer jeans from leading fashion houses*. It has become a cliché, and is now mainly used humorously, with the implication that the 'designer' item is overrated or merely trendy.

---

## despatch

See dispatch.

---

## desperate

Spelling: remember the **e** in the middle.

---

## despicable

The first syllable is the same as the first syllable of *despise*, and the word is pronounced [di-**spick**-able]. Some traditionalists still use the older pronunciation [**dess**-pick-able], with the stress on the first syllable, but it is rarely heard.

---

## dessert

See desert.

---

## detach

Spelling: remember it has no **t** before the **ch**.

---

## determiner

A word like *the*, *a*, *some* or *this*, which is placed before a noun and defines the particular noun you are talking about.

---

## developing

Spelling: remember it has only one **l** and one **p**.

---

## dexterous or dextrous

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## diagram

Spelling: remember it is not **-mme** at the end.

---

## diarrhoea

US spelling: *diarrhea*.

---

## dichotomy

The first syllable is pronounced [die]. The stress is on the second syllable [cot].  
Spelling: note the **ch**.

---

## dietician or dietitian

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## different

The verb *to differ* can be followed only by *from*, and some people apply the same rule to *different*. However, *different to* has been in use since the 15th century, and is quite acceptable. *Different than*, once quite common, is no longer considered correct in British English, but is the standard form in American English.

---

## dike

See dyke.

---

## dilapidated

Spelling: note that it has a single **l** and single **p**.

---

## dilatory

The stress is on the first syllable, the second syllable is weak, and the *o* is lost altogether [**dill**-uh-tree].

---

## dilemma

This means a choice, or a situation demanding a choice, between equally undesirable alternatives; a doctor at a difficult birth would be *in a dilemma* if he could save the mother or the child, but not both. Some people maintain that it should not be used when there are more than two alternatives, and it is best to avoid referring to a complex problem, with many possible courses of action, as a dilemma: *the dilemma of economic decline*. A dilemma may have more than two choices, but they should be few in number and clearly defined: *the dilemma of whether to go on to short-time working, lay off staff, or cut wages*. Strictly speaking, *dilemma* should not be used if the choices are pleasant or unimportant; having to choose between cream and ice cream on your strawberries is hardly a dilemma.

---

## dilettante

The stress is on the third syllable [**tan**]. The word comes from Italian, and the final **e** is pronounced, giving [diller-**tan**-tee]. Spelling: note the single **l** and double **t**.

---

## dinghy

(a type of boat). Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## dingy

(meaning dirty). Spelling: Remember that there is no **e**.

---

## diphtheria

Spelling: remember the **ph**.

---

## diphthong

Spelling: remember the **ph**.

---

## disappear

Spelling: think of **dis** plus **appear**, and remember one **s** and two **ps**.

---

## disappoint

Spelling: think of **dis** plus **appoint**, and remember one **s** and two **ps**.

---

## disapprove

Spelling: think of **dis** plus **approve**, and remember one **s** and two **ps**.

---

## disbar

See debar.

---

## discomfiture

See discomfort.

---

## discomfort or discomfiture

**Discomfort** is pain, unease or embarrassment: *Linda's sprained wrist caused her continuing discomfort; I had to face the discomfort of telling them myself.* To experience **discomfiture** is to feel disconcerted, or baffled: *He laughed at my momentary discomfiture at the arrival of the unexpected guest.*

---

## disc or disk

In British English **disc** is the usual spelling, but American English uses *disk*, and **disk** is also more common in computing, as in *disk drive*.

---

## discreet or discrete

In British English **disc** is the usual spelling, but American English uses *disk*, and **disk** is also more common in computing, as in *disk drive*.

---

## discrete

See discreet.

---

## disingenuous

See ingenious.

---

## disinterested or uninterested

If you are **disinterested** in something you are impartial and do not take sides: *A disinterested observer of the scene would have wondered what all the fuss was*

*about*. If you are **uninterested** you have no interest at all: *The player was uninterested in the public reaction to his remark*. *Disinterested* is often used instead of *uninterested* to mean lacking interest. This use is widely regarded as incorrect and should be avoided, especially in formal writing.

---

## disk

See disc.

---

## dismissal

Spelling: remember the single **s** and then double **s**.

---

## dispatch or despatch

This word can be spelled either way, although *dispatch* is more common.

---

## dispirited

Spelling: remember there is only one **s**.

---

## dispute

The verb and noun are both pronounced with the stress on the second syllable [diss-**pyoot**]. A sizeable number of speakers pronounce the noun with the stress on the first syllable [**diss**-pyoot]. Both pronunciations are acceptable.

---

## dissatisfied

Spelling: remember the double **s**.

---

## dissect or bisect

To **dissect** something is to cut it into pieces or analyse it: *The pathologist dissected the body; The new film was dissected by the critics*. (The word begins with *dis-*, 'apart', not *di-*, 'two'). To **bisect** something is to cut it into two: *The path bisected the park*.

---

## disseminate

Spelling: remember the double **s**. It comes from the Latin *dis* meaning 'asunder' and *seminare*, 'to sow'.

---

## dissension

Spelling: note the double **s** and the ending **-sion**, not **-tion**.

---

## dissentient

See dissenting.

---

## dissenting, dissident, or dissentient

See dissenting.

---

## dissent or dissension

See dissenting.

---

## dissertation

Spelling: remember the double **s**.

---

## dissident

See dissenting.

---

## dissipate

Spelling: note the double **s** and single **p**.

---

## dissociate

Spelling: remember it is not *dis-as-sociate*.

---

## distil

Spelling: note the single I, although American English uses *distill*.

---

## distinctive

See distinct.

---

## distinct or distinctive

See distinct.

---

## distracted

See distraught.

---

## distrain

See distraught.

---

## distraught, distracted, or distraint

A **distraught** person usually behaves irrationally when affected by a deep emotion such as fear or grief: *The distraught mother looked for the missing child everywhere.* A **distracted** person is often one who is mentally confused or even insane, even if only temporarily: *The poor woman was quite distracted and kept murmuring the same words over and over again.* A person who is **distrain** is absent-minded (ie abstracted rather than distracted): *My fellow guest appeared gloomy and distraint, and I wondered what was troubling him.*

---

## distribute



The standard British pronunciation is with the stress on the second syllable [dis-**trib**-yoot]. The pronunciation with the stress on the first syllable [**dis**-trib-yoot] is increasingly heard, but is widely disapproved of. The US pronunciation has the stress on the second syllable.

---

### **distrust or mistrust**

The standard British pronunciation is with the stress on the second syllable [dis-**trib**-yoot]. The pronunciation with the stress on the first syllable [**dis**-trib-yoot] is increasingly heard, but is widely disapproved of. The US pronunciation has the stress on the second syllable.

---

### **divers**

See diverse.

---

### **diverse or divers**

See diverse.

---

### **Domesday or doomsday**

**Domesday** is the usual spelling for the Domesday Book, while **Doomsday** is Judgement Day and **doomsday** is this same word in a general sense: *The Domesday Book was probably so called as there was no appeal against it, any more than there was against Doomsday; This work will take me till doomsday.*

---

### **doomsday**

See Domesday.

---

### **double negative**

*She didn't see nothing.* Did she see anything? In many varieties of English, the answer would be a clear 'no'. It is common to reinforce the negativeness of a sentence by using two (or even more) negative words. So *She didn't see nothing* is the same as *She certainly didn't see anything*.

From a mathematical point of view, however, two negatives equal a positive, and it has come to be thought that sentences like *She didn't see nothing* should mean 'She

did see something'. In practice, no one would ever interpret them like that unless the context suggested it, but such *double negatives* are not regarded as acceptable in standard English. Say instead, *She didn't see anything* or *She saw nothing*.

It is particularly easy to fall into the double negative trap after expressions like *I shouldn't be surprised if* and *I shouldn't wonder if*. There is a great temptation to put in another negative word, even though what you want to say is positive: *I shouldn't be surprised if it didn't rain*. If what you mean is that you expect it to rain, say *I shouldn't be surprised if it rained*.

There is one sort of double negative that is accepted in standard English. You can use *not* with a word that has a negative prefix, in order to emphasize positive meaning – as in *a not inconsiderable sum* and *a not unreasonable question*. The technical name for this is *litotes*, pronounced [lie-**tote**-ees].

---

## doubling letters

See [spelling rules](#).

---

## doubtful or dubious

If something is **doubtful** it is uncertain, and one needs to know more about it: *The weather looks doubtful* (it may rain, but it may not). If a thing is **dubious** it raises or causes doubt: *He gave a dubious reply when I asked him about it*, *Christine had the rather dubious privilege of staying behind to keep an eye on things*.

---

## douse or dowse

To **douse** something is to extinguish it: *We doused the blaze with buckets of water*, *Hey, douse that light!* To **dowse** is to search for water underground by using a special divining rod: *A dowsing party soon established the presence of an underground stream*. However, *douse* can also be spelled *dowse* in the first sense.

---

## dowse

See [douse](#).

---

## draft or draught

A **draft** is either a preliminary written version of something or a body of people selected for a special purpose: *The solicitor had prepared a draft of the letter he intended to send*, *A second draft of troops was called in to assist in the flooded area*.

A **draught** is a current of air or a swallowing of liquid: *There's a terrible draught in here; He downed his glass of beer in a single draught.* In American English the usual spelling is *draft* for both senses.

---

## draught

See draft.

---

## dual or duel

See draft.

---

## dubious

See doubtful.

---

## duel

See dual.

---

## due to

Although it is very common, many people object to *due to* being used to introduce the reason for an undesirable situation, maintaining that *owing to* is the correct form: *Due (or owing) to the fog, all flights were delayed for several hours.* There is no real reason to avoid *due to*, but it is just as easy to use *because of*, which no one can criticize.

---

## duffel or duffle

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## dyke

This is the usual British spelling, although American English uses *dike*.

---

## dynasty

In Britain the standard pronunciation is [**din**-er-stee], in the USA [**dine**-er-stee]. The broadcasting in Britain of the American soap opera *Dynasty* in the 1980s familiarized British speakers with the transatlantic pronunciation.

---

## dysentery

Spelling: remember the **y** at the beginning and the ending **-ery**.

---

## each

In traditional standard English, the pronoun **each** is used with a singular verb and singular pronouns: *Each has made his own decision.*

As with other indefinite pronouns, which could refer to either a man or a woman, there is a tendency in present-day English to use a plural verb and pronouns with it (see they/their/theirs). But the conjunction of *each* and *have* in *Each have made their own decision* is inelegant, and the use of a singular verb and a plural pronoun in *Each has made their own decision* is scarcely better, so it is preferable to avoid this construction altogether by using an *of* phrase: *Each of them have made their own decision.*

When **each** comes after a plural noun or pronoun, it takes a plural verb: *They each have their own way of doing it.*

---

## easiness

Spelling: remember the **i** in the middle, not a **y**.

---

## eatable or edible

Spelling: remember the **i** in the middle, not a **y**.

---

## ebullient

The standard pronunciation is with the stress on the second syllable, which is pronounced like the **bul-** in *bulb*. The pronunciation is [ee-**bulee**-uhnt].

---

## eclectic

See esoteric.

---

## economical

See economic.

---

## economic *or* economical

See economic.

---

## ecstasy

Spelling: remember **cs**, not **x**, and the ending **-asy**.

---

## eczema

Spelling: remember **cz**, not **x**.

---

## edible

See eatable.

---

## effect

See affect and impact.

---

## effective, effectual, efficacious, *or* efficient

If something is **effective** it has a noticeable effect: *The actor made a most effective entrance.* If it is **effectual** it produces a particular effect, usually the one intended: *We took effectual steps to redress the situation.* If a thing is **efficacious** it has the power or potential to produce a particular effect: *These tablets are efficacious against malaria.* If a thing is **efficient** it works well: *Josie did a very efficient job with the lawns.*

---

## effectual

See effective.

---

## effeminate or effete

See effective.

---

## effete

See effeminate.

---

## efficacious

See effective.

---

## efficient

See effective.

---

## egoist or egotist

There is a considerable overlap between the words, but a difference exists. An **egoist** is someone who is self-centred or selfish, often without realising it: *He's a proper egoist, never thinking to enquire about the needs or wishes of anyone else.* An **egotist** is an arrogant or conceited person, always talking about himself: *She's a real egotist, always on about what she has done or is planning to do.*

---

## e.g. or i.e.

The abbreviation **e.g.** (from the Latin *exempli gratia*, 'for sake of an example') indicates that one or more examples follow of what has been mentioned in general terms: *It could be cheaper by public transport, e.g. by train or coach.* The abbreviation **i.e.** (from Latin *id est*, 'that is') indicates that an explanation follows of what has just been mentioned: *Gratuities are discretionary, i.e. you don't have to leave a tip if you don't want to.*

---

## egotist

See egoist.

---

## egregious

The pronunciation is with the stress on the second syllable. The first syllable is like the beginning of *elope*, and the word is pronounced [i-**gree**-jus].

---

## either

**Either** on its own is used with a singular verb: *Wear red or white – either is acceptable*. When it is followed by *of*, it commonly has a plural verb: *Have either of you seen my glasses?*, although in formal writing a singular verb is preferable: *Has either of you seen my glasses?*

When it is followed by *or*, the verb agrees with the noun or pronoun that comes after the *or*. If this is singular, the verb is singular: *Either John or Kathie has got it*. But if it is plural, the verb is plural: *Either Frankie or his brothers have promised to be there*.

The second noun or pronoun also determines the person of the verb: *Either you or I am right*, but *Either I or you are right*.

If one noun or pronoun refers to a male person and the other to a female person, it is permissible to use a plural verb and plural pronouns, in order to avoid the invidious 'he': *If either Peter or Jennie ring, tell them I'll call them back*.

When you use **either ... or**, it is preferable to put both the *either* and the *or* immediately in front of the parts of the sentence they refer to. So: *You must either pay up or leave* is more acceptable than: *Either you must pay up or leave*, and: *You can have either red wine or white* is more acceptable than: *You can either have red wine or white*.

When **either** is a pronoun, it refers only to two things or people: *Has either of you two seen Harry?* For three or more things or people, use *any*. But when *either* is a conjunction, it is perfectly acceptable to use it for three or more things or people: *For the first course, you can have either soup, pâté or fruit juice*.

As an adjective, **either** can mean either 'one or the other of two': *She can write with either hand* or 'each': *There's a lifeguard station at either end of the beach*. But be aware that when you use it in a context which could have both meanings, you may cause confusion: if you say, *There's a service tunnel that runs on either side of the main tunnel*, do you mean that there is one service tunnel that runs first on the left side of the main tunnel, then on the right, then on the left, and so on, or that there are two service tunnels, one on each side of the main tunnel.

The main British pronunciation of **either** is with [aye]. There is an alternative with [ee], but this is frowned upon by some. The main US pronunciation is [ee-the], but [aye-the] is also heard. See also neither.

---

## elder or older

**Either** on its own is used with a singular verb: *Wear red or white – either is acceptable.* When it is followed by *of*, it commonly has a plural verb: *Have either of you seen my glasses?*, although in formal writing a singular verb is preferable: *Has either of you seen my glasses?*

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---

## embarrass

Spelling: remember the double **r** and double **s**.



---

## embodiment

Spelling: remember the **i**, not a **y**.

---

## emend

See amend.

---

## emotional or emotive

See amend.

---

## emotive

See emotional.

---

## empathy

See sympathy.

---

## enervate or invigorate

Because of a false association with words such as elevate and energy, **enervate** is often used to mean 'invigorate'. It actually means the opposite: to drain and weaken: *The climate in hot countries can be depressing and enervating.* To **invigorate** someone or something thus means to give them vigour and energy: *The freshness of the morning invigorated me as I walked.*

---

## enforceable

Spelling: remember to keep the **e** before adding **able**.

---

## England and English

These are often used carelessly as though they applied to the whole of the United Kingdom. This makes many Scots, Welsh, and Irish people angry. See [Britain](#).

---

## enormity

See [enormousness](#).

---

## enormousness or enormity

See [enormousness](#).

---

## enquire or inquire

This word can be spelled either way, although the tendency is to use **enquire** when asking for information, and **inquire** when conducting an investigation.

---

## ensure

See [assure](#).

---

## enthuse

**Enthuse**, meaning 'to be *or* to make someone enthusiastic', 'to show enthusiasm', originated in the USA and is still regarded as an Americanism by many people. Avoid using it in formal speech or writing.

---

## envelope

The majority of British speakers say [**enn**-ver-lope] but some, mainly older, speakers keep a pronunciation nearer to the French, and say [**on**-ver-lope].

---

## envisage

This is similar to *imagine*; it means to form a mental picture of something which may one day exist. It is often used to mean 'intend': *We do not envisage making changes in the near future*. This sounds pompous and also rather vague, implying that you have not really thought about the possibility of change. *We do not intend to make*

*changes* is more definite, implying that you have made a conscious decision not to change.

---

## epigram, epigraph, epitaph, or epithet

An **epigram**, originally an inscription on a monument or statue, is now a short, witty statement, especially one with two counterbalancing halves: *Francis Bacon popularized the epigram: 'If the hill will not come to Mahomet, Mahomet will go to the hill'*. An **epigraph** is either an inscription on a monument or statue, or a motto or quotation at the beginning of a book: *The epigraph to E M Forster's novel Howards End is 'Only connect!'*

An **epitaph** is an inscription on a tomb or grave: *Dryden's epitaph on his wife was: 'Here lies my wife: here let her lie!/Now she's at rest, and so am I'*. An **epithet** is an adjective or phrase describing a person or thing: *Richard Coeur de Lion earned the epithet 'Lionheart' because of his bravery*.

---

## epigraph

See epigram.

---

## epitaph

See epigram.

---

## epithet

See epigram.

---

## equable or equitable

If a thing is **equable** it is unvarying in an agreeable way: *The island of Malta has an equable climate, with stable temperatures for most of the year*. If it is **equitable** it is impartial or reasonable: *The crew reached an equitable agreement: they would take it in turns to keep watch*.

---

## equally

*Equally* should not be followed by *as*: *He's equally as good as his brother*. Use *just as good*, or change the order of the sentence: *He and his brother are equally good*.

---

## equitable

The stress is on the first syllable. The British pronunciation is [e**ck**-quitable]. American English has a weak second syllable [e**ck**-kwuht-able]. See equable.

---

## erupt or irrupt

To **erupt** is literally to burst out, while the less common **irrupt** is literally to burst in: *The gang erupted from the building onto the street when the police irrupted into it.*

---

## Eskimo

See Indian.

---

## esoteric or eclectic

Something **esoteric** is designed for the select few or the initiated, with the implication that the thing in question is abstruse or obscure: *James Joyce's esoteric use of language can deter the average reader.* If a thing is **eclectic** (an esoteric word) it implies that the best of something has been selected from a number of sources, or simply that a person has wide or catholic tastes: *The concert was enjoyably eclectic, and included music from Bach to the Beatles.*

---

## essay and report writing

The comma comes before the inverted comma. Closing quotation marks follow the punctuation marks for the sentence of which they are part, except for a colon or semi-colon. See the previous example.

If you refer several times to something for which there is an established but not well known abbreviation, give the full form the first time you mention it, with the abbreviation in brackets after it. Subsequently, use the abbreviation alone.

For the preferred style for dates, see dates.

**3. Footnotes** Footnotes are pieces of extra information placed at the bottom of the page to which they relate. They were traditionally used to give information about the sources of material quoted or referred to in the main body of an essay or report. Current practice is to give at the end of the text a bibliography, that is, a list of books and articles consulted, and referred to in the text.

You can use footnotes for background or explanatory information that might divert from the general line of argument if it were included in the text, but which some readers would be interested to look at. Some people prefer to keep the basic text free of the clutter of footnotes, and put the additional material in endnotes at the end of the text. Use footnotes and endnotes as little as possible, and keep them short. Use asterisks or superscript numbers in the text to indicate them.

A large block of information that would interrupt the text if included can be placed in a separate appendix at the end of the text.

**4. Bibliographies** The last section of the essay or report is the bibliography, called the reference list in the USA. This is where you list the books and articles that you consulted when you were researching your subject and that might be useful to readers. They are listed in alphabetical order by authors' surnames. You need to give full details of each so that any reader who wishes to consult a copy may do so.

Each item in the bibliography should be set out consistently in a standard form. A common one has the elements in this order: 1 name(s) of the author(s), surname and comma before first name and initials 2 the title of the work 3 place of publication, publisher, and date of publication Full stops are used at the end of each of these parts.

---

## et al

See etc.

---

## etc

This is an abbreviation of the Latin **et cetera**, meaning 'and other things'. Some people say that it should not be used with lists of people, or to mean 'and so forth' when referring to events or actions: *The children laughed, shouted, ran about, etc.* However, its use in these contexts is well established, although **et al** is more polite when referring to people (this is an abbreviation of the Latin *et alii*, meaning 'and others').

The more important question is whether you should use these abbreviations at all. They are useful for notes and on forms, but look out of place in ordinary writing; better to begin a list of examples with *such as* or *for example*, or to follow it with *and so on*, *and so forth*, or (with people) *and others*. Whatever form you use, make sure that you give some idea of what the other items might be.

In a sentence such as *there are worms etc in the garden*, **etc** could refer to almost anything: *worms, beetles, woodlice, and so on* suggests other creepy-crawlies, while: *creatures such as worms, spiders, and frogs* suggests a much wider range of wildlife. This means that you have to know what you mean: **etc** and its equivalents are often used when people are not sure, or cannot be bothered to think about, what they wish to include. Remember the **c** in *et cetera* is pronounced **s**. The *et* is sometimes incorrectly pronounced *ek*. Note also that **etc** and **et al** can be written with or without a full stop.

---

## ethnic

This is often used to mean 'foreign': *ethnic* clothing, fabrics, etc, being based (sometimes rather loosely) on the traditional materials and designs of other cultures, particularly peasant or tribal ones. Strictly speaking, this is incorrect, as *ethnic* refers to the combination of physical and cultural characteristics by which a group identifies itself or is identified by others, and everyone has some kind of ethnic background.

An *ethnic minority* is a group which is racially and culturally different from the majority of people in the society it belongs to; in the USA a member of such a group may be called *an ethnic*. Ethnicity is not the same as nationality; a person may be of British nationality (legally regarded as a British citizen), and ethnically Jewish, Welsh, Afro-Caribbean, Asian, etc. It also differs from race; Africans, Afro-Caribbeans and black Americans have common ancestry, but their history and culture have diverged, making them ethnically different.

---

## evenness

Remember that this word has two **ns**.

---

## evince or evoke

To **evince** something is to exhibit it or show that one has it: *Mozart evinced an amazing talent for music as a young child*. To **evoke** something is to bring it to mind or actually cause it as a response: *The music evoked memories of her days at school; The pianist's fine performance evoked prolonged applause from the audience*.

---

## evoke

See evince.

---

## exacerbate

The standard pronunciation is [igg-**zass**-erbate] with the stress on the second syllable, which rhymes with *lass*.

---

## exaggerate

Spelling: remember the two **gs** and one **r**.

---

## exalt or exult

To **exalt** someone or something is to raise them in esteem or honour by praising them: *Many of Churchill's contemporaries exalted him as a fine leader, "Tis not what man does which exalts him, but what man would do!"* (Robert Browning). To **exult** is to rejoice greatly: *Roberta exulted at her first professional success; 'Exult O shores, and ring O bells!'* (Walt Whitman).

---

## excellent

Spelling: remember the **c**.

---

## except

See accept.

---

## exceptionable

See exceptional.

---

## exceptional or exceptionable

See exceptional.

---

## exception proves the rule, the

This is often used to mean that the exception confirms the rule. However, *prove* in this case means 'test'; the fact that there is an exception implies that the rule may not be valid, or may need some modification. The phrase is perhaps most often used as a more or less meaningless reply to an inconvenient fact: *'You're always late'. 'I was early this morning'. 'Ah, but the exception proves the rule!'*

---

## exciting

Spelling: remember the **c**.

---

## exclamation mark or exclamation point

This is a punctuation mark (!) used to indicate emphasis or strong emotion: *That's terrible!* It is appropriate after interjections: *Rats!*, emphatic greetings: *Yo!*, and orders: *Shut up!*, as well as those sentences beginning *How* or *What* that are not questions: *How embarrassing! What a surprise!*

The exclamation mark is most often seen in dialogue. Its use is kept to a minimum in narrative prose and technical writing. Within a quotation an exclamation mark may be placed in square brackets to indicate that the writer or editor is surprised by something.

Exclamation marks are used to indicate urgency; contrast *Let me get out, I need to go home* with *Let me out! I'm choking in here!* They are sometimes used to suggest heavy sarcasm: *You are a great goalkeeper!* means the opposite in the context of a lost game. Overuse of exclamation marks reduces their impact. Double exclamation marks are always to be avoided.

---

## exercise or exorcize

To **exercise** is to use or practise the mind or body in some activity: *Jogging exercises the body and often the mind as well.* To **exorcize** something is to drive it out, with particular reference to an evil spirit: *The minister exorcized the house when the family claimed they had an active poltergeist.* The words are unrelated.

---

## exorcize

See exercise.

---

## expatriate

Spelling: remember that the ending is **-ate**, not **-ot**.

---

## explicable

The standard pronunciation is [ix-**pl**ick-able], but traditionalists maintain that the word should be pronounced [**ex**-pl~~ick~~able] with the stress on the first syllable.

---

## extraordinary

Spelling: remember **extra** plus **ordinary**.



---

## extrovert

Spelling: remember the **o**, not an **a** in the middle.

---

## exult

See exalt.

---

## facia or fascia

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## Fahrenheit

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## faint or feint

Use **faint** when referring to dizziness, a loss of consciousness, or swooning. Use **feint** when you mean a pretended punch in boxing. Either spelling can be used to describe fine lines on paper, although *feint* is more common.

---

## famous or infamous

A **famous** person or deed is widely known and is usually good or praiseworthy: *We saw a film about Captain Scott, the famous explorer.* An **infamous** person or deed is widely known and is bad or to be deplored: *We saw a film about the infamous king Richard III.*

---

## farther or further

A **famous** person or deed is widely known and is usually good or praiseworthy: *We saw a film about Captain Scott, the famous explorer.* An **infamous** person or deed is widely known and is bad or to be deplored: *We saw a film about the infamous king Richard III.*

---

## fascia

See facia.

---

## fascinating

Spelling: remember the **sc**.

---

## fascism

Spelling: remember the **sc** (also in *fascist*).

---

## fashion

Spelling: remember the **i**.

---

## fatal or fateful

If something is **fatal** it causes death: *His second heart attack was fatal*. If it is **fateful** it is ominous or decisive, perhaps bringing death, but perhaps not: *That day was to be the fateful one for her*. In popular speech, however, the two words are not differentiated: *Have you seen the gory film Fatal Attraction?*

---

## fateful

See fatal.

---

## faze

**Faze**, meaning 'daunt', 'perturb', 'disconcert', is usually used in negative statements: *Nothing fazes her*. It comes from the USA and Canada, and is still regarded as an Americanism. However, it is a useful word and is slowly becoming accepted. Avoid using it in formal contexts.

---

## feasible

Spelling: remember the ending **-ible**.

---

## February

Spelling: remember the **br**.

---

## feign

Spelling: note the **ei** and the **g**.

---

## feint

See faint.

---

## feisty

This is an Americanism which is gaining ground in British and Australian English. It is defined in many dictionaries as 'aggressive, excitable, nervous, touchy' but is now more often used to mean 'spirited', 'assertive', 'able to speak up for oneself' (usually applied to women). It has also appeared in an advertisement for a high-performance car, presumably suggesting that the car is fast, tough, and exciting to drive.

Words tend to change their meanings with time, sometimes through an error which gradually becomes accepted (as with *decimate*), often by being applied to different things, as in this case. *Feisty* is changing too quickly for dictionaries to keep up with – and it remains to be seen what the accepted meaning will eventually be.

---

## ferment

See foment.

---

## fervent or fervid

See foment.

---

## fervid

See fervent.

---

## fewer or less

**Fewer** means 'not so many'; **less** means 'not so much': *Fewer jobs mean less money in the town; Fewer people would take up less room.* *Less* is used with expressions of quantity: *less than five miles; less than 10.* *Less* is often used in place of *fewer*, but this is widely regarded as incorrect and should be avoided, especially in formal writing.

---

## fiancé or fiancée

Use **fiancé** for a man, and **fiancée** for a woman.

---

## fifth

Spelling: remember the second **f** (also in *fifthly*).

---

## filament

Spelling: note the single **l**.

---

## filthiness

Spelling: the **y** in *filthy* changes to an **i**.

---

## finally

Spelling: remember the double **l**.

---

## finance

In Britain the pronunciation for the noun: *Finance is going to be a problem*) is [**fye-nance**], although [**fye-nance**] is also common. The verb: *The dam has been financed by the British government* is usually [**fye-nance**]. The US pronunciations are the other way round.

---

## fiord or fjord

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## first or firstly

Either can be used to begin a list, or to introduce a series of questions or statements: *I have two questions. First, do we need it? Second, can we afford it? Firstly, we must have it. Secondly, we've got plenty of money.* Whichever you choose, be consistent: **first** should be followed by *second, third, firstly* by *secondly, thirdly*, and so on.

---

## fizziness

Spelling: the **y** in *fizzy* changes to an **i**.

---

## fjord

See fiord.

---

## flaccid

The recommended pronunciation used to be [**flack**-sid], but the pronunciation that rhymes with *acid* is now commonly accepted.

---

## flagrant

See blatant.

---

## flammable

See inflammable.

---

## flaunt

See flout.

---

## fleshly or fleshy

See flout.

---

## floatation or flotation

This word can be spelled either way, although the second spelling is more common.

---

## floor

In Britain, the *first floor* is above the *ground floor*, which is at street level. In the USA the *first floor* is at street level, with the *second floor* corresponding to the British *first floor*.

---

## flotation

See floatation.

---

## flotsam or jetsam

Technically, **flotsam** is cargo or wreckage floating on the surface of the sea, while **jetsam** is cargo that has been thrown overboard (jettisoned) or washed up on the beach. However, the two words are linked to refer to homeless people: *The government seemed to do little to help the flotsam and jetsam of society.*

---

## flounder or founder

To **flounder** is to struggle in an attempt to retain control in a situation: *The swimmer began to flounder in the heavy seas; My next question made him flounder.* To **founder** is to sink or collapse: *The ship sprang a leak and started to founder; The project foundered when we no longer had the funds to support it.*

---

## flout or flaunt

To **flout** someone or something is to treat them with contempt and ignore them: *The school's lack of discipline meant that many pupils flouted the rules.* To **flaunt** something is to parade it ostentatiously: *He loved flaunting his knowledge on the subject.* People sometimes use *flaunt* when they mean 'flout' so use these words with care.

---

## fogginess

Spelling: the **y** in *foggy* changes to an **i**.

---

## foment or ferment

To **foment** is to stir up trouble or something undesirable: *I don't want to foment any ill feeling.* To **ferment** is to stir up emotions or reactions, not necessarily bad ones: *The race fermented considerable excitement among the spectators.*

---

## forbid or prohibit

To **foment** is to stir up trouble or something undesirable: *I don't want to foment any ill feeling.* To **ferment** is to stir up emotions or reactions, not necessarily bad ones: *The race fermented considerable excitement among the spectators.*

---

## foreign

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## foresee

Spelling: remember the **e** after the **r**.

---

## foreword or forward

remember that **forward** means near or towards the front. A **foreword** is an introduction to a book.

---

## forfeit

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## formally

See formerly.

---

## former, latter

**Former** refers to the first of two things, **latter** to the second. Strictly speaking, if there are more than two things *first* or *first-named* and *last* or *last-named* should be used, but this rule is often ignored. The use of *former* and *latter* mean that the reader has to go back over the sentence (or, worse, the listener has to remember it). It is usually better to repeat a word; in the sentence *Some people prefer dogs to cats because the former are more faithful* it is easier, and kinder to the reader, to write *because dogs are more faithful*.

---

## formerly or formally

**Former** refers to the first of two things, **latter** to the second. Strictly speaking, if there are more than two things *first* or *first-named* and *last* or *last-named* should be used, but this rule is often ignored. The use of *former* and *latter* mean that the reader has to go back over the sentence (or, worse, the listener has to remember it). It is usually better to repeat a word; in the sentence *Some people prefer dogs to cats because the former are more faithful* it is easier, and kinder to the reader, to write *because dogs are more faithful*.

---

## formidable

Although a majority of British speakers probably stress the second syllable, the pronunciation with the stress on the first syllable has more prestige. Americans usually place the stress on the first syllable.

---

## for- or fore-

Words beginning **for-** have the idea of doing without or forbidding in their meaning, while words beginning **fore-** have the idea of going before or into the future in their meaning. Note especially the spellings of these words: forbear (abstain); forbid; forgo (do without); forebear (ancestor); forecast; foregoing (preceding); foretell

---

## fortuitous

This is sometimes used instead of *fortunate*. It means 'by chance', 'accidentally', whether that chance is fortunate or not.

---



## forty

Spelling: remember that there is no **u**.

---

## forward

See foreword.

---

## founder

See flounder.

---

## Frances or Francis

**Frances** is the feminine form of the name, **Francis** is the masculine form, often shortened to *Frank*.

---

## freight

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## friend

Spelling: remember it is **ie**.

---

## friendliness

Spelling: the **y** of *friendly* changes to an **i**.

---

## frigid

Spelling: note that there is no **d** before the **g**.

---

## friskiness

Spelling: the **y** of *frisky* changes to an **i**.

---

## frolic

Spelling: note that there is no **k** (but remember *frolicked* and *frolicking*).

---

## fruitiness

Spelling: the **y** of *fruity* changes to an **i**.

---

## fuchsia

Spelling: remember that the plant was named after a botanist called Leonard Fuchs.

---

## fulfil

Spelling: note the two single **ls**.

---

## full stop

This is a punctuation mark (.) used to indicate the end of a sentence or an abbreviation.

The use of a comma where a full stop or at least a semicolon is needed has been the most common error in written English for many years. Commas would be inadequate to punctuate this piece: *I looked at my watch it was five o'clock in the morning this was always a dangerous time we had the dawn at our backs the enemy would see us outlined against the sky.*

There are five complete statements here. Each may be a sentence marked by full stops and capital letters. Since the statements are closely linked, this would be an opportunity to use semicolons. But commas do not provide a sufficiently strong pause. They are not traditionally the marks used for separating complete statements.

There are no fixed rules about the use of full stops to indicate abbreviations, but the growing practice is to omit them: *Mr* rather than *Mr.*, *Cambs* rather than *Cambs.*

A comma can be used after an abbreviation that has a full stop: *Fred Smith, M.P., O.B.E., said ...*, but if it falls at the end of a sentence, only one full stop is used: *He was awarded the O.B.E.* not *He was awarded the O.B.E..*

---

## -ful or-full

See spelling rules.

---

## fulsome

**Fulsome** praise or thanks are not just given wholeheartedly and enthusiastically, they are laid on with a trowel. In modern English **fulsome** is derogatory, meaning 'too effusive or flattering', 'overdone'.

---

## fungous or fungus

Remember that **fungous** is the adjective and **fungus** is the noun.

---

## funniness

Spelling: the **y** of *funny* changes to an **i**.

---

## further

See farther.

---

## fussiness

Spelling: the **y** of *fussy* changes to an **i**.

---

## fuzziness

Spelling: the **y** of *fuzzy* changes to an **i**.

---

## Gaelic or Gallic

The most common pronunciation of *Gaelic* is [**gay**-lick], but [**gal**-ick], beginning like *gallon*, is also acceptable.

---

## gaiety

Spelling: note the **e**.

---

## gala

Two pronunciations are heard, [**gar**-ler] and [**gay**-ler]. Americans use the latter.

---

## Gallic

See Gaelic.

---

## gamble or gambol

To **gamble** is to risk or chance something: *He gambled away a lot of his money on the pools; I wouldn't gamble on the weather staying fine.* To **gambol** is to frisk or leap about playfully: *The little lambs were gambolling in the field; After the wedding the younger children were gambolling around the churchyard.*

---

## gambol

See gamble.

---

## gaol or jail

This word can be spelled either way, although American English uses **jail**. (Note also *gaoler* and *jailer*).

---

## garage

There are several alternative pronunciations in British English: [**ga**-raj, **ga**-rardge, **ga**-ridge], the last one being regarded by some as non-standard. Americans put the stress on the second syllable [**g'**-raj, **g'**-rardge].

---

## gaseous

In British English *gaseous* does not have the same vowel as *gas*, but is pronounced [gay-seous]. The US pronunciation is [gash-ous].

---

## gauge

Spelling: note the **au**.

---

## gay

The most common meaning of **gay** in everyday use is now 'homosexual'. Many people regret the loss of the older meanings 'jolly', 'merry', 'bright', 'colourful'; they can still be used, but only with great care when there is no possible ambiguity. As a noun, *gay* usually refers to a man. Many homosexual women prefer the older term *lesbian*, although some will use *gay* as an adjective: *I'm a lesbian; I'm gay*. Gay people may use *queer* among themselves, but regard its use by heterosexuals as offensive.

---

## genealogy

Spelling: note the **a** in the middle, not an **o**.

---

## gerund

A gerund, or verbal noun, is a form of a verb with an *-ing* ending which has some of the characteristics of a noun. For example, it can be the object of a verb: *The council has decided to ban smoking in its offices* or the subject of a verb: *Smoking is strictly forbidden*. But it can also retain some characteristics of a verb – for instance, if its base verb is transitive, a gerund can take an object: *Smoking a pipe is supposed to be less harmful than smoking cigarettes*. Nouns formed from verbs with *-ing* that are pluralizable, like *etching*, as in *Come up and see my etchings*, are not classified as gerunds.

In traditional grammar, any pronoun or noun that precedes a gerund should be in the possessive case: *I disapprove of his smoking; I resented Sarah's taking my place*. In practice, though, in present-day English most people use the object form of pronouns: *I disapprove of him smoking* and do not inflect nouns: *I resented Sarah taking my place*. This usage (which is sometimes termed a *fused participle*) is perfectly acceptable in standard English, and indeed it is probably preferable to using possessive forms, which can sound stilted and cumbersome.

---

## geyser

In the usual British pronunciation *gey-* rhymes with *key*. A few people use the pronunciation [guy] for the 'hot spring' meaning. This is the usual pronunciation in the USA.

---

## gherkin

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## gibe, gybe, or jibe

To **gibe** someone, or at someone, is to mock them or jeer at them: *They gibed him about the error*. To **gybe**, as applied to a sailing ship, is to shift direction: *The yacht gybed suddenly to port*. Both verbs have the alternative spelling **jibe**.

---

## gill

The word for the liquid measure is pronounced [jill]. The word for other meanings (as in fish or mushroom) is pronounced [gill] with a hard **g** like *go*.

---

## gipsy or gypsy

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## girl

**Girl**, as an informal word for *woman* (the female equivalent of 'chap', 'bloke', 'guy,' etc) should be used with great care. Many adult women object strongly to being called *girls* by men. A man who refers to his female secretary as *my girl* will almost certainly cause offence, as will a sports commentator who says (however truthfully), *In cricket the girls' team generally does better than the men's*.

A woman may refer to another woman as a girl, particularly if they have known each other since they were girls or if the other woman is younger. A woman may also call the female members of a group that she belongs to *the girls*. A man might get away with this if it is clear that no offence is intended, but it is safer for him to refer to them as *the ladies*. See also lady.

---

## glamorous

Spelling: note that there is no **u** before the **r** as there is in *glamour*.

---

## glisten

Spelling: remember the **t**.

---

## goddess

Spelling: note the double **d**.

---

## gourmand or gourmet

A **gourmand** is someone who is excessively fond of food and drink: *He's a real gourmand, and never stints on his weekly shopping.* A **gourmet** is a connoisseur of food and drink: *TV cookery expert Graham Kerr was nicknamed the 'Galloping Gourmet' because he produced exquisite dishes with lightning speed.* Remember the **u** when spelling these two words.

---

## gourmet

See gourmand.

---

## government

Spelling: remember the first **n**.

---

## graceful or gracious

A **graceful** person or thing shows grace or elegance: *The ballet dancer gave a graceful leap across the stage.* A **gracious** person or thing is kindly or indulgent, as typically aristocrats and royalty are or were said to be: *Gracious living is not everyone's cup of tea.* The word can be used patronisingly or sarcastically: *How incredibly decent of you to honour us with your gracious presence.*

---

## gracious

See graceful.

---

## graffiti

This is actually a plural, but the singular form *graffito* is seldom used. Strictly speaking, *graffiti* should be treated as a plural and followed by a plural verb, although is more often seen with a singular verb: *Graffiti is an eyesore*. To refer to a single item, use *piece* or *bit of*: *I saw a good bit of graffiti today*.

---

## grammar

Spelling: remember the ending **-ar** not **-er**.

---

## grandad or granddad

This word can be spelled either way, although *grandad* is more common.

---

## granddaughter

Spelling: remember the two **ds**.

---

## grand- or great-

In family relationships, **grand-** is used for one's parents' parents and for one's children's children, while **great-** is used for one's grandparents' parents and one's grandchildren's children: *My grandfather was born in London and his father, my great-grandfather, in Reading*. For relatives by marriage one can use *great-* or *grand-*, but *great-* is always more common: *He had a surprise visit from his great-niece; She has kept in touch with her grand-aunt*.

---

## great-

See grand-.

---

## Great Britain

See Britain.

---

## greengrocer's apostrophe



See apostrophe.

---

## Greenwich

The most common pronunciation of the name of the London borough, the meridian, Greenwich village in New York, and the town in Connecticut is [**Gren**-itch]. Pronunciation of the first syllable as [grin] and of the last syllable as [idge] is also heard both in Britain and the USA.

---

## grey

US spelling: *gray*.

---

## grievance

Spelling: note the **ie**.

---

## grisly or grizzly

When writing these words, use **grisly** to mean horrible and **grizzly** to mean a bear.

---

## grizzly

See grisly.

---

## guarantee

Spelling: remember the **u**.

---

## guerrilla

This word, meaning 'fighter', is easy to misspell. Remember the **u** and the double **r** and double **l**. *Guerilla* is an alternative spelling.

---

## guitar

Spelling: remember the **u**.

---

## gybe

See gibe.

---

## gypsy

See gipsy.

---

## haemorrhage

Spelling: remember the double **r** and the **h**. In American English it is spelled *hemorrhage*.

---

## hairiness

Spelling: the **y** of *hairy* changes to an **i**.

---

## half

*Half is or half are?* The answer depends entirely on what comes after *half*. If it is a singular noun, use a singular verb: *Half (of) the town was in darkness after the power failure*. If it is a plural noun, use a plural verb: *Half (of) the members want to change the rules*. If it is a collective singular, you can use a singular verb or a plural verb: *Half (of) the party supports/support the call for a ballot*.

---

## handicraft

Spelling: note the **i**.

---

## handkerchief

Spelling: remember the **d**.

---

## hanged or hung

Spelling: remember the **d**.

---

## happiness

Spelling: the **y** of *happy* changes to an **i**.

---

## harass

The traditional British pronunciation is [**harr**-us] with the stress on the first syllable, but in the 1970s the American [h'-**rass**] with a weaker first syllable began to be heard, and has since become very common, to the annoyance of some who keep to the traditional British pronunciation.

---

## harassment

Spelling: remember it has one **r** and two **ss**.

---

## hasten

Spelling: note the **t**.

---

## haughtiness

Spelling: the **y** of *haughty* changes to an **i**.

---

## have or have got

In everyday British English speech **have got** is used to show possession: *I've got twenty pounds*. In American English and in more formal British English **have** is used alone: *I have only five*. In formal British English, questions and negative statements use *have*: *'Have you enough money?' 'No, I have not'*. In American English **do have** is used: *'Do you have enough money?' 'No, I don't' or 'No, I don't have any'*.

---

## Haydn

The name of the composer is pronounced [**hide**-n]. The Welsh name is pronounced [**hade**-n].

---

## haziness

Spelling: the **y** of *hazy* changes to an **i**.

---

## healthiness

Spelling: the **y** of *healthy* changes to an **i**.

---

## heartiness

Spelling: the **y** of *hearty* changes to an **i**.

---

## heaviness

Spelling: the **y** of *heavy* changes to an **i**.

---

## hegemony

The main British pronunciation has a hard **g** as in *go* [**hig-ghem**-uh-ny], though alternative pronunciations with a soft **g** or with the stress on the first syllable are also heard. The standard US pronunciation has a soft **g** [**huh-jem**-uh-ny].

---

## heifer

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## height

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## heinous

The standard pronunciation is [**hay**-nus]. The pronunciation [**hee**-nus] is regarded as non-standard. A pronunciation that rhymes with *genius* is probably based on the mistaken idea that there is an *i* in the spelling of the second syllable. Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## heir

Spelling: note the **ei**. (Two related words are *heirloom* and *heiress*).

---

## hence

This means 'from here'; there is no need to use *from* before it. The same is true of *thence* 'from there' and *whence* 'from where'.

---

## heroin or heroine

Remember that **heroin** is the drug and **heroine** is the female hero.

---

## he/she/they

After certain indefinite pronouns, such as *anyone* and *neither*, it is traditional in standard English to use the masculine singular pronouns *he*, *him* and *his*. However, it is increasingly being seen as invidious to implicitly exclude women and girls by using *he* rather than *she*, and *they* is now widely used instead. To find out more about this, see [they/their/theirs](#).

---

## heyday

Spelling: note that it is **hey**, not **hay**.

---

## hiccough

See [hiccup](#).

---

## hiccup or hiccough

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## Hilary

This name can be used for both sexes, with no difference in spelling.

---

## Hindi or Hindu

This name can be used for both sexes, with no difference in spelling.

---

## historical

See historic.

---

## historic or historical

A **historic** event is an important one, or one that may come to be regarded as important: *The two heads of state signed a historic agreement.* A **historical** event is one that belongs to history, so that it actually took place: *King Arthur is generally believed to be a historical figure, though some regard him as legendary.*

---

## hitchhike

Spelling: note the double **h**.

---

## hoard or horde

A **hoard** is a store or accumulation of things: *An important hoard of Roman coins was found in a field in Suffolk.* A **horde** is a large group of people: *There were hordes of bargain hunters at the sales.*

---

## hoi polloi

A **hoard** is a store or accumulation of things: *An important hoard of Roman coins was found in a field in Suffolk.* A **horde** is a large group of people: *There were hordes of bargain hunters at the sales.*

---

## Holborn

The **l** is not pronounced in this name of a part of London. The pronunciation is [**hoe-**b'n].

---

## holiness

Spelling: the **y** in *holy* changes to an **i**.

---

## holy

See wholly.

---

## homage

Spelling: note the single **m**.

---

## homeliness

Spelling: the **y** in *homely* changes to an **i**.

---

## homogeneous or homogenous

Spelling: the **y** in *homely* changes to an **i**.

---

## homosexual

Both [home] and [hom] are accepted pronunciations of the first syllable. [Home] is probably more common, but purists prefer [hom] on the grounds that it is closer to the pronunciation of the Greek source. In the USA only the [home] pronunciation is heard.

---

## hopefully

Most people now accept the use of **hopefully** to mean 'it is hoped (that)'. In this sense it is separated from the rest of the sentence by commas, and often comes before the part it refers to: *They are saving hopefully to buy a house* means that they

are saving their money in a spirit of hope, looking forward to their own home; *hopefully, they are saving*, or *they are saving, hopefully, to buy a house* means that the speaker hopes that they intend to use the money to buy a house, and not for some other purpose.

---

## horde

See hoard.

---

## horrific

Spelling: remember the double **r** and single **f**.

---

## houmous or houmus

This word, meaning 'chickpea paste', can be spelled either way. The stress is on the first syllable, which rhymes with *room*, or sometimes *broom*. The second syllable is like the end of *famous*. Do not confuse it with *humus*, which means 'decomposed matter in soil' and is pronounced [**hyoo**-mous].

---

## humerus

This word, meaning a bone in the upper arm, must not be confused with humorous.

---

## humorous

This word, meaning funny, is easy to misspell. Note that there is no **u** before the **r** as there is in *humour*.

---

## humus

See houmous.

---

## hygiene

Spelling: remember the **i**.



---

## hypercritical

See [hypocrite](#).

---

## hyphen

This is a punctuation mark (-) used in forming compound words and to indicate a word break at the end of a line.

Not all compound words are hyphenated, but the hyphen is needed to link adjectives that jointly qualify a noun or nouns: *red-hot poker*, *Mrs Brown's twenty-odd nephews and nieces*. Without the hyphen, the adjectives would apply separately to the nouns: a poker red in colour and hot, nephews and nieces twenty in number and odd in character.

Some compounds contain more than one hyphen: *mother-in-law*, *up-to-date*. There are no definite rules about when to hyphenate compound nouns. For example, you could write *worldview*, *world view*, or *world-view*. Generally, the more closely associated the words become, the more appropriate it is to merge them. A hyphen may be considered a middle way between separation and complete integration, but the modern tendency is to use fewer hyphens in compound words.

A hyphen is also used to mark a word break at the end of a line, to avoid a space or an ugly squashing-in.

---

## hypocrisy

Spelling: note the ending **-sy**, not **-cy**.

---

## hypocrite

Spelling: remember the **y**, and note that it has an **o** in the middle, not **er**. Do not confuse the adjective *hypocritical* with *hypercritical*, which means 'overly critical'.

---

## -ible or-able

See [spelling rules](#).

---

## iciness

Spelling: the **y** of *icy* changes to an **i**.

---

## icon or ikon

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## idiosyncrasy

Spelling: remember the second **i**, the **y** in the middle, and the ending **-asy**.

---

## idyllic

Spelling: remember the **y**.

---

## ikon

See icon.

---

## ilk

This is a Scots word, meaning 'same', used when the name of a property is the same as that of its owner: *the Knockwinnocks of that ilk* are the Knockwinnock family who own or live at Knockwinnock. It is often used to mean 'of the same name or family' or 'of the same type': *The Davises are a family of engineers, and one of that ilk designs oil tankers; Barbara Cartland and her ilk* (other writers of romantic fiction). Strictly speaking this is incorrect, and some Scots object to it quite strongly.

---

## illegal or illicit

Something **illegal** is forbidden by law: *It is illegal for motocyclists not to wear a crash helmet*. If a thing is **illicit** it is done by someone who knows that it is disallowed by law but that under different circumstances it could be legal: *The crew were involved in the illicit import of brandy* (it is basically legal to import brandy but not the way they did it).

---

## illicit

See illegal.

---

## illusion

See delusion.

---

## immaculate

Spelling: remember the double **m**.

---

## immediately

Spelling: remember the double **m**.

---

## immigrant

Spelling: remember the double **m**.

---

## imminent

Spelling: remember **-ent**, not **-ant**.

---

## immoral or amoral

An **immoral** person or thing has low or corrupt moral standards: *She lived on her immoral earnings as a prostitute; Some might find that book immoral.* An **amoral** person or thing has no moral standards: *Some tribes were known to be quite amoral, with no sense of right or wrong.* Spelling: *immoral*, remember the double **m**.

---

## impact

Many people dislike **impact** used as a verb: *The spacecraft has impacted on Mars; The new taxes will impact on young families.* It is easy to avoid it by using *hit*, *strike*, or *effect*. *Have an impact* (i.e. an effect) is rather overused; *effect* or *have an effect* are alternatives.

Although these phrases are often used negatively, they are neutral: *The single market will have an effect (or an impact) on our business* means that the business will change, but does not say whether the change will be for the better or the worse.

---

## impetuous

See compulsive.

---

## imply or infer

See compulsive.

---

## impresario

Spelling: note the single **s**.

---

## impulsive

See compulsive.

---

## inapt

See inept.

---

## in behalf of

See behalf.

---

## incredible or incredulous

**Incredible** is used of something unbelievable or difficult to believe; **incredulous** is used of someone who is disbelieving: *When he described his incredible escape, she listened with an increasingly incredulous expression.* Compare credible.

---

## incredulous

See incredible.

---

## incurred

Spelling: note the double r (unlike *incur*).

---

## indebted

Spelling: remember the **b**.

---

## indefinite article

See article.

---

## indefinite pronoun

A pronoun that does not refer to or replace a specific noun. *Anybody*, *nobody*, *one*, *none*, *some*, and *anything* are examples of indefinite pronouns.

---

## independent

Spelling: remember the ending **-ent**, not **-ant**.

---

## Indian

Many people from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka dislike being referred to as *Indian*. (The correct adjectives are *Bangladeshi*, *Pakistani*, and *Sri Lankan*. *Paki* is offensive, even if the person is from Pakistan.) *Asian* is acceptable but vague; *from the Indian subcontinent* longer but more accurate.

Some of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, particularly North America, would rather be called *Native American*, although *American Indian* is usually acceptable: **Indian** by itself is ambiguous, *Red Indian* is offensive. The indigenous peoples of the extreme north of Canada, commonly called *Eskimo*es although they prefer the term *Inuit*, are often included in the term *Native American*: many of them object.

---

## indictment

Note the silent **c**. The word is pronounced [in-**dite**-ment].

---

## indigenous

Spelling: note the **e**.

---

## indispensable

Spelling: note the ending **-able**.

---

## ineffective

See ineffectual.

---

## ineffectual or ineffective

See ineffectual.

---

## inept or inapt

An **inept** remark is an absurd or clumsy one: *He said a few inept words by way of an introduction* (they were not well chosen). An **inapt** remark is an inappropriate one: *He mumbled an inapt apology* (it was not adequate for the occasion).

---

## inequity or iniquity

An **inept** remark is an absurd or clumsy one: *He said a few inept words by way of an introduction* (they were not well chosen). An **inapt** remark is an inappropriate one: *He mumbled an inapt apology* (it was not adequate for the occasion).

---

## infamous

This is not pronounced to rhyme with *famous*. The stress is on the first syllable, and the other two vowels are weak [**inn**-fermus]. See also famous.

---

## infectious or contagious

In medical terms, an **infectious** disease is one spread by germs: *Typhoid and typhus are both highly infectious diseases*. In figurative terms, the word is used of something irresistibly catching: *Her infectious laughter brightened the meal*.

Medically, **contagious** is used of a disease spread by bodily contact: *Scarlet fever is a contagious disease formerly known as scarlatina*. Figuratively, the word is used of something that spreads rapidly: *His enthusiasm for the project was contagious, and we soon joined in*.

---

## infer

See imply.

---

## infinitive

The basic form of a verb, the form by which verbs are identified: *to be; to hit; to love* and so on. The infinitive form of the verb in English is always preceded by *to*. See also split infinitive.

---

## inflammable

**Inflammable** means the same as *flammable*, 'liable to catch fire', 'easily ignited'. Because it is often taken to mean the opposite, it is best to avoid using it at all; in official use *flammable* and *non-flammable* are the preferred terms.

---

## inflection

A word ending that indicates the word's function in the sentence. Examples of inflections are *-ed* in *posted*, *-s* in *girls*, and *-est* in *longest*.

---

## ingenious, ingenuous, or disingenuous

A word ending that indicates the word's function in the sentence. Examples of inflections are *-ed* in *posted*, *-s* in *girls*, and *-est* in *longest*.

---

## ingenuous

See ingenious.

---

## inhumane

See inhuman.

---

## inhuman or inhumane

Somebody or something **inhuman** lacks normal human qualities such as kindness and pity: *It was inhuman to take the child away from her parents like that.* An **inhumane** person or thing is cruel, and insensitive to the suffering of others: *Many people are concerned about the inhumane treatment of animals.*

---

## iniquity

See inequity.

---

## innate

Spelling: remember the double **n**.

---

## innocuous

Spelling: remember the double **n**.

---

## innovate

Spelling: remember the double **n**, and the **o**, not **er**.

---

## innumerable

See numerous.

---

## inoculation



Spelling: remember it has only one **n** at the beginning.

---

## inquire

See enquire.

---

## inseparable

Spelling: remember **-par-**, not **-per-**.

---

## insidious or invidious

Something **insidious** is gradually and stealthily harmful or destructive: *Cancer is often an insidious disease; His constant criticism had an insidious effect on morale and goodwill.* Something **invidious** causes resentment or unpopularity, especially if it is seen to be unfair: *Teachers are often faced with invidious duties; You have put me in an invidious position, and I am tempted to refuse.*

---

## install

Spelling: note the double **I** but remember *instalment*. US spelling: *installment*.

---

## instantaneous

See instant.

---

## instant or instantaneous

If something is **instant** it happens immediately, at once: *Any employee who broke this ruling was faced with instant dismissal.* Something **instantaneous** also happens immediately, but often as a consequence of something else, that is, at the instant of its occurrence: *Death was instantaneous (at the moment of the accident or heart attack which caused it).*

---

## instil

Spelling: note the single **I** (but remember *instilled* and *instilling*). US spelling: *instill*.

---

## insure

See assure.

---

## intense or intensive

If something is **intense** it is great or powerful: *The heat was intense; I was filled with intense curiosity.* If it is **intensive** it is concentrated: *The city was subjected to intensive bombardment; The course was an intensive one, with little free time and frequent tests.*

---

## intensive

See intense.

---

## intercede

Spelling: note the ending **-cede**, not **-sede**.

---

## interface

This means a surface where two spaces or bodies meet: *the interface of air and water.* In recent years it has come to be used for an apparatus that connects two devices or systems so that they can work together; in the language of information technology, a device which enables a user to communicate with a computer, or computers to communicate with each other. In this sense *interface* is also a verb: *This machine will interface with most PCs.*

Figuratively, *interface* can refer to almost any boundary: *Design is at the interface of art and technology.* As a verb it is used to mean 'combine or cooperate with': *Your job will be to interface with the marketing department.* This sounds like jargon. Before using *interface* figuratively, ask yourself whether you need to; words such as *boundary, border, meeting-place, combine, work with, cooperate* will often express the sense just as well.

---

## interment or internment

This means a surface where two spaces or bodies meet: *the interface of air and water.* In recent years it has come to be used for an apparatus that connects two devices or systems so that they can work together; in the language of information

technology, a device which enables a user to communicate with a computer, or computers to communicate with each other. In this sense *interface* is also a verb: *This machine will interface with most PCs.*

Figuratively, *interface* can refer to almost any boundary: *Design is at the interface of art and technology.* As a verb it is used to mean 'combine or cooperate with': *Your job will be to interface with the marketing department.* This sounds like jargon. Before using *interface* figuratively, ask yourself whether you need to; words such as *boundary, border, meeting-place, combine, work with, cooperate* will often express the sense just as well.

---

## internment

See interment.

---

## interrelated

Spelling: note the double r.

---

## intransitive verb

A verb that cannot have an object noun or pronoun after it, such as *wait; happen*. A verb that is followed by an object is a transitive verb. Some verbs can be transitive or intransitive.

---

## introvert

Spelling: note the **o**, not **a**.

---

## inveigle

The standard pronunciation is [in -**vay**-gle] but [in-**vee**-gle] is also acceptable.

---

## inventory

This word is stressed on the first syllable [in-vuhn-tree], not on the second. The ending is pronounced [tree] in British English and [tory] in American English.

---

## invidious

See insidious.

---

## invigorate

See enervate.

---

## ironic

In drama, *irony* is the dramatic effect produced when the audience knows more than the characters in the play. In everyday use, an **ironic** remark is one, often humorous, that means the opposite of what is said, particularly if it appears to be sincere: *You're every bit as good as your brother* is ironic if the speaker thinks the listener's brother is no good at all. *Ironic* is often used loosely to mean paradoxical, the opposite of what might be expected: *Ironically, the poorest people are often the most generous*. Although this usage is fairly well established, some people dislike it. Consider whether you really need anything to introduce the statement. If you do, *paradoxically*, *strangely*, *oddly enough* etc can be used. Avoid using *ironic* to mean simply odd, unexpected, out of the ordinary.

---

## irradiate

Spelling: note the double r.

---

## irregular

Spelling: note the double r.

---

## irrelevant

Spelling: note the double r.

---

## irrespective or regardless

Spelling: note the double r.

---

## irrupt

See erupt.

---

## -ise or -ize

See spelling rules.

---

## Islam

See Muslim.

---

## I/me; we/us; you

Compound objects containing pronouns are in the accusative case in standard English, not the nominative case, so *between you and me* is acceptable but *between you and I* is not. To find out more about this, see between you and me.

---

## its and it's

Compound objects containing pronouns are in the accusative case in standard English, not the nominative case, so *between you and me* is acceptable but *between you and I* is not. To find out more about this, see between you and me.

---

## -ize or -ise

See spelling rules.

---

## jail

See gaol.

---

## jargon

See clichés, pretentious language, and jargon and plain English.

---

## jejune

The word starts like *Jehovah*. The second syllable is stressed, and is pronounced [June].

---

## jetsam

See flotsam.

---

## jewellery

Spelling: remember the third **e**. US spelling: *jewelry*.

---

## jibe

See gibe.

---

## Jocelyn, Joscelin

This is now nearly always a female name, but it was originally a male name and is occasionally still given to boys. Either spelling may be used for either sex, but another form, **Joycelin**, is given only to girls.

---

## journey

Spelling: remember the **o**.

---

## judgement *or* judgment

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## judicial *or* judicious

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## judicious

See judicial.

---

## junta

The usual British pronunciation is [jun-ter] to rhyme with *hunter*. It is increasingly common to hear the pronunciation [**h**oon-ter], which sounds like a Northern British pronunciation of *hunter*, and is an approximation to the original Spanish pronunciation. This is the usual US pronunciation.

---

## kaleidoscope

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## Kenya

Nowadays most people say [**K**en-yer] but before independence people called it [**K**een-yer], and this pronunciation is still heard.

---

## kerb

See curb.

---

## key

**Key**, in the sense 'crucial', 'most important', for example *a key issue*, has been overused and has become a cliché. Use it sparingly, if at all.

---

## kilometre

The traditional British pronunciation [**k**ill-ermeeter] has the advantage that it follows the pattern of *centimetre* and *millimetre*. However, the main US pronunciation [**k**ill-**om**-mitter] appears to be gaining ground in Britain. US spelling: *kilometer*.

---

## kindliness

Spelling: the **y** of *kindly* changes to an **i**.

---

## kind, sort, or type of

**Kind** and **sort** are more colloquial and can refer to things or people that are broadly similar, without applying strict criteria. These words should be used with *this, that* rather than *these, those*; phrases such as *I like these kind of books* are often heard but should not be written down. If referring to more than one type, the following noun may be singular or plural: *these types of dog* (or *dogs*). The singular noun is preferable.

Avoid using *kind, sort, or type* unnecessarily; there is no need to say *it's a sort of collie* if the dog is a collie. If it is a particular type of collie, use *type of*. If there is some doubt about the dog's breeding it is better to say *rather like a collie*, or a similar phrase.

---

## lady or woman

**Lady** is the feminine equivalent of 'gentleman', and is used as a term of politeness; for example a shop assistant may address a customer as *Madam* and refer to her in her presence as *this lady*, although she may be called *that woman* once she has left the shop. Children are encouraged to refer to an adult female as a *lady* rather than a *woman*, and the female members of a group may be called *the ladies*.

*Lady* is also used occasionally to describe a woman who is noted for kind and courteous behaviour: *She's a real lady*. In other contexts it sounds a little old-fashioned, and most people now use **woman**. Some women dislike the terms *lady doctor, lady teacher*, etc. It is best just to say *doctor* or *teacher* unless there is a good reason to specify the sex; if there is, use *woman*. See also girl.

---

## lamentable

The usual pronunciation is with the stress on the first syllable [**lam**-uhn-tble].

---

## languor

Spelling: remember the **u**.

---

## last (*Tuesday, etc*)

See this (Tuesday, etc).



---

## latter

See former.

---

## lawful

See legal.

---

## lay or lie

See legal.

---

## laziness

Spelling: the **y** of *lazy* changes to an **i**.

---

## league

Spelling: remember the **u**.

---

## lecherous

Spelling: remember there is no **t**.

---

## legalese

This is a kind of long-winded jargon used by lawyers which it is difficult to understand. Contracts, insurance policies, and guarantees are among the documents in which you may find it. Some businesses and official bodies have had their documents written by Plain English Campaign so that the public can understand them. Others have produced their own plain English documents that have received Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark for clarity. See also plain English.

---

## legal or lawful

If a thing is **legal** it is authorized or permitted by law: *It is perfectly legal to park here.* If it is **lawful** (the word usually precedes a noun) it is done according to the law: *The crowd was asked to disperse in a lawful manner; The elder son was the lawful heir to the estate.*

---

## lend or loan

A **loan** is something which is lent, or an act of lending: *I've applied to the bank for a loan; We are grateful for the loan of the premises.* In British English, *loan* is used as a verb only when referring formally to a loan of considerable value: *The banks have loaned more than three million pounds to small businesses; The Picasso has been loaned to the museum.* In a less formal context, **lend** is used: *Lend me your pen?* In American English the verb *loan* is used for everyday things: *Loan me ten bucks?*

---

## leopard

Spelling: remember the **o**.

---

## Leslie or Lesley

**Lesley** is the feminine form of the name, **Leslie** the masculine.

---

## liable, apt, likely, and prone

*Liable* is often used when there is reason to think that something will probably happen in the future, whether or not there is a general tendency for it to do so: *It's liable to rain this afternoon* (because the weather forecast says so and there are black clouds in the sky); *he's liable to lose his temper when he sees what the kids have done* (he does not have much patience with the children, and this particular piece of mischief will probably make him angry).

**Likely** is also used for things which will probably happen. It can refer to good or bad things, whereas *liable* usually refers to bad: *It's likely to be fine this afternoon; No, it's liable to rain.*

**Liable** and **prone** are used before a noun to refer to something unwelcome which has a tendency to happen: *The system is liable to error; He's prone to fits of temper.* Some people prefer to use *prone* only when referring to a tendency to ill-health: *He's prone to migraines.* However, its use in other contexts is well established, and there is no reason to restrict its use.

---

## liaise

Spelling: remember the second **i**.

---

## libel or slander

In English law, **libel** is defamation (the publishing of what is false or derogatory) in permanent form, such as in writing, printing, and radio and TV broadcasts, while **slander** is not in permanent form, so that it is in spoken words or in gestures: *The actor issued a writ for libel; Slander is not legally a crime unless it can be proved that special damage was done to the person or persons concerned.*

---

## library

Spelling: remember the **rar**.

---

## licence or license

Remember that **licence** is the noun and **license** is the verb. In American English, however, the noun is spelled *license*. To remember the spellings, think of *advice* (noun) and *advise* (verb).

---

## lichen

The standard pronunciation is [**lie**-k'n], which corresponds to the word's Greek origin. However, [**lit**-chen], pronounced to rhyme with *kitchen* is also often heard in Britain, and is acceptable.

---

## lie

See lay.

---

## lieutenant

The British pronunciation is [lef-**ten**-ant] and the US pronunciation [lu-**ten**-ant].

---

## lighted or lit

Either may be used as the past tense and past participle of the verb *to light*. *Lit* is more common.

---

## lightening or lightning

Use **lightening** if you mean 'making lighter', and **lightning** if you mean 'thunder and lightning'.

---

## lightning

See lightening.

---

## likelihood

Spelling: note the **i**.

---

## likely

See liable.

---

## like or as

**Like** and **as** can both be used before nouns: *It flies like a bird; I meant it as a surprise*. The two are not interchangeable: notice the difference between: *Speaking as a father, I deplore these changes* (I am a father, and I speak in that capacity) and: *I want to speak to you like a father* (I am not your father, but I will speak as if I were).

**Like** and **as** can also be used before verbs. But whereas **as** is completely acceptable: *She performed the sonata perfectly, as she always does*, **like** is not regarded as part of standard English, and it would not be correct to say: *She performed the sonata perfectly, like she always does*. Similarly, **as if** and **as though** are acceptable: *You look as if you'd seen a ghost*, but **like** should be avoided in formal or careful writing, for example: *You look like you'd seen a ghost*.

**Like** and **as** can also be used before adverbs and prepositions. But again, although **as** is completely acceptable: *As with the old model, the new model is fully automated*, **like** is best avoided; it is not correct to say: *Like with the old model, the new model is completely automated*.

---

## liquefy

Spelling: note the **e** (not an **i**) before the **f**.

---

## liqueur

(meaning a sweet alcoholic drink such as fruit liqueurs). The stress is on the second syllable, reflecting the original French pronunciation. The standard British pronunciation is [lick-**cure**]. Spelling: remember **ueu**.

---

## liquor

(meaning alcoholic drink in general). It rhymes with *bicker*. Spelling: remember the **o**.

---

## lit

See lighted.

---

## litany

See liturgy.

---

## literally

This word is often used to emphasize a figurative expression: *My uncle literally died laughing*. Correctly used, it shows that an expression which is usually figurative is to be taken at face value, for example, if uncle had a fatal heart attack while enjoying a joke.

---

## literature

Spelling: note the single **t**, and **a** in the middle (not **i**).

---

## liturgy or litany

A **liturgy** (from the Greek *leitourgia*, 'ministry') is the form of public services practised by a particular church: *We were moved by the beauty and solemnity of the Orthodox liturgy*. A **litany** (from the Late Greek *litaneia*, 'prayer') is a form of prayer consisting of a series of requests and responses, as well as generally a lengthy list or recital of

something: *Here followeth the LITANY, or General Supplication* (Book of Common Prayer); *The applicant was faced with a litany of queries about her work experience.*

---

## livelihood

Spelling: note the **i** (not **y**) in the middle.

---

## liveliness

Spelling: the **y** of *lively* changes to an **i**.

---

## loan

See lend.

---

## loath or loathe

Use **loath** (or **loth**) when you mean reluctant, and **loathe** when you mean to hate.

---

## locale

See location.

---

## locality

See location.

---

## locate

See location.

---

## location, locality, or locale

A **location** is the place where something is situated: *The new flats were built in a pleasant riverside location.* A **locality** is similar, but unless qualified ( *exact locality* )

has a wider sense: *Our hotel was in an attractive locality not far from the sea.* A **locale** is a place linked to a particular event or series of events: *The director found an ideal locale for his new film.*

---

## loneliness

Spelling: the **y** of *lonely* changes to an **i**.

---

## longevity

The main stress is on the second syllable, and the **g** is soft as in *jam*. The pronunciation is [lon-**jev**-ity].

---

## longitude

Spelling: note that there is no **t** after the **g**.

---

## loveliness

Spelling: the **y** of *lovely* changes to an **i**.

---

## lower case

See case, upper and lower.

---

## luxuriant

See luxurious.

---

## luxurious or luxuriant

See luxurious.

---

## machination

The standard pronunciation is [mackin-**ay**-shun], the stressed syllable rhyming with *day*. The pronunciation [mashin-**ay**-shun] is also heard.

---

## macho

The first syllable is stressed and is pronounced [match].

---

## macrocosm

See microcosm.

---

## magical

See magic.

---

## magic or magical

See magic.

---

## maintenance

Spelling: remember the **e**.

---

## major

The primary meaning of **major** is 'the greater or more important of two things'. It is often used to mean 'very important' or 'most significant'. This is not incorrect, but *major* is rather overused in this sense. It can be replaced by such words as *important*, *principal*, *foremost*, *main*, *serious*, *grave*, or their synonyms.

---

## majority, minority

These refer to a greater or lesser number, and should not be used with a single entity: *The majority of people fritter their money away*, not *The majority of the money is frittered away*. The exception is in cases like *a minority of the committee*, which actually means a minority of the members of the committee. Many people find it difficult to decide whether to use a singular or plural verb with words like *majority*.



The word itself is singular, but *the majority of people is* looks odd because the singular verb comes immediately after the plural noun.

In British English, a plural verb is used if the real subject of the sentence is *the people*: *The majority of people agree with the government*. If the subject is *the majority*, a singular verb is used: *The government's majority has grown*. This also applies to terms like *a lot of*, *a number of*, which are technically singular: *A lot of children no longer have school dinners*; *The number of children having school dinners has shrunk* (the number has shrunk, the children may well have grown).

A quick test to find the real subject is to try substituting *many* or *most* for *majority*, *a number of*, and *fewer* for *minority* etc. If the sentence still makes sense a plural verb is needed. This applies even if the real subject of the sentence is not stated but understood: *The majority agree with the government*; *A lot no longer have school dinners*.

---

## malign

The stress is on the second syllable, and the word is pronounced [m' **line**]. Spelling: remember the **g**.

---

## manageable

Spelling: remember to leave the **e** in.

---

## mandatory

The standard pronunciation is with the stress on the first syllable [**man**-der-tree], but a pronunciation with the stress on the second syllable is also heard [man-**day**-ter-ree]. The US pronunciation has the stress on the first syllable [**man**-der-tory].

---

## manikin

See mannequin.

---

## man, mankind

The word **man** has always had two meanings, 'human being' and 'adult male', but a few people feel that the use of *man* in the word *mankind* and phrases such as *Stone Age man* excludes women. In these cases the meaning is clearly 'humans', and most people have no qualms about using *man* or *mankind*. For those that do, or if it is important to emphasize that both men and women are referred to, the following may

be suitable in some contexts: *men and women, people, persons, the population, the community, everyone, folk, mortals, humans, human beings, the human race*. *Personkind* exists, but is not recommended as it sounds unnatural, either contrived or facetious.

---

## mannequin or manikin

Both words are now rather old-fashioned, but as applied to people a **mannequin** is a (female) fashion model and a **manikin** is a (male) dwarf: *Mannequin parades were a regular feature of the fashion world in the 1930s; The children loved the story about the giant and the manikin*.

---

## manœuvre

The stress is on the second syllable, and the word is pronounced [m' **noo**-vuh]. Spelling: note the **œu**. US spelling: *maneuver*.

---

## mantle or mantel

Use **mantle** when you mean a cloak, or something that covers like a cloak. Use **mantel** when you mean a shelf over a fireplace, now better known as a mantelpiece.

---

## margarine

Most British people say [marge-er-**reen**] with a soft **g** with the sound of **j** in *jam*. A few people, mostly older, use a hard **g** like the one in *go* and think that the soft **g** is not really correct. The standard US pronunciation has the stress on the first syllable and then two weak syllables [**marge**-er-reen].

---

## marital or matrimonial

Most British people say [marge-er-**reen**] with a soft **g** with the sound of **j** in *jam*. A few people, mostly older, use a hard **g** like the one in *go* and think that the soft **g** is not really correct. The standard US pronunciation has the stress on the first syllable and then two weak syllables [**marge**-er-reen].

---

## maroon

Spelling: remember one **r**.

---

## marquess

See marquis.

---

## marquis or marquess

The title is normally spelt **marquis** for a foreign nobleman (next in rank above a count) and **marquess** for a British nobleman (next in rank above an earl but below a duke): *The Marquis de Sade, who gave his name to sadism, was not really a marquis at all but a French count, The Marquess of Bath opened Britain's first safari park at Longleat in 1967.*

---

## mastectomy

Spelling: remember the first **t**.

---

## masterful

See masterly.

---

## masterly or masterful

Something **masterly** is clever or skilful, as befits a master: *The batsman then played a masterly stroke which ensured the victory of the side.* A person or thing that is **masterful** is imperious or commanding, befitting one who is master: *She is a proud and masterful woman, and intimidating on first acquaintance.*

---

## matrimonial

See marital.

---

## mattress

Spelling: remember the double **t**.

---

## may or might

There is an increasing tendency to use *may have* in place of *might have*: *You were lucky the gun didn't go off – you may have been killed*. In most cases the meaning will be perfectly clear from the context, but occasionally ambiguity may arise, and the *may have/might have* distinction is a useful one to keep.

See also can or may.

---

## media

Note that the plural of *medium* in other senses can be *media* or *mediums*; in the sense 'a person who attempts to communicate with the dead' the plural is *mediums*.

---

## medicine

The standard pronunciation has two syllables [**med**-suhn], with the stress on the first syllable and a weak second syllable, but there are several acceptable variations including [**med**-sin] and [**med**-iss-sin].

Spelling: remember **i** after the **d**, not **e**.

---

## Mediterranean

Spelling: remember one **t** and two **rs**.

---

## metallurgy

The standard British pronunciation is with the stress on the second syllable, which rhymes with *pal*. The end is like the end of *biology*. Another accepted pronunciation has the stress on the first syllable. The first two syllables sound the same as *metal*. The US pronunciation also begins with [metal] and the **r** is pronounced.

---

## metre or meter

In their most obvious applications, a **metre** is a measure (just over three feet) and a **meter** a measuring device: *The gas meter is about a metre from the back door*. This means that words ending in *-metre* relate to a length and those in *-meter* apply to a measuring instrument: *The speedometer showed how fast we were travelling in kilometres per hour*. However, the US spelling of all *metre* words is *meter*: *Like the British, Americans reckon distances in miles, not kilometers*.

---

## metrical

See metric.

---

## metric or metrical

**Metric** is to do with the metre (see above) that is the unit of length, while **metrical** relates to the metre that is found in verse: *Britain converted its currency to the metric system in 1971; A hexameter is a line of verse with six metrical feet.*

---

## microcosm or macrocosm

A **microcosm** is something that represents the universe, or humanity, in miniature: *A single human being is a microcosm of the whole of humanity; Their village was a microcosm of our world.* A **macrocosm** is essentially the converse, and is a term either for the universe or for any complete structure that contains smaller structures: *Society is the macrocosm of each of its individual members.*

---

## might

See may.

---

## mightiness

Spelling: the **y** of *mighty* changes to an **i**.

---

## migraine

[**Mee**-grain] is probably the main British pronunciation, but [**my**-grain] is also widespread. In the USA the standard pronunciation is [**my**-grain].

---

## mileage or milage

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## **militate**

See mitigate.

---

## **millennium**

Spelling: remember double **l** and double **n**.

---

## **millepede *or* millipede**

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## **mineralogy**

Spelling: note the **a** before the **l**, not **o**.

---

## **miniature**

Spelling: remember the **a**.

---

## **minority**

See majority.

---

## **minuscule**

Spelling: note the **u** before the **s**, not **i**.

---

## **minute**

Spelling: note the **u**.

---

## **mischievous**

Spelling: remember there is no **i** after the **v**.

---

## misspell

Note that this word has two **ss** ( *mis-* plus *-spell*).

---

## mistrust

See distrust.

---

## misuse

See abuse.

---

## mitigate or militate

To **mitigate** something is to moderate it or make it less severe: *The offence was mitigated by the fact that the offender had not seen the warning notice.* To **militate** against something is to affect or influence it adversely: *The bad weather militated against the planned outing.* People sometimes say *mitigate against* instead of *militate against* but this is incorrect and should be avoided.

---

## moat

See note.

---

## moccasin

Spelling: note the two **cs** and one **s**.

---

## modal verb

A verb that, when used with other verbs, expresses such things as certainty, possibility, wishes, or intentions. The main modal verbs are: *may/might; will/would; can/could; shall/should; must.*

---

## Mohammedan

See Muslim.

---

## mollusc

US spelling: *mollusk*.

---

## mortgage

Spelling: remember the **t**.

---

## Moslem

See Muslim.

---

## mote

This word (meaning 'speck') should not be confused with *moat*, meaning 'a ditch round a castle'.

---

## mould

US spelling: *mold*.

---

## moult

US spelling: *molt*.

---

## moustache

US spelling: *mustache*.

---

## Ms



This came into use in the early 1970s, when it was adopted by feminists who did not wish to be publicly labelled as married or single, and some people still use it, or disapprove of it, for this reason. Nowadays it is often used to refer to women whose marital status is not known, and most people find this acceptable and useful. A woman should be addressed by the form she uses herself, whatever your own feelings on the subject. This is not to make a stand for or against feminism; it is simply good manners.

---

## **mucous or mucus**

Remember that **mucous** is the adjective and **mucus** is the noun.

---

## **murkiness**

Spelling: the **y** of *mirky* changes to an **i**.

---

## **muscle**

(meaning the parts of the body used for movement). Do not confuse this with *muskel*, the shellfish. Spelling: remember the **c**,

---

## **Muslim**

*Muslim*, not *Moslem*, is the preferred spelling. *Mohammedan* is old-fashioned and disliked by Muslims. The religion is called *Islam*, with the adjective *Islamic*: *Islamic art*. *Muslim* refers to the followers of Islam: *the British Muslim community*.

---

## **mussel**

See muscle.

---

## **mutual or common**

**Mutual** refers to a feeling that two or more people or groups have towards each other: *the mutual love between husband and wife*; *We do not trust them, and the feeling is mutual*; or to something that two or more people or groups do to or for each other: *Nuclear war can only result in mutual destruction*; *a self-help group for mutual support*.

*Mutual* is also often used to refer to a feeling, interest, etc that two people have about a third person or thing: *a mutual love of sailing*. Some people consider this to be incorrect, and would use *common* instead. Applied to people, *mutual* is more or less accepted, as *common* might suggest inferiority: *We met through a mutual friend*.

Avoid using *mutual* if the idea is expressed elsewhere in the sentence, for example by *cooperate*, *each other* or *share*: *We shared a love of sailing*.

---

## myself

**Myself** is the first person singular reflexive pronoun: *I cut myself shaving*. Linked to a noun by *and* or another conjunction, it can be used as the subject of a sentence: *My husband and myself are pleased to accept your invitation*; and as an ordinary, non-reflexive object of a verb or preposition: *This is a great honour for Trevor and myself*.

This strikes many people as an excessively genteel usage (perhaps arising out of uncertainty over whether to use 'I' or 'me' in compound subjects). It is more straightforward to use 'I' as a subject: *My husband and I are pleased to accept your invitation*, and 'me' as an object: *This is a great honour for Trevor and me*.

---

## mysterious, mystic, or mystical

**Myself** is the first person singular reflexive pronoun: *I cut myself shaving*. Linked to a noun by *and* or another conjunction, it can be used as the subject of a sentence: *My husband and myself are pleased to accept your invitation*; and as an ordinary, non-reflexive object of a verb or preposition: *This is a great honour for Trevor and myself*.

This strikes many people as an excessively genteel usage (perhaps arising out of uncertainty over whether to use 'I' or 'me' in compound subjects). It is more straightforward to use 'I' as a subject: *My husband and I are pleased to accept your invitation*, and 'me' as an object: *This is a great honour for Trevor and me*.

---

## mystic

See mysterious.

---

## mystical

See mysterious.

---

## mythical or mythological

In its general sense, **mythical** relates to anything imaginary, while both *mythical* and **mythological** refer to mythology, and especially to the myths of classical times: *What happened to that mythical fortune of his? Her favourite mythological character in Greek legend was Ganymede.*

---

## mythological

See mythical.

---

## naive or naïve

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## nastiness

Spelling: the **y** of *nasty* changes to an **i**.

---

## naturalist or naturist

A **naturalist** is a person who is interested in botany or zoology: *Sheila is an enthusiastic naturalist, and has a particular interest in woodland life.* A **naturist** is a nudist: *A section of the sea front at Brighton is reserved for naturists.*

---

## naturist

See naturalist.

---

## naughtiness

Spelling: the **y** of *naughty* changes to an **i**.

---

## naught or nought

Spelling: the **y** of *naughty* changes to an **i**.

---

## naval or navel

Spelling: the **y** of *naughty* changes to an **i**.

---

## navel

See naval.

---

## necessary

Spelling: remember one **c** and two **ss**.

---

## Negro

See black.

---

## neither

Spelling: note the **ei**.

In standard English, **neither** on its own is used with a singular verb: *Do not attempt to bring livestock or plant material into the country; neither is permitted.* But in colloquial English, it is completely acceptable to use a plural verb: *Neither are permitted.* Similarly when *neither* is followed by *of*, it is common to use a plural verb: *Neither of her parents are alive*, but a singular verb is more appropriate for formal writing: *Neither of her parents is alive.*

When it is followed by *nor*, the verb agrees with the noun or pronoun that comes after the *nor*. If this is singular, the verb is singular: *Neither I nor your father was told about it.* But if it is plural, the verb is plural: *Neither the French nor the Italians have qualified for the finals.*

If one noun or pronoun refers to a male person and the other to a female person, it is permissible to use a plural verb and plural pronouns, in order to avoid the invidious 'he': *Neither Beth nor Tim have collected their tickets.*

When you use **neither ... nor**, it is preferable to put both the *neither* and the *nor* immediately in front of the parts of the sentence they refer to. *She will eat neither meat nor dairy products* is more acceptable than: *She will neither eat meat nor dairy products.*

When *neither* is a pronoun, it refers only to two things or people. For three or more things or people, use *none*. But when it is a conjunction, it is perfectly acceptable to

use it for three or more things or people: *The prisoners were allowed neither food, sleep nor washing facilities for 48 hours.*

---

## nephew

See cousin.

---

## next ( *Tuesday, etc* )

See this (Tuesday, etc).

---

## nice

Used of people, *nice* means 'pleasant', 'affable' (except of young women, where it also means 'conventionally well-behaved'). In other contexts *nice* has been so overused as a vague term of approval that it has become almost meaningless.

It is often better to be more specific: *a delicious meal; a comfortable (cosy, spacious, beautiful) house; a pretty (funny, appropriate) birthday card.*

Sometimes, however, the vagueness of *nice* is useful: *that's a nice hat* is all that is needed to pay a compliment, and a more specific word might reveal that your opinion of the hat's good points is not the same as the wearer's.

---

## niche

There are two common British pronunciations, [neesh] and [nitch], the first perhaps being more highly regarded. The US pronunciation is always [nitch].

---

## niece

See cousin.

---

## noisiness

Spelling: the **y** of *noisy* changes to an **i**.

---

## nominative case

The case of a noun or pronoun that is the subject of a sentence. All pronouns have a nominative form: *I, you, we, she, they*, for example. Most pronouns have a different form when they are in the accusative case, that is, when they are objects: *me, us, her, him*.

---

## none

*None is or none are?* When *none* refers to a singular noun, the answer is easy – *is*: *I needed money immediately, but none was available; None of this meat is worth keeping.*

But when *none* refers to a plural noun, doubts can arise. This is because the fallacious idea has been implanted in the minds of English speakers that *none* means 'not one' and therefore, like *one*, must have a singular verb. It conflicts with the natural tendency of the English language, which is to make the verb agree with the noun to which the pronoun refers – if the noun is plural, then the verb is plural.

The result is that in a plural context, both a plural verb: *None of my friends were there* and a singular verb: *None of my friends was there* can be used. In general, a plural verb sounds more natural and unaffected, and is to be preferred. It has the particular advantage that an accompanying plural pronoun avoids the sexist 'he' or 'she' and the ponderous 'he or she' in cases where the sex of the referent is unknown or unspecified: *None of the directors of the company stand to lose their own money.* And sometimes it would simply be ridiculous to insist on the singular – for instance, where *none* is used in specific comparison with a plural noun: *None of our dancers are as talented as the Russians.*

---

## non-flammable

See [inflammable](#).

---

## nonwhite

See [black](#).

---

## not

The position of *not* within a sentence can substantially affect the meaning of the sentence.

*Not all* and *not every* imply 'some': *Not all his novels were bestsellers* (but some of them were). If *not* comes after *all* or *every*, it can have the same meaning, but it is

also open to the interpretation 'none': *All his novels were not bestsellers* (but some of them were *or* none of them were). When you speak, you can make clear which you mean by the way you say it, but in writing that is not possible, so if there is any danger of real ambiguity, it is best to recast the sentence.

*Not* can also present problems when it is used with *because*. Does *We didn't appoint him because of his age* mean that his age was not the reason why we appointed him, or that because he was too young or too old we didn't appoint him? If there is a genuine possibility that both interpretations could be made, it is better to rewrite the sentence in an unambiguous form.

---

## noticeable

Spelling: remember to keep the **e**.

---

## nought

See naught.

---

## noun

This is a grammatical part of speech that names a person, animal, object, quality, idea, or time. In English many simple words are both noun and verb *jump; reign; rain*. Adjectives are sometimes used as nouns: *a local man; one of the locals*.

A **common noun** does not begin with a capital letter: *child; cat*, whereas a **proper noun** does, because it is the name of a particular person, animal, or place: *Jane; Rover; Norfolk*. A **concrete noun** refers to things that can be sensed: *dog; box*, whereas an **abstract noun** relates to generalizations abstracted from life as we observe it: *fear; condition; truth*. A **countable noun** can have a plural form *book; books*, while an **uncountable noun** or mass noun cannot: *dough; weather*. Many English nouns can be used both countably and uncountably, for example, *wine: Have some wine; it's one of our best wines*.

A **collective noun** is singular in form but refers to a group: *flock; family; committee*, and a **compound noun** is made up of two or more nouns: *teapot; baseball team; car-factory strike committee*. A **verbal noun** is formed from a verb as a gerund or otherwise: *build: building; regulate: regulation*.

---

## number

Number is a feature of nouns, verbs and pronouns. In present-day English it consists of two categories: **singular** and **plural**. Singular nouns and pronouns: *car; I; it*

generally take a singular verb, plural nouns and pronouns: *cars*; *we*; *they* generally take a plural verb.

In practice there is little difference between singular and plural in English verbs. In the past tense they are identical. In the present tense, the only difference is that the third person singular usually has an **s** on the end, whereas the plural and the first and second person singular do not: *I come*, *he comes*, *they come*. Exceptions to this are the modal or auxiliary verbs, such as: *can*, *may*, *will*, which do not have an **s** in the third person singular *she can*; and the verb *to be*, which has distinctive forms in the first and third person singular in both the present and the past tenses.

Some singular nouns which refer to groups of people or animals can take a plural verb. To find out more about this, see [collective noun](#).

It can often happen that another noun or pronoun comes between the verb and its grammatical subject. If this is different in number from the subject, it can affect the number of the verb: *The contents of the book submitted to our legal department has raised a few eyebrows*. The subject of the verb here is *contents*, not *book* or *department*, so the verb should be plural: *have*, not singular: *has*.

Nouns and pronouns linked by *and* can take a plural or a singular verb. To find out more about this, see [compound subject](#).

Measurements of quantity, distance, etc, that contain a plural noun can be regarded as a single unit, and therefore take a singular verb: *Fifty pounds is too much to pay*; *Twenty miles is a long way to walk*.

There are some nouns ending in **-s** that take a singular verb: *The news is good*. They include the names of certain games: *Darts is my favourite game* and the names of certain diseases: *Mumps is unpleasant for adult males to catch*. Some nouns ending in **-s** take a singular verb when they denote an area of study: *Acoustics is a tricky subject* but a plural verb when they have another meaning: *The acoustics of the hall aren't very good*.

---

## number a number of

See [majority](#)

---

## numerable

See [numerous](#).

---

## numerous, numerable, or innumerable

See [numerous](#).



---

## obelisk

Spelling: remember the **e**.

---

## object

The noun or other word that is the recipient of the action of the verb in a sentence.

---

## obscene

Spelling: remember the **sc**.

---

## observant

Spelling: remember the ending **-ant**, not **-ent**.

---

## observatory

Spelling: remember the **o** after the **t**.

---

## occasion

Spelling: note the double **c** and only one **s**.

---

## occupy

Spelling: note the double **c**.

---

## occurrence

Spelling: note the double **c** and double **r** (although *occur* has a single **r**).

---

## odorous

Spelling: note there is no **u** before the **r**, unlike *odour*.

---

## offence

US spelling: *offense*.

---

## officialese

This is a kind of jargon used in government offices, which is difficult for the public to understand. Forms and standard letters are among the documents in which you may find it. Certain government departments have reformed. Some have had their documents written by Plain English Campaign. Others have produced their own plain English documents, which have been granted Plain English Campaign's Crystal Mark for clarity. See also [plain English](#).

---

## official or officious

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---

## officious

See [official](#).

---

## often

The standard pronunciation is [off-n]. Some people pronounce the **t**. There is an upper class pronunciation [orf-n], and this is also the standard US pronunciation.

---

## older

See [elder](#).

---

## omelette

Spelling: remember the double **t**. US spelling: *omelet*.

---

## omitted

Spelling: note the single **m**.

---

## on behalf of

See behalf.

---

## one of

The singular phrase **one of** is usually followed by a plural noun or pronoun. This can sow a seed of doubt in people's minds about the verb that comes afterward – should it be singular or plural? The answer depends on whether the verb goes with *one* or with the plural noun or pronoun: *One of my old school friends is coming to stay next week*. In this sentence, it is only one of the school friends that is coming to stay. *One* is the subject of the verb, so the verb is singular – *is*.

*It's one of those books that keep you gripped until the very end*. In this sentence, it is all the books that keep you gripped, not just this one. *Those books* is the subject of the verb, so the verb is plural – *keep*.

The noun or pronoun following **one of** is usually plural (if it is not plural, then it is a collective singular, like *group* or *gang*). But putting in an extra phrase can disrupt the link between *one of* and its noun or pronoun, as in this sentence: *'In England the main object seems to be what is after all one of the most, if not **the** most, important gastronomic principle..'* The singular *principle* is incorrect, and sounds very odd, but it would have sounded equally odd to use the plural *principles*. The best solution in such cases is to rewrite the sentence: *one of the most important gastronomic principles, if not **the** most important*.

---

## one or you

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---

## only

The natural place in a sentence for **only**, as for most adverbs, is next to the verb. Its meaning may stretch out to affect other words, but when you speak you can make this clear by the way you say the sentence. There is no need to move *only*.

However, when you write, that option is closed off, and ambiguity can creep in. For example, does a sign in a station saying: *This platform only for Olympia* mean that trains from this platform go to Olympia and to nowhere else, or that trains do not go to Olympia from any platform other than this one.

If there is a danger of misunderstanding, it is best either to put *only* next to the word it relates to: *Only I* (I and no one else) *saw the accident*; *I only saw* (did not hear, etc) *the accident*; *I saw only the accident* (I did not see anything else); or, if the result is inappropriately formal for its context, to recast the sentence without *only*: *I and no one else saw the accident.*

---

## on the part of

See behalf.

---

## on to or onto

Some people consider **on to** to be correct, although **onto** is now widely used and accepted. It is sometimes useful in avoiding ambiguity: *He walked on to the common* (he walked on until he reached the common), but: *He walked onto the common* (he reached the common and began to walk on it).

---

## openness

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

## ophthalmic

Spelling: remember the **ph**.

---

## opossum

Spelling: note the single **p** and double **s**.

---

## opponent

Spelling: remember the double **p**.

---

## opportunity

Spelling: note the double **p**, and the **or**.

---

## oppress

Spelling: remember the double **p**.

---

## oral

See aural.

---

## ordinance or ordnance

Remember that **ordinance** means a regulation or decree, whereas **ordnance** means military equipment or weapons. It is also used in Ordnance Survey maps, which were originally produced by the artillery department.

---

## ordinarily

The standard British pronunciation has the stress on the first syllable, then two weak syllables before the final one [**ord**-n-ruh-lee]. Some people put the stress on the third

syllable [ord-n-**air**-ruh-lee], but many people disapprove of this pronunciation. The US pronunciation is similar, [ord-n-**e**-ruh-lee].

---

## **ordnance**

See ordnance.

---

## **orient *and* orientate**

See ordnance.

---

## **oscillate**

Spelling: remember the **sc** and the double **l**.

---

## **outspokenness**

Spelling: remember the double **n**.

---

## **overrated**

Spelling: remember the double **r**.

---

## **overreact**

Spelling: remember the double **r**.

---

## **override**

Spelling: remember the double **r**.

---

## **overrule**

Spelling: remember the double **r**.

---

## overrun

Spelling: remember the double r.

---

## owing to

See due to.

---

## pageant

Spelling: note the **ea**.

---

## palate or palette

The **palate** is literally the roof of the mouth, and so the means of testing the taste of something, or the pleasure of taste itself: *Too much junk food can ruin your palate; The white wine appealed to her palate.* A **palette** is the board on which an artist mixes paints to make different colours. It is sometimes used to refer to a range of colours.

---

## pallor

Spelling: note there is no **u** after the **o**.

---

## panacea

A **panacea** is a remedy for all diseases or problems. There is no need to use *all* after it: *a panacea for our economic problems* means a remedy that will solve all the problems of the economy. It is sometimes misused to mean a remedy which is extremely effective for a specific problem: *a panacea for the common cold*. Avoid this.

---

## panache

Spelling: note the **ch**.

---

## paprika

British English has two pronunciations, [**pap**-rica] with an ending like the ending of *Africa*, and [per-**preek**-ker], which is also the US pronunciation.

---

## paradigm

The beginning is pronounced the same as the beginning of *paratrooper*, and the end is pronounced [dime].

---

## paraffin

Spelling: note the single **r** and two **fs**.

---

## paragraph

The first sentence makes very clear what the topic is. The unity of the paragraph can be seen in the ease with which one can give it a title, *the Ten Hours Bill*, and in the fact that every sentence is relevant when tested against that title.

---

## parallel

Spelling: remember the double **l** first, then single **l**. (Also *paralleled* and *paralleling*).

---

## parallelogram

Spelling: note the double **l** then single **l**.

---

## parameter

In general use, **parameter** refers to a distinguishing characteristic or factor, especially one that can be measured or quantified: *the parameters of light are brightness and colour*. It has come to be used loosely to mean a limit. This is not incorrect, but it sounds like jargon. Before using it consider whether *limit*; *scope*; *boundary*, or a similar word would be more suitable.

---

## parenthesis



The practice in written or printed language of placing certain statements between a pair of such punctuation marks as commas, dashes, and brackets, to show that they are asides or interruptions in the normal flow of text.

---

## parliament

Spelling: remember the **i**.

---

## participles

English verbs have two types of participle: the present participle and the past participle. The **present participle** ends in *-ing*. It is used in forming the continuous or progressive tenses of a verb: *He's sleeping; She was combing her hair*. Many present participles can be used as adjectives: *a sleeping baby*. Some such adjectives can be used as plural nouns: *the living and the dead*. The present participle can also be used as a noun denoting the action of a verb (see gerund) and as a noun denoting a result of the action of the verb: *She showed me her paintings*.

The **past participle** usually ends in *-ed*, although some verbs have special past participial forms e.g. *chosen; gone; slept; swum*. It is used in forming the perfect tenses of a verb: *They've disappeared; I hadn't meant to do it*. It is also used to form the passive: *He can't be blamed for it*. Many past participles can be used as adjectives: *I was surprised to hear the news; She had a surprised look on her face*. Some such adjectives can be used as nouns: *Advise the accused of his rights*.

---

## part, on the part of, on someone's part

See behalf.

---

## passive

The form of a verb, using *to be*, where the subject of the sentence is affected by the action rather than performing it: *James was surprised by the news*, rather than: *The news surprised James*. See also active.

---

## past or passed

The form of a verb, using *to be*, where the subject of the sentence is affected by the action rather than performing it: *James was surprised by the news*, rather than: *The news surprised James*. See also active.

---

## patent

The usual British pronunciation for all senses of this word is [pay-tuhnt]. In technical usage, when it refers to the legal protection of an invention, the word is often pronounced [pat-uhnt]. Americans use [pat-uhnt] for all uses of the word except 'obvious', for which they use [pay-tuhnt].

---

## pathetic

This means 'giving rise to pity': *pathetic television pictures of starving children; a pathetic attempt to hold on to the life-raft*. It is also widely used to mean 'very bad', 'inadequate', 'deserving contempt or scorn': *What a pathetic excuse!*. Avoid this in formal contexts.

---

## patisserie

Spelling: note the one **t** and two **ss**.

---

## pavilion

Spelling: note the single **l**.

---

## peaceable

See peaceful.

---

## peaceful or peaceable

See peaceful.

---

## pedal or peddle

To **pedal** is to move by pedalling, as on a bicycle: *The children pedalled down the road*. To **peddle** is to sell things from door to door: *The salesman was peddling his wares wherever he could*. The words are not related.

---

## peddle

See pedal.

---

## pejorative

The standard British pronunciation is [pidge-**orr**-ertive], the middle part rhyming with *horror*. Some traditionalists put the stress on the first syllable, and say [**peej**-er-uh-tive]. The US pronunciation is [pidge-**jaw**-ruhtive].

---

## pendant

(meaning necklace) Remember the *-ant* and do not confuse it with *pendent* (an adjective meaning 'hanging').

---

## pendent

See pendant.

---

## penicillin

Spelling: remember the single **n** and double **l**.

---

## peninsula or peninsular

**Peninsula** is the noun and **peninsular** the adjective.

---

## penniless

Spelling: note the **i**, not **y**.

---

## per cent or percentage point

When the Chancellor announces that he has reduced the bank rate by one **per cent**, he usually means that he has reduced it by one *percentage point*. If the bank rate was ten per cent, a fall of one per cent would be a fall of one per cent (one hundredth) of ten per cent, and the new bank rate would be 9.99%.

A **percentage point** is a unit expressing the difference between two percentages; a fall of one percentage point would be a fall from ten to nine per cent. In American English *per cent* is spelt as one word, *percent*.

---

## perceptive, percipient, perspicacious, or perspicuous

A **perceptive** person understands something readily or intuitively: *So you realized I had lost? That was very perceptive of you.* A **percipient** person is similar, but notices whatever it is quickly: *The youngest members of the class were often the most percipient.*

A **perspicacious** person is one who discerns or who understands something without needing an explanation: *He was a perspicacious student of human nature, and knew how we would react.* A **perspicuous** person is easy to understand: *We then heard Anna's account, which although long was wonderfully clear and perspicuous.*

---

## percipient

See perceptive.

---

## perennial

Spelling: remember the single **r** and double **n**.

---

## permanent

Spelling: note the ending **-ent**.

---

## person

Person is a feature of verbs and pronouns. It consists of three categories: **first person**, which denotes the speaker; **second person**, which denotes the person spoken to; and **third person**, which denotes the person or thing spoken about.

The first-person pronouns are *I* and *we*; the second-person pronoun is *you*; and the third-person pronouns are *he*, *she*, *it* and *they*.

*I* and *we* take first-person verb forms; *you* takes second-person verb forms; and nouns and *he*, *she*, *it* and *they* take third-person verb forms. In the past tense all these verb forms are identical. In the present tense, the only difference is that the third person singular usually has an **s** on the end, whereas the plural and the first and second person singular do not: *I come, he comes, they come*. Exceptions to this are

forms of the modal verbs, such as *can*; *may*; *will*, which do not have an **s** in the third person singular: *she can*; *he may*, and the verb *to be*, which has distinctive forms in the first and third person singular in both the present and the past tenses.

When two subject pronouns are joined by *or*, the verb should agree with the second. To find out more about this, see [compound subject](#).

---

## **-person**

In recent years this has been used as a suffix to avoid *-man* or *-woman*. It is useful for employers, who should not appear to be advertising specifically for a male or female employee, and also when the gender of the person is not known. For example, a pub owner may advertise for a *barperson*, but once the vacancy is filled the employer will refer to *the new barman* or *barmaid*.

Advertisers use similar words for jobs traditionally done by men, for which they expect only male applicants: *dustperson*; *milkperson*; *handyperson*. Such terms are seldom used otherwise, except in fun. When the gender of the person is known, *-person* nearly always refers to a woman; a man will be called a *chairman* or a *spokesman*, a woman is more likely to be referred to as a *chairperson* or *spokesperson*.

---

## **personnel**

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

## **perspicacious**

See [perceptive](#).

---

## **perspicuous**

See [perceptive](#).

---

## **persuade**

See [convince](#).

---

## **pessimist**

Spelling: note the double **s** and single **m**.

---

### **pettiness**

Spelling: the **y** of *petty* changes to an **i**.

---

### **pharaoh**

Spelling: note the ending **-aoh**.

---

### **Philippines**

Spelling: remember the single **l** and double **p**.

---

### **phlegm**

Spelling: remember the silent **g**.

---

### **phoenix**

The pronunciation is [**fee**-niks].

---

### **pianissimo**

Spelling: note the double **s** and single **m**.

---

### **picaresque**

See picturesque.

---

### **piccolo**

Spelling: remember the double **c** and single **l**.

---

## **picturesque or picaresque**

Spelling: remember the double **c** and single **i**.

---

## **piteous**

See pitiful.

---

## **pitiable**

See pitiful.

---

## **pitiful, pitiable, or piteous**

See pitiful.

---

## **placid**

Spelling: note there is only one **c**.

---

## **plague**

Spelling: remember the ending **-gue**.

---

## **plain**

See plane.

---

## **plain English**

This is the kind of English to use in business: in letters, memos, reports to your colleagues, documents giving information to the public, promotional material, coursework and examination essays, or in any situation in which you are giving information, or want to persuade or interest.

Plain English is clear, concise, effective, interesting English. It saves time, paper, and misunderstanding, and so it saves money.

To make your English clear, you need to put yourself in the position of your reader, and decide what they need to know. In addition to the main facts, is there any background information you need to provide so that the reader can understand them? What is the most helpful way to order the information.

Show how your ideas are related. It may be obvious to you, but your readers will be happier if you give them signposts. Connect sentences with words and phrases such as *for example; however, on the other hand; but, besides; so; at first, secondly, in other words; in the first place; as a result, eventually, otherwise.*

If you need to deal with several questions, provide a clear heading for each.

Some information is very simple, and can be given in a straightforward way, but some is complicated. Would examples help? If the information is rather general, can you say what its practical implications are.

Write in everyday English. This will often save thinking time, for you can use the words that you first thought of when you got your aims straight for yourself. Don't waste time and lose clarity by wrapping up the plain facts in flowery language, long words, unnecessary technical terms, legalese, officialese, bureaucratic language, jargon, clichés, unnecessary words, or any other form of gobbledegook. Research shows that simple language sells products and services better than any other kind.

Don't waffle or pad. Be direct. Use *we* for your organization, rather than talking about it in the third person, and use *you* for the readers. For example, don't say, *The Sheffield and Manchester Building Society is endeavouring to develop a wider client base, and to this end is offering an attractive package to first time mortgage applicants.* Say, *If you are a first-time borrower, you pay a lower rate of interest.* Don't be pompous. That is, don't use phrases such as *not unmindful.*

In objective scientific writing there is good reason to use the passive, and to use long nouns made from verbs: *The leaves were classified; the classification of the leaves.* Who did the classifying is irrelevant. But where people matter, or emotions are involved, use active verbs rather than passive ones, and prefer the concrete to the abstract.

Keep sentences reasonably short, but not too short. Fifteen to twenty words is a good average. Don't be afraid to add a comma if it will make something clearer, particularly before *and*. What do you understand by the following sentence: *The articles were sorted by size and price labels attached.*

Did you start by thinking that the articles had been sorted according to size AND price, and then have to go back and re-analyse the sentence to see that *and* here joins two clauses and not two nouns? A comma before *and* would have prevented the confusion.

If you produce documents of which large numbers of copies go to the public, other companies, or government departments, you may like to have the help of Plain English Campaign, 'an independent organization which fights for clear, effective business communication and wants to stamp out all forms of gobbledegook.' For a fee, they will edit, write, and design documents, and train staff. They are particularly concerned with official documents and consumer contracts. They publish an *A-Z of alternative words*, plain English alternatives for words that make writing dull, confusing, or long-winded.



Plain English Campaign is at PO Box 3, New Mills, Stockport, SK12 4QP. Their telephone number is 01663 744409.

---

## plainness

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

## plane or plain

Both words can apply to a flat or level area. A **plane** is a more or less technical term for a flat surface: *The sides of a pyramid rise on an inclined plane to meet at its apex; Joe tried to raise the level of conversation to a more elevated plane.* A **plain** is a level tract of country: *'A gentle knight was pricking on the plain'* (Spenser).

---

## plaque

Spelling: note the ending **-que**.

---

## platypus

Spelling: note the single **t** and single **s**.

---

## playwright

Spelling: remember that the second part is not **-write**.

---

## plethora

*a plethora of* is sometimes used to mean 'plenty of', 'a large selection of'. It actually means 'an excessive number or amount of': *a plethora of petty rules*.

---

## pleural

(meaning 'to do with the lungs'). Do not confuse this word with *plural*.

---

## plimsoll or plimsole

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## plough

US spelling: *plow*.

---

## plumbing

Spelling: remember the silent **b**.

---

## Plurals

Spelling: remember the silent **b**.

---

## pneumatic

Spelling: remember the **p**.

---

## pneumonia

Spelling: remember the **p**.

---

## poignant

Spelling: remember the **gn**.

---

## poltergeist

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## pomegranate

Spelling: note the single **m**, and the ending **-ate**.

---

## pore

See pour.

---

## Portuguese

Spelling: note the ending **-uese**.

---

## possess

Spelling: note the two double **ss**.

---

## possessive pronoun

A pronoun that indicates ownership of something. The possessive pronouns are: *mine; yours; his; hers; its; ours; their*.

---

## potato

Spelling: note there is no **e** at the end.

---

## pour or pore

To **pour** is to fall as liquid: *The rain poured down*. To **pore** is to study something intently: *We pored over the map, looking for the best route*. Despite the apparent common concept of downward direction, the two words are not related.

---

## practicable

See practical.

---

## practical or practicable

If something is **practical** it is useful and likely to be successful; if it is **practicable** it can be carried out, or put into practice: *You have made a practical suggestion, but I wonder if in this case it will be practicable?*

---

## practice or practise

**Practice** is the noun, and **practise** the verb (though not in the USA, when it is *practice*): *I'm afraid I'm rather out of practice; Why don't you practise what you preach?* See also practical. To spell the two words correctly, remember *advice* (noun) and *advise* (verb).

---

## practitioner

Spelling: remember the two **tis**.

---

## pray or prey

To **pray** is to 'talk' to your god; to **prey** on someone or something is to hunt, catch or exploit them: *I pray that it won't rain today; It's been preying on my mind for some time now; The praying mantis is so called not because it preys on living insects for its food but because when at rest it folds its front legs as if praying.*

---

## precede

See proceed.

---

## predilection

Spelling: remember **-ile-**, not **-eli-**.

---

## predominantly

Spelling: *predomin-ant-ly* (not **-ate-ly**).

---

## prefix

A group of letters that can be added to the beginning of a word to make a new word. For example, the prefix *over-* can be added to the word *charge* to make the word *overcharge*; the prefix *co-* can be added to the word *pilot* to make the word *co-pilot*.

---

## prejudice

Spelling: note that there is no **d** before the **j**.

---

## premise or premiss

**Premises** is the standard spelling for the words relating to buildings and to a reasoned idea: *The office premises are vacant, I am basing my premise on what you told me*. However, **premiss** is an alternative spelling for the second sense, especially in its use as a term in logic: *The two first parts of an argument in logic are known as the major premiss and the minor premiss*.

---

## premiss

See [premise](#).

---

## preposition

This is a part of speech coming before a noun or a pronoun. A preposition can show location: *in*; *on*; time: *during*, or some other relationship, for example, figurative relationships in phrases like *by heart* or *in truthfulness*.

In the sentence '*Put the book on the table*', *on* is a preposition governing the noun *table* and relates the verb *put* to the phrase *the table*, indicating where the book should go.

Many people know the 'rule' that says that a sentence should never end with a preposition. Traditional English grammar rules such as this were based on Latin grammar and as it is not possible to end a Latin sentence with a preposition, it was considered incorrect in English too. There is no other justification for the rule and it may safely be disregarded. Put the preposition where it sounds natural: *These people have no idea what they are talking about; Have you found those pages you were looking for?*

---

## prerogative

Spelling: note the first **r**.

---

## prescribe or proscribe

The two verbs are virtual opposites. To **prescribe** something is to recommend or authorize it: *The doctor prescribed a course of antibiotics; The laws prescribe a strict penalty for this offence.* To **proscribe** something is to ban it: *The import of pornographic material was proscribed by law; The new nationalist party was proscribed.*

---

## presently

In standard British English this means 'in a little while', 'before long'. In some dialects, in Scots, and in American English, it retains an older meaning 'now', 'at this time': *She's presently in Canada.* This can sometimes be confusing: an English person saying *she's visiting Canada presently* would mean that she is soon to visit Canada, an American would mean that she is there now. Use *soon* or *now* if there is a danger of being misunderstood.

---

## pretence

US spelling: *pretense*.

---

## pretentious language

See [clichés](#), [pretentious language](#), and [jargon](#) and [plain English](#).

---

## prettiness

Spelling: the **y** of *pretty* changes to an **i**.

---

## prevent

*Prevent* is followed by *from* or by a possessive: *They prevented me from going or they prevented my going.* The former is more common, and is often preferable when the verb is followed by a noun: *We prevented the baby from falling* rather than *we prevented the baby's falling* (a listener could not tell whether there was one baby or more). Constructions such as *They prevented me going; we prevented the baby falling* are best avoided in formal writing, as some people consider them incorrect. They are very common in speech, and there is no reason not to say them.

---

## preventive or preventative

The words are often used interchangeably to denote whatever prevents something else happening or occurring, especially when it is undesirable. However, **preventative** is often applied to an actual object, especially in noun form, while **preventive** is mostly reserved for an abstract concept, and remains an adjective: *Preventive medicine regards vitamin C as an effective preventative against colds.*

---

## prey

See pray.

---

## primarily

There are two common British pronunciations, [**prime**-ruhlee] and [prime-**mer**-rily]. Purists favour the first one. The second is also the US pronunciation.

---

## principle or principal

A **principle** is a firm belief or conviction that one has about something, or a rule or law about the way something works: *It would be against my principles to do such a thing; A thermometer works on the principle that mercury expands when warm and contracts when cool.* A **principal** is the head of a college: *She became Principal in 1991.* *Principle* is always a noun, but *principal* can also be an adjective meaning 'main', or 'chief': *My principal objection is the cost.*

---

## pristine

This means 'in its original condition', 'unspoilt'. It has also acquired the meaning 'clean', 'spotless', 'as if new': *a pristine white handkerchief.* Some people still consider this to be incorrect, but it is widely used and generally accepted.

---

## privacy

The preferred British pronunciation has a short i sound like the i in *privet*, though some speakers say [**pry**-versee], which is also the US pronunciation.

---

## privilege

Spelling: remember **-ile-**, not **-eli-**.

---

## proceed or precede

To **proceed** is to go forward, especially after stopping or turning: *The parade then proceeded up the High Street.* To **precede** is to go in front: *The parade was preceded by two majorettes, tossing and twirling their batons.*

---

## prodigy or protégé

A **prodigy** is an unusually talented child: *Mozart gained early fame as a prodigy, giving public performances of his own compositions at the age of six.* A **protégé** is a (usually young) person who is guided or helped by someone else, by implication usually older or wiser (and wealthier): *He came to regard Justin as his protégé, encouraging and advising him in his studies whenever he could.*

---

## profession

Spelling: note there is only one **f**.

---

## professor

Spelling: note the single **f** and double **s**.

---

## program or programme

Spell this word **program** when referring to computers or computing, and also in American English. Use **programme** for other senses such as 'television programme' or 'a programme of events'.

---

## prohibit

See forbid.

---

## project



The verb is stressed on the second syllable and has a weak first syllable [pruh-**ject**]. The noun is stressed on the first syllable, [**prodge**-ect] or sometimes [**proe**-ject].

---

## prone

See liable.

---

## prone

See prostrate.

---

## pronoun

This is a part of speech that is used in place of a noun, usually to save repetition of the noun. For example: *The people arrived around nine o'clock. They behaved as though we were expecting them.* Here, *they* and *them* are substitutes for repeating *the people*.

*They, them, he, and she* are **personal pronouns** (representing people); *this/these, and that/those* are **demonstrative pronouns** (demonstrating or pointing to something: *this book and not that book*).

Words like *that* and *who* can be **relative pronouns** in sentences like *She said that she was coming* and *Tell me who did it* (relating one clause to another). *Myself* and *himself* are **reflexive pronouns** (reflecting back to a person, as in *He did it himself*).

---

## pronunciation

Note that the spelling has **-nun-** in the middle, and that this is pronounced [nun] and not [noun].

---

## prophecy or prophesy

Remember that **prophecy** is a noun (meaning 'a prediction') and **prophesy** is a verb (meaning 'to predict').

---

## proportion

This is often used to mean 'some': *A proportion of travellers prefer to drive.* Constructions such as *large, small, or greater proportion* would give a better idea of how many of the travellers are involved. However, all these are longer, and no more informative, than *some; many; a few; most*, and there is really no good reason to use them.

---

## proscribe

See prescribe.

---

## prostrate, prone, or supine

See prescribe.

---

## protagonist

Some people still maintain that, as the Greek word from which *protagonist* comes meant 'first actor', there may be only one protagonist in any situation, and the word should not be used to mean 'supporter' or 'advocator': *a protagonist of gay rights*. However, this use is widely accepted, and you need have no misgivings about it. Words do change their meanings, especially as they move from one language to another. If we allowed words only in their original senses, we would still be using the word *treacle* for an antidote to a poisonous bite (this was the earliest meaning in English, taken from French; *treacle* is ultimately from a Greek word meaning 'wild animal').

---

## protégé

See prodigy.

---

## proved or proven

The traditional English pronunciation of *proven* is [**proo**-v'n], and the Scottish pronunciation is [**proe**-v'n], but because English people have become familiar with the Scottish legal term 'not proven' they too sometimes pronounce the word [**proe**-v'n].

---

## provided and providing

These are used to refer to a condition that must be fulfilled before something else can take place: *Provided you've finished your work, you may go*; *Providing it doesn't rain, we'll have a picnic*. Either is correct, but some people feel that *provided* is more formal. Do not use either to mean simply 'if' in sentences like *We'd never have gone on the picnic if we'd known it was going to rain*.

---

## providing

See provided.

---

## psalm

Spelling: remember the **p**.

---

## pseudonym

Spelling: remember the **p**.

---

## pterodactyl

Spelling: remember the **p**.

---

## purposefully

See purposely.

---

## purposely or purposefully

To do something **purposely** is to do it deliberately or on purpose: *Please don't move those books: I put them there purposely*. To do something **purposefully** is to do it with determination: *'Right, you naughty children, here I come!' he said, and strode purposefully into the garden*.

---

## pyjamas

US spelling: *pajamas*.

---

## quantitative

Spelling: remember the **-ta-**.

---

## quantum leap

In physics, *quantum* refers to a very small amount of energy, momentum, etc, but in general use **quantum leap** is often used for a sudden dramatic increase or advance, implying a very large movement. In physics, a *quantum jump* or *leap* means 'the abrupt transition of a particle or atom from one energy state to another', so *quantum leap* is perhaps best used for a sudden increase or advance which, although it may not be large, brings about a dramatic change: *The 'last straw' was a 'quantum leap' as far as the camel's back was concerned.*

---

## quasi

The traditional pronunciation is [kwayz-eye] but some people say [kwarz-ee].

---

## queasiness

Spelling: the **y** of *queasy* changes to an **i**.

---

## queer

See gay.

---

## question

See beg the question.

---

## question mark

This is a punctuation mark (?) used to indicate an enquiry, placed at the end of a direct question: *Who is coming?* or an implied question: *This is my reward?*. A question mark is never needed at the end of an indirect question: *He asked us who was coming*, since this is a statement. To express doubt, a writer or editor may insert a question mark: *born in ? 1235*, often in brackets.

The question mark carries the force of a full stop (indeed it contains one) so it is incorrect to use them together.

---

## questionnaire

Spelling: remember the double **n**.

---

## queue

Spelling: remember the double **ue**.

---

## quotation marks

These are punctuation marks (") which are also known as quotes, inverted commas, or speech marks. They are used in pairs to mark off dialogue or quoted matter in a text: *'Will you buy me a present, please?'* asked Jane; Jane asked, *'Will you buy me a present, please?'*; *'Will you please,'* Jane asked, *'buy me a present?'*

Whether the direct speech comes first, last, or is broken, the inverted commas must enclose only the words that the speaker actually utters. The punctuation marks are part of the speech; they must be inside the inverted commas: *'You said, 'Go home!' Those were your very words. No wonder he's upset,'* said Steven angrily. *'I said 'Go home if you want.' He didn't have to go,'* replied John. Here the reported speech within the dialogue and the dialogue itself can be distinguished by the use of single and double quotation marks.

Quotation marks are sometimes used to indicate the title of a play, a book, the name of a ship, and so on, but italics (or underlining) are normally used for these, and both may be omitted. Quotation marks may also be used to indicate that the writer is using the word in an unusual, often ironic, way: *He is one of these 'modern' young men – appalling manners and terrifying appearance.* In British English, single quotes are now more commonly used than double ones, and double quotes within single; in American English normal practice is the other way round.

---

## rabid

Two pronunciations are acceptable, [**rab**-id] and [**ray**-bid].

---

## raccoon or racoon

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## racialist or racist

The words are often used interchangeably but a distinction can be made. A **racialist** is someone who believes in the superiority of one race (usually white) over another (usually black or coloured), and who voices their views when surrounded (and outnumbered) by representatives of the 'other' race: *Many white racialists in South Africa were bitterly opposed to the release of the ANC leader Nelson Mandela.*

A **racist** is more of a theorist, believing that race is what determines a person's characteristics, so that some races are superior to others: *Critics remain divided regarding the extent to which Rudyard Kipling was or was not a racist.* The accepted pronunciation of both noun and adjective is [**ray**-sist], as the word comes from *race*. The pronunciation [**ray**-shist], probably formed by analogy with *racialist* or *fascist*, is generally regarded as incorrect.

---

## racket or racquet

This word (meaning a piece of sports equipment) can be spelled either way.

---

## rack or wrack

This word (meaning a piece of sports equipment) can be spelled either way.

---

## racoon

See racoon.

---

## racquet

See racket.

---

## raise

See r~~aise~~.

---

## rancorous

Spelling: there is no **u** after the first **o** as there is in *rancour*.

---

## rarefied

Spelling: note the **e** in the middle, not **i**.

---

## rase or raze

This word (meaning to demolish) can be spelled either way. Do not confuse it with *raise* meaning to lift.

---

## raspberry

Spelling: remember the **p**.

---

## rateable or ratable

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## ravage or ravish

To **ravage** is to destroy or lay waste: *The storms ravaged the wood, uprooting many trees.* To **ravish** is to seize and carry off by force, and hence to rape (which originally meant carrying off a woman with the aim of forcing her to have sex): *The dog was living wild and farmers feared it could ravage their flocks.* From this bad 'carrying off' sense came the good one of 'transporting' with delight: *The visitors were ravished by the beauty of the landscape before them.*

---

## ravish

See ravage.

---

## raze

See rase.

---

## realm

Spelling: remember the **a**.

---

## reason

**Reason** is usually followed by *that* or *why*: *The reason that (or why) we left was that no one spoke to us.* You can also omit both: *the reason we left.* If *reason* is followed by a phrase without a verb, use *for*: *the reason for our departure.*

Note that the verb *to be* which introduces the reason is not followed by *because*: *The reason was that (not because) no one spoke.*

---

## rebuff, rebut, refute, repudiate

*Refute* is sometimes used to mean 'deny or contradict without argument or proof' (although many people think this is wrong), and in this sense it can be confused with **repudiate**, which means to reject the authority or validity of something: *He repudiated the accusation* (because it was invalid, there was no evidence for it). *Repudiate* can also mean 'refuse to have anything to do with something': *She repudiated all our offers of help.* In this meaning it overlaps with *rebuff*, but usually refers to the offers rather than the person making them.

---

## rebut

See rebuff.

---

## recede

Spelling: note the ending **-ede**.

---

## receipt

Spelling: remember the **ei**, and the silent **p**.

---

## receive

Spelling: remember the **ei** after **c**.



---

## recommend

Spelling: remember the single **c** and double **m**.

---

## reconnaissance

The stress is on the second syllable, and the word is pronounced [rick-**con**-uh-suhns]. Spelling: note the double **n** and double **s**.

---

## recourse *or* resort

The stress is on the second syllable, and the word is pronounced [rick-**con**-uh-suhns]. Spelling: note the double **n** and double **s**.

---

## recurrent

Spelling: note the double **r**, unlike *recur*.

---

## redoubtable

Spelling: remember the **b**.

---

## referred

Spelling: note the double **r**, unlike *refer*.

---

## reflexive pronoun

An object pronoun that refers to the same person as the subject: *I cut myself; You see yourself as the leader*. The other reflexive pronouns are *Himself, herself, itself, ourselves, yourselves, themselves*, and *oneself*.

---

## refrigerator

Spelling: remember no **d** before the **g**.

---

## refute

See rebuff.

---

## regardless

See irrespective.

---

## register office or registry office

Both are widely used, and neither can be regarded as incorrect. However, *register office* is the official term, and should be used in formal speech and writing.

---

## regretfully or regrettably

**Regretfully** means 'feeling or showing regret', **regrettably** means 'undesirable', 'causing regret', 'open to criticism'. *Regrettably* is sometimes used in place of *regretfully*, but this should be avoided because of the difference in meaning: *Regretfully, he declined their invitation* means that he was, or appeared to be, full of sadness and regret at having to do so. *Regrettably, he declined their invitation* means that his refusal is something to regret; perhaps because he had no good reason for doing so or because things would have turned out better if he had accepted.

---

## reign or rein

To **reign** is to rule, while to **rein** is to check. Hence the expression *give free rein* (not *reign*), meaning to allow freedom to someone or something when it might otherwise have been held in check (like a horse by its reins): *She gave the gardener free rein to work as he thought best; Judy gave free rein to her imagination about what she would do if she won the pools.*

---

## rein

See reign.

---

## relative clause

Relative clauses are clauses which modify what they are attached to – that is to say, they affect its meaning in some way. Most relative clauses modify a noun. In this way they act rather like adjectives – in fact *adjectival clause* is another name for them. There are two types of these: restrictive relative clauses (also called defining relative clauses) and non-restrictive relative clauses (also called non-defining relative clauses).

Restrictive relative clauses identify and particularize the noun they modify, and the sentence would be incomplete without them: *The zebra which the lion picked on was clearly sick.* They can be introduced by the relative pronouns *who*, *whom*, *whose* or *which*, or by *that*: *The zebra that the lion picked on was clearly sick.* They can also be used without a relative pronoun: *The zebra the lion picked on was clearly sick.* You do not put a comma before and after them.

Non-restrictive relative clauses merely give additional information about the noun, which is dispensable: *The zebra, which lives in southern Africa, is related to the horse.* They can only be introduced by *who*, *whom*, *whose* and *which*, never by *that*. You generally put a comma before a non-restrictive relative clause (and after it, if it does not end the sentence).

There is a third sort of relative clause, which modifies not a noun but a whole clause: *They can't come after all, which is a shame.* It can only be introduced by *which*.

---

## renege

The standard pronunciation is [ri-**neeg**], though some British speakers say [ri-**naig**].

---

## repertoire or repertory

A **repertoire** is properly the range of acts, songs, turns, and the like that a particular company or actor can perform, and hence anyone's 'stock' of similar things: *Uncle Geoff has a good repertoire of corny jokes.* A **repertory** can be the same, but the word usually refers more precisely to the plays that a company performs at one theatre over a period: *Many famous performers started their career in repertory companies.* Spelling: remember the second **r**.

---

## repertory

See repertoire.

---

## replica

A **replica** is a model of something, but it is a particular kind of model and the two words are not interchangeable. A *model* may represent a type of thing rather than a

specific example: *a model railway*, and it may be quite crude and not very much like the original: *a pink plastic model of the Taj Mahal*. A model may be of something which does not yet exist: engineers sometimes make detailed scale models of things they are planning or constructing. A **replica** is an exact copy of a specific thing which exists or has existed in the past, and is usually made to scale.

---

## repudiate

See rebuff.

---

## rescind

The **c** is not pronounced, and the stress is on the second syllable. The first syllable is the same as the beginning of *return*. Spelling: remember the **c**.

---

## research

The standard pronunciation of both verb and noun in Britain, especially among researchers, has the stress on the second syllable [**ri-search**], but a pronunciation with the stress on the first syllable [**ree-search**] is gaining ground among the general public. The situation is the same in the US, except that the **r** is pronounced.

---

## resign

Spelling: remember the **g**.

---

## resort

See recourse.

---

## restaurant

Spelling: remember the **au**.

---

## restaurateur

Note that, unlike *restaurant*, this is spelt and pronounced without an **n**.

---

## resurrection

Spelling: note the single **s** and double **r**.

---

## resuscitate

Spelling: remember the **sc**.

---

## retch

See wretch.

---

## review or revue

A **review** is a re-examination, survey, or report: *This schedule is subject to review; Most company reports include a financial review of the year; I quite agreed with the review of the TV programme.* A **revue** (the French equivalent) is a theatrical entertainment, either of song and dance, and purely for pleasure, or satirical in some way: *After the war many spectacular revues turned into night club or strip-tease shows; One of the first great TV satirical revues was 'That Was the Week that Was'.*

---

## revue

See review.

---

## rhapsody

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## rheumatism

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## rhinoceros

Spelling: remember the **h** and the ending **-os**.

---

## rhombus

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## rhyme

Spelling: remember the **hy**.

---

## rhythm

Spelling: remember the **hy**.

---

## rigid

Spelling: there is no **d** before the **g**.

---

## rigorous

Spelling: there is no **u** before the second **r**, unlike *rigour*.

---

## risotto

Spelling: note the single **s** and double **t**.

---

## rogue

Spelling: remember the ending **-gue**.

---

## rural or rustic

Spelling: remember the ending **-gue**.

---

## rustic

See rural.

---

## saccharin or saccharine

**Saccharin** is an artificial sweetener whereas **saccharine** means something excessively sweet: *a saccharine smile*. Spelling: remember the double **c**.

---

## sachet

Spelling: remember the ending **-et**.

---

## sacrament

Spelling: remember **a** in the middle, not **e**.

---

## sacrilegious

Spelling: remember **-ile-**, not **-eli-**. The word is related to *sacrilege*, not *religious*.

---

## Sagittarius

Spelling: note the single **g** and double **t**.

---

## sake, saké, or saki

This word can be spelled in all three ways.

---

## salmon

Spelling: remember the **l**.

---

## satellite

Spelling: note the single **t** and double **l**.

---

## sauciness

Spelling: the **y** of *saucy* changes to an **i**.

---

## Saudi

The standard current pronunciation is [**sow**-dee]. A few people still use an older pronunciation [**sore**-dee], and people who have dealings with Saudi Arabia sometimes pronounce it more like Arabs do, and say [sar-**oo**-dee].

---

## scallop

The standard pronunciation in Britain is [**skol**-op], to rhyme with *trollop*. Some people pronounce it, as you might expect from the spelling, with a short **a** sound. This is the standard pronunciation in the USA, although [**skol**-op] is also heard there. Note that the word can also be spelt *scollop*. In this case it is pronounced as you would expect from the spelling.

---

## scantiness

Spelling: the **y** of *scanty* changes to an **i**.

---

## scenario

A *scenario* is a state of affairs that may come about, or a series of events that may happen. It is often used in the context of planning to deal with such an eventuality: *In this scenario, unemployment has reached five million. What action should be taken?* Avoid using it to mean 'plan' or 'scheme'. It has recently been somewhat overused: it may sometimes be better to use words such as *prediction; projection; development; outlook, or prospect*.

---

## sceptic

US spelling: *skeptic*.

---



## sceptical

See cynical.

---

## sceptre

Spelling: remember the **c**.

---

## schedule

The usual British pronunciation is [**shed**-you], but the US pronunciation [**sked**-you] is increasingly heard in Britain.

---

## scheme

Spelling: remember the **sch**.

---

## schism

The standard current pronunciation is [**skizz**-um], though traditionalists and clergymen still frequently use [**sizz**-um].

---

## schizophrenic

Spelling: remember the **sch**.

---

## scholar

Spelling: remember the **sch**.

---

## science

Spelling: remember the **sc**.

---

## scissors

Spelling: remember the **sc**.

---

## scone

Both [skon] and [skone] are heard in Britain, with [skon] probably more common. The standard US pronunciation is [skone], though [skahn] is also heard.

---

## scorch

Spelling: there is no **t** before the **ch**.

---

## Scottish, Scots, or Scotch

Spelling: there is no **t** before the **ch**.

---

## scourge

Spelling: remember the **ou**.

---

## scrimmage, scrummage, or scrum

A **scrimmage** is any general confused tussle or struggle, as also is a **scrum** (though perhaps a more local one): *There was a real scrimmage outside the store before the sales, and a scrum round the bargain counter as soon as the doors opened.* A **scrummage** (or *scrum*) is a set formation in Rugby football.

---

## scruffiness

Spelling: the **y** of *scruffy* changes to an **i**.

---

## scrum

See scrimmage.

---

## scrummage

See scrimmage.

---

## scythe

Spelling: remember the **c**.

---

## seasonable

See seasonal.

---

## seasonal or seasonable

If something is **seasonal**, it relates to a particular season (often summer): *He got seasonal work hiring out deck chairs on the beach.* If a thing is **seasonable** it is appropriate for the season or occasion: *The snow was unexpected but seasonable for the time of year.*

---

## secede

The stress is on the second syllable [sis-**seed**]. Spelling: remember the ending **-ede**.

---

## secretary

The standard British pronunciation has only three syllables [**seck**-ruh-tree]. The US pronunciation has four [**seck**-ruh-ter-ry]. Note that the pronunciation [**seck**-ertree] is considered wrong.

---

## seize

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## self-deprecating

See deprecate.

---

## selvage or selvedge

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## semicolon

This is a punctuation mark (;) with a function halfway between the separation of sentence from sentence by means of a full stop, and the weaker separation provided by a comma. It also helps separate items in a complex list: *pens, pencils, and paper; staples, such as rice and beans; tools, various; and rope.*

Rather than the abrupt *We saw Mark last night. It was good to see him again,* and the grammatically inaccurate *We saw Mark last night, it was good to see him again,* the semicolon reflects a link in a two-part statement and is considered good style: *We saw Mark last night; it was good to see him again.* An alternative in such cases is to use a comma followed by *and* or *but*.

---

## sensual or sensuous

This is a punctuation mark (;) with a function halfway between the separation of sentence from sentence by means of a full stop, and the weaker separation provided by a comma. It also helps separate items in a complex list: *pens, pencils, and paper; staples, such as rice and beans; tools, various; and rope.*

Rather than the abrupt *We saw Mark last night. It was good to see him again,* and the grammatically inaccurate *We saw Mark last night, it was good to see him again,* the semicolon reflects a link in a two-part statement and is considered good style: *We saw Mark last night; it was good to see him again.* An alternative in such cases is to use a comma followed by *and* or *but*.

---

## sensuous

See sensual.

---

## separate

Spelling: remember **-par-** not **-per-** in the middle.

---

## sergeant

Spelling: remember **ser**, not **sar**.

---

## sexism in language

Many women object to having to be labelled as married or unmarried when they give their title as *Mrs* or *Miss*. Men are all *Mr* and do not have to reveal their marital status. Feminists proposed *Ms* as a female equivalent of *Mr*, and it is now well established as an option.

There is an increasing tendency towards dropping all titles and using a person's first name and surname in letters, public notices, and so on. If you are writing to someone such as a company's customer care officer, and you do not know the name or sex of that person, start the letter *Dear Sir or Madam*. See also chair, girl, he, lady, man, Ms, -person, they, woman

---

## shabbiness

Spelling: the **y** of *shabby* changes to an **i**.

---

## shall or will

*Shall* and *will* are both used as auxiliary verbs to form the future tense. In standard British English, the traditional difference between the two is that **shall** is used with *I* and *we*: *I shall leave* and **will** is used with nouns and *you*, *he*, *she*, *it* and *they*: *You will stay*. In practice, though, *shall* is going out of use in this role, and *will* is widely used for the first person: *I will leave*. This is now widely accepted as part of standard English. In American English, *will* is the norm in all persons for the future tense.

A parallel development has been the gradual decline of *will* in the first person and *shall* in the second and third persons to express determination, promises or commands. *I will leave* now indicates merely intention, not, as in the past, determination; and usages like *Cinderella, you shall go to the ball* now sound rather old-fashioned.

The first person *shall* does survive as a way of making a suggestion or asking a question: *Shall I put the light on?* means 'Would you like me to put the light on?', not 'Am I going to put the light on?'

---

## shapeliness

Spelling: the **y** of *shapely* changes to an **i**.

---

## sheik or sheikh

This word can be spelled either way. The current standard pronunciation is [shake], but older people sometimes still use [sheek].

---

## shepherd

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## sheriff

Spelling: remember the single **r** and double **f**.

---

## shiftiness

Spelling: the **y** of *shifty* changes to an **i**.

---

## shininess

Spelling: the **y** of *shiny* changes to an **i**.

---

## shoddiness

Spelling: the **y** of *shoddy* changes to an **i**.

---

## should or would

The main use of **should** is to mean 'ought to': *You shouldn't speak like that to your mother.* It is also used after *if* to express hypothetical situations: *If it should rain, the performance will be indoors* and after *that* in expressing suggestions, arrangements and necessities: *I suggested that he should leave.* See subjunctive.

**Would** is used in conditional sentences: *If it weren't so expensive, I would buy it*, in reporting the words of someone who has said *will*: *She said she would let me know tomorrow*, and to say what used to happen: *Every evening he would go along to the pub.*

Formerly, *should* replaced *would* after *I* and *we* in the first two of these three uses: *If it weren't so expensive, I should buy it.* In present-day English, however, this sounds

rather old-fashioned, and it is preferable to use *would*. There are, though, certain expressions, such as *I should think* and *I shouldn't wonder*, in which it is still the norm to use *should*.

---

## sieve

Both the noun and the verb are pronounced [siv]. [Seev] is not standard.

---

## silhouette

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## silicon or silicone

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## silliness

Spelling: the **y** of *silly* changes to an **i**.

---

## sincerely

Spelling: remember the second **e**.

---

## singular or plural verb?

As a rule, singular nouns and pronouns go with a singular verb and plural nouns and pronouns go with a plural verb. However, there are some exceptions to this rule in English. To find out more about them, look at the entries for collective noun, compound subject, number and they/their/theirs.

---

## situation

*Situation*, in the sense 'state of affairs' is often used in unnecessarily long-winded phrases: *This is a crisis situation*; *We are in a no-win situation*. *This is a crisis* and *we cannot win* are simpler and more elegant. Avoid using *situation* to mean 'problem': *the problem of homelessness* rather than: *the homelessness situation*.

---

## skein

This is pronounced [skane] to rhyme with *pain*. Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## skilful

Spelling: note the single **l**s.

---

## slander

See libel.

---

## sleigh

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## sleight

This is pronounced to rhyme with *height*. Spelling: remember **ei** not **ie**.

---

## smoulder

US spelling: *smolder*.

---

## sobriquet

This is a sophisticated word for nickname or unofficial name. The pronunciation reflects its French origin and is [so-**brick**-kay]. The US pronunciation of the first syllable is [soo]. Spelling: note the ending **-quet**.

---

## sociable

See social.

---



## **social *or* sociable**

See social.

---

## **soldier**

Spelling: note there is no **j** in it.

---

## **solecism *or* solipsism**

Spelling: note there is no **j** in it.

---

## **solemn**

Spelling: remember the **n**.

---

## **solipsism**

See solecism.

---

## **somersault**

Spelling: note the **o** and the single **m**.

---

## **sort**

See kind.

---

## **soulless**

Spelling: note the double **l**.

---

## **sovereign**

Spelling: note the **ei** and the **g**.

---

## spaghetti

Spelling: remember the **h**.

---

## speciality

US spelling: *specialty*.

---

## spectre

Spelling: note the ending **-re**, although the US spelling is **-er**.

---

## spelling rules

### 1. Doubling letters

Some people are unsure whether to double the last letter of a word when adding suffixes like **-ed**, **-ing**, or **-er** to the word. Below are a number of simple rules.

- Most short words of one syllable ending with a single consonant double the last letter:
  - tap – tapped
  - hit – hitting
  - shop – shopper
- Words ending with more than one consonant don't double the last letter:
  - thump – thumped
  - halt – halting
- Words of more than one syllable ending with a single consonant double the last letter if the word is stressed on the last syllable:
  - begin – beginner
  - commit – committed
  - occur – occurring
  - prefer – preferring

If the stress is not on the last syllable, but an earlier one, the last letter is not doubled:

- benefit – benefited
- gallop – galloping
- pardon – pardoned
- offer – offering

Exceptions:

- handicap – handicapped
- kidnap – kidnapper
- worship – worshipping
- Words of more than one syllable ending in **l** double the **l** even if the stress does not fall on the last syllable:
  - cancel – cancelled
  - travel – travelling
  - jewel – jeweller

(These words take a single **l** in US spelling). Exceptions:

- appealing
- paralleled
- Final consonants are not doubled before suffixes beginning with a consonant:
  - enrol – enrolment
  - commit – commitment
  - fulfil – fulfilment
  - prefer – preferment
  - quarrel – quarrelsome
  - rival – rivalry

## 2. Keep e?

Some people are unsure whether to keep the final silent **e** of words when adding suffixes like **-ed**, **-ing**, **-er**, or **-ly**.

- If the suffix begins with a vowel, the **e** is dropped:
  - hope – hoping
  - dive – diver
  - pursue – pursuing
  - celebrate – celebrated

Exception:

- age – ageing
- If the suffix begins with a consonant, the **e** is kept:
  - bare – barely
  - fine – finely
  - woe – woeful
  - refine – refinement
  - care – careless

Exceptions:

- argue – argument
- awe – awful
- due – duly
- true – truly
- whole – wholly

## 3. y or i?

Some people are unsure whether to change **y** at the end of a word to **i**, when adding **-ed**, **-ing**, or **-er**.

- Words ending in **y** and preceded by a vowel, keep the **y**:
  - key – keying
  - play – playing
  - annoy – annoying
- Words ending in **y** and preceded by a consonant, change the **y** to **i** when adding **-ed** or **-er**:
  - cry – cried
  - fly – flier
  - carry – carried
  - dusty – dustier

But keep the **y** when adding **-ing**:

- cry – crying
- fly – flying
- carry – carrying

#### 4. *-ful* or *-full*?

**Full** becomes **-ful** when added to the end of a word:

- beautiful
- joyful
- useful
- mouthful
- spoonful

Note also:

- fulfil
- fulfilment

But:

- fullness

#### 5. Adding *mis-* and *dis-*

When adding **mis-** or **dis-** to the beginning of a word, there is only one **s** unless the word itself begins with **s**:

- misheard
- disagree
- disappear
- misspelt
- disservice
- dissimilar

#### 6. Adding *in-* and *un-*

When adding **in-** or **un-** to the beginning of a word, there is only one **n** unless the word itself begins with **n**:

- inseparable
- unending
- innumerable
- unnecessary

### 7. *i before e except after c*

Most people know the rule *i before e except after c*. This rule works with many words, especially if the sound is **ee**:

- ceiling
- believe
- deceive
- niece
- receive
- shield
- siege

Exceptions (examples):

- seize
- protein
- weird
- species
- Keith
- Neil
- Sheila

If the sound is **ay** the spelling is always **ei**:

- freight
- neighbour
- weigh

### 8. Adding *-ly*

When **-ly** is added to a word ending in **y**, the **y** changes to an **i**:

- happy – happily
- necessary – necessarily

### 9. *-ize or -ise?*

In British English, many verbs can be spelt either **-ize** or **-ise**. **-ize** is the usual US spelling. Note capsized, prize (to value) which must be spelt **-ize**.

Words spelt **-ise** (note that these words can only be spelt **-ise**; there is no choice in the matter):

- nouns:

- compromise
- demise
- disguise
- enterprise
- exercise
- franchise
- merchandise
- revise
- surmise
- surprise
- verbs:
  - advertise
  - advise
  - apprise
  - arise
  - chastise
  - circumcise
  - comprise
  - compromise
  - demise
  - despise
  - devise
  - disguise
  - enfranchise
  - enterprise
  - excise
  - exercise
  - improvise
  - incise
  - merchandise
  - premise
  - prise (open)
  - revise
  - supervise
  - surmise
  - surprise
  - televise

### 10. *-able* or *-ible*?

It is not always easy to remember whether a word ends with **-able** or **-ible**. Most words end **-able**, and whenever new words are coined, they are usually spelt **-able**. There is no simple rule (it depends on the Greek or Latin word from which the word comes), but the set of commonly used words that end **-ible** is a fairly small one:

- accessible
- audible
- collapsible
- combustible
- compatible
- comprehensible
- contemptible
- convertible
- credible

- crucible
- defensible
- digestible
- discernible
- edible
- eligible
- fallible
- feasible
- flexible
- forcible
- gullible
- horrible
- inadmissible
- incorrigible
- incorruptible
- indelible
- indestructible
- indivisible
- inexhaustible
- inexpressible
- intelligible
- invincible
- irascible
- irrepresible
- irresistible
- legible
- negligible
- ostensible
- perceptible
- permissible
- plausible
- possible
- reducible
- reprehensible
- responsible
- reversible
- sensible
- susceptible
- tangible
- terrible
- visible

Most other adjectives end in **-able**.

---

## spiciness

Spelling: the **y** of *spicy* changes to an **i**.

---

## spinach

Spelling: there is no **t** before the **ch**.

---

## split infinitive

The infinitive is the basic form of a verb, with no added endings in English. For example, *come* in *Can you come?* is an infinitive. English often uses *to* with an infinitive, as in *I'd like to come*, and *to* has come to be regarded as part of the infinitive.

Grammarians in the 17th and 18th centuries, formulating the 'rules' of English grammar, based their views on the structure of Latin, which was considered to represent the high point of linguistic development. In Latin, the infinitive consists of a single word ('to come', for instance, is *venire*), which self-evidently cannot be interrupted by another word. These English grammarians therefore decided that the English two-word infinitive should not be interrupted by another word either, and their injunction against the *split infinitive* survives to the present time: 'Do not insert an adverb or adverbial phrase between *to* and the following verb'.

The tenuous basis of the ban has been pointed out often enough for most people to be aware of it, but the prejudice against the *split infinitive* seems to be firmly embedded in English speakers' psyche. So, should one split or not split.

Perhaps the most important point to make is that there are some contexts in which it is virtually impossible not to split the infinitive, and that in those cases you should go ahead and do so rather than produce a nonsensical sentence. For example, *We've been asked to more than triple our contribution*, although it contains a split infinitive, is at least a well-formed English sentence; *We've been asked more than to triple our contribution* is ungrammatical.

A particular danger of forcibly unsplitting an infinitive is that it can change the meaning of the sentence. For instance, *She asked me to kindly close the door* clearly indicates that she said, 'Kindly close the door'. If you eliminate the split infinitive you get either: *She asked me kindly to close the door*, which could mean something entirely different, or: *She kindly asked me to close the door*, which certainly does.

Apart from cases like this, where comprehensibility and clarity call for a split infinitive, splitting is a matter of personal preference. Do it if you want to, but be aware that it annoys some people. Try to avoid a very long adverbial phrase or string of adverbs between *to* and the verb, which generally produces an inelegant effect: *It has been decided to finally and with immediate effect close the swimming pool*.

Remember that in formal writing, where grammatical conservativeness is the norm, there is more of a case for not splitting infinitives than in everyday writing and speech. But even there, try to avoid the thumping unsplit infinitive with the adverb in front of the *to*, the sort which says 'Look at me, I'm not splitting the infinitive!': *The government has promised seriously to consider the proposals* draws attention to its own structure; *The government has promised to consider the proposals seriously* is structurally unobtrusive, and allows us to concentrate on its meaning. Take account of the rhythm and balance of the sentence when deciding whether to split the infinitive; don't just do it, or not do it, dogmatically.



Linguistic insecurity can lead people to avoid structures which they mistakenly think are split infinitives. There is no need, for instance, to contort *The talks are said to have completely collapsed* into *The talks are said completely to have collapsed*, because *completely* does not come between *to* and *have*, and this is therefore not an example of a split infinitive.

---

## spokesperson

See -person.

---

## sponsor

Spelling: note the ending **-or**.

---

## spoonful

Spelling: note the single **l**.

---

## sprightliness

Spelling: the **y** of *sprightly* changes to an **i**.

---

## squalid

Spelling: note the single **l**.

---

## squalor

Spelling: note the ending **-or**.

---

## staccato

Spelling: note the double **c**.

---

## stalactite or stalagmite

A **stalactite** is an icicle-shaped formation of lime that hangs down from a cave roof. A **stalagmite** is the opposite, and extends upwards like a pillar from a cave floor: A stalagmite grows higher as the water from a stalactite drips onto it. One way of remembering which is which is to remember **t** for top and **t** in *stalac tite*.

---

## stalagmite

See stalactite.

---

## stammer or stutter

To **stammer** is to speak with difficulty, hesitating, and repeating words: '*I can't—can't—don't know how to thank you,*' he stammered. To **stutter** is also to speak with difficulty, but typically involves repeating a single letter rather than a whole word: '*B-but you s-s-said you'd t-t-tell me,*' she stuttered.

---

## stanch or staunch

As a verb, this word can be spelled either way: *She managed to stanch (or staunch) the flow of blood.* As an adjective, however, only **staunch** is used: *He was a staunch supporter of the party.*

---

## Standard English

The form of English that in its grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and spelling system does not identify the speaker or the writer with a particular geographical area or social grouping. The accent associated with Standard English is known as 'received pronunciation' or RP.

---

## stationary or stationery

The form of English that in its grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and spelling system does not identify the speaker or the writer with a particular geographical area or social grouping. The accent associated with Standard English is known as 'received pronunciation' or RP.

---

## stationery

See stationary.

---

## status

The standard pronunciation, both in Britain and the USA, is [stay-tus], though [statt-us] is also used.

---

## staunch

See stanch.

---

## steadiness

Spelling: the **y** of *steady* changes to an **i**.

---

## stealth

Spelling: remember the **a**.

---

## sternness

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

## stickiness

Spelling: the **y** of *sticky* changes to an **i**.

---

## stiletto

Spelling: note the single **l** and double **t**.

---

## stinginess

Spelling: the **y** of *stingy* changes to an **i**.

---

## storey

Note that this word (a floor of a building) is spelled *story* in American English.

---

## straight *or* strait

Note that this word (a floor of a building) is spelled *story* in American English.

---

## strait

See straight.

---

## stress

The main emphasis, placed on any syllable of a spoken word. Stress patterns vary from word to word but follow certain rules.

---

## stupefy

Spelling: note the **e**, not **i** as in *stupid*.

---

## stupor

Spelling: note the ending **-or**.

---

## sturdiness

Spelling: the **y** of *sturdy* changes to an **i**.

---

## stutter

See stammer.

---

## stye *or* sty

This word (meaning a swelling on the eyelid) can be spelled either way.

---

## subject

The noun, noun phrase, or pronoun that the sentence is about. For example, *The black dog* in *The black dog chased the brown dog*, and *The man* in *The man was injured by tamping horses*.

---

## subjunctive

The subjunctive is a set of forms of a verb which express states that do not exist. There are two sorts of subjunctive in English: the present subjunctive and the past subjunctive. In form, the present subjunctive is the same as the infinitive, so the present subjunctive of *to be* is: *I be, you be, he/she/it be, we be, they be*. There is no *s* on the end of the third person singular: *he go; she leave; it have*.

The **present subjunctive** has three uses in modern English. First, it follows verbs, nouns or adjectives that express the idea of command, suggestion or possibility: *I suggested that he leave; It is my recommendation that she not be appointed; It is fitting that she resign*.

This use of the present subjunctive is common in American English. In British English it is more usual to use *should*: *I suggested that he should leave*, but it seems that the present subjunctive may be on the increase.

Second, it is used in formal English in clauses beginning with words such as *if; although; whether* and *lest*: *If that be the case, there is little more we can do; Tie her up securely, lest she escape*.

This use of the present subjunctive tends to sound stilted and old-fashioned, and in everyday speech and writing the indicative is usually used instead: *If that is the case...*, but again American English uses it more readily than British English.

Third, it is used in certain fixed phrases, such as *far be it from me; be that as it may; God save the Queen; come what may; suffice it to say; heaven forbid; perish the thought*.

The **past subjunctive** effectively relates only to the verb *to be*, where it takes the form *were*. It is used to express hypothetical states, and comes after the verbs *wish* and *suppose*, conjunctions such as *if; if only; as; though; whether*, and the phrases *would rather* and *would that*: *I wish she were here; If I were you, I'd resign; Would that he were still alive*.

It is widely used in everyday English, but in non-formal contexts it is often replaced by *was* in the first and third person singular: *I wish she was here*. In formal or literary English, the order of *if*-clauses can be reversed and the *if* omitted: *Were I you, I'd resign*.

---

## subordinate clause

In a sentence, a clause that is dependent on the main clause and cannot stand as a sentence on its own. A subordinate clause can relate to the main clause in an adjectival, an adverbial, or a noun way.

---

## subpoena

Spelling: remember the **oe**.

---

## subsidence

In both British and American English there are two pronunciations. One begins with a weak syllable like the beginning of *submit*, [sub-**sigh**-duhns]. The other has the stress on the first syllable, which is pronounced like the beginning of *submarine*, [**sub**-si-duhns].

---

## substantial or substantive

If a thing is **substantial** it is considerable or sizeable: *We need a substantial improvement in sales* (so that they are greater). If something is **substantive** it is real or actual: *We need a substantive improvement in sales* (not just a cosmetic improvement).

---

## substantive

See substantial.

---

## substitute or replace

See substantial.

---

## subtle

Spelling: remember the **b**.

---

## succeed

Spelling: remember the double **c**.

---

### **success**

Spelling: remember the double **c**.

---

### **succinct**

Spelling: remember the double **c**.

---

### **suddenness**

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

### **suede**

Spelling: remember the **ue**.

---

### **suffix**

A letter or group of letters added to the end of a word in order to show its tense or person: *-ed* in *passed*; *-es* in *goes*; to form the plural: *-ren* in *children*; to change the part of speech: *-ful* in *wonderful* (adjective); *wonderment* (noun); or form a new word: *-ist* in *sexist*. Common suffixes are *-ing*; *-ed*; *-ness*; *-less*; *-able*.

---

### **sullenness**

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

### **sulphate**

US spelling: *sulfate*.

---

### **sulphide**

US spelling: *sulfide*.

---

## **sulphur**

US spelling: *sulfur*.

---

## **superintendent**

Spelling: note the ending **-ent**.

---

## **superlative**

The maximum degree of an adjective or adverb, created by the use of *most* or an *-est* ending: *largest; greatest; most surprising; most speedily; most unusually*.

---

## **supersede**

Spelling: note especially the ending **-sede**, not *-cede* like *precede*. The word derives from the Latin *supersedere*, meaning 'to sit above', and so is related to words such as *sedentary* and *sedan*.

---

## **supine**

See prostrate.

---

## **suppress**

Spelling: remember the double **p**.

---

## **surfeit**

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## **surliness**



Spelling: the **y** of *surly* changes to an **i**.

---

## susceptible

Spelling: note the **sc**.

---

## swap or swop

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## swath

(as in cutting hay). The main British pronunciation is [swoth], to rhyme with *moth*, although [sworth] is also heard. The alternative noun *swathe*, and the verb *swathe* (as in wrapping or bandaging) are both pronounced by British and American speakers to rhyme with *bathe*.

---

## swop

See swap.

---

## syllable

A unit of a word, when spoken, that contains a vowel sound or a vowel-like sound. *Photo* has two syllables; *photograph* has three syllables; *photography* has four syllables.

---

## syllabus

Spelling: remember the **y**.

---

## symmetry

Spelling: remember the **y** and the double **m**.

---

## **sympathy *or* empathy**

Spelling: remember the **y** and the double **m**.

---

## **syndrome**

Spelling: remember the **y**.

---

## **synonym**

Spelling: remember the two **ys**.

---

## **syrup**

Spelling: remember the **y**.

---

## **tableau**

Spelling: remember the ending **-eau**.

---

## **taboo *or* tabu**

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## **tacit**

Spelling: remember **c**, not **s**.

---

## **tailless**

Spelling: remember the double **l**.

---

## **taramasalata**

Spelling: remember no double letters.

---

### **tardiness**

Spelling: the **y** of *tardy* changes to an **i**.

---

### **targeted**

Spelling: note the single **t**, which is because the syllable is unstressed.

---

### **tariff**

Spelling: remember the single **r** and double **f**.

---

### **tarot**

Spelling: note the ending **-ot**.

---

### **tarragon**

Spelling: note the double **r**.

---

### **tassel**

Spelling: note the ending **-el**.

---

### **tastiness**

Spelling: the **y** of *tasty* changes to an **i**.

---

### **tattoo**

Spelling: note the double **t**.

---

## tautology

This is the name for a particular fault in expression, the unnecessary duplication of an idea using different words. In the phrase: *the former musical glories of an earlier time*, *former* is not needed; it means 'of an earlier time'. In the phrase: *the circumstances surrounding her death*, the word *circumstances* already means *conditions surrounding*, so it should be followed simply by *of*. Here are some further examples.

a new innovation; an amazing marvel; return the book back to the library; at this moment in time; the one single reason; the single most quoted reason; make a beeline straight there; an added bonu.

It is noticeable that many tautological expressions are clichés. They come ready made along tired old grooves of expression. The reader may well wonder whether tired expression means tired ideas.

Some tautologies arise because the writer does not know the precise meaning of a word. An *innovation*, for example, is a 'new' idea or way of doing something, not just an idea or practice.

It is quite easy to introduce tautologies into a piece of writing when you are searching among various similar phrases for a way to express an idea, so it is wise to look out for them when you are checking a piece of writing.

---

## temporary

Spelling: remember the **ar**.

---

## tenet

Spelling: note the single **n**.

---

## tense

The form a verb takes to indicate action in the present, past, or future.

---

## tepid

Spelling: note the single **p**.

---

## terrific

Spelling: remember the double r and single f.

---

## thankfully

The use of *thankfully* to mean 'fortunately', 'let us be thankful (that)', is still disliked by many people, although it is becoming accepted. In this sense it is separated from the rest of the sentence by a comma. *Thankfully they went to their grandfather's that day* means that they went there full of gratitude; *Thankfully, they went to their grandfather's that day* means that it was fortunate that they did so; *They went to their grandfather's, thankfully, that day* means it was fortunate that they went on that particular day.

---

## their or they're

**Their** means 'of them', while **they're** is short for 'they are': *That's their house, over there, and they're in the garden right now.* See also they/their/theirs.

---

## thence

See hence.

---

## they're

See their.

---

## they/their/theirs

**They** is the third person plural pronoun, which means that it refers to more than one person. In the second half of the 20th century, however, it has become increasingly common to use it as an indefinite pronoun which could refer to just one person.

There is a range of indefinite words in English – *anybody, anyone; everybody, everyone; nobody, no one; somebody, someone; either, neither, each* – which traditionally have been used with the masculine singular pronoun: *If anyone finds my glasses, could he let me know?* In this role, the masculine pronoun notionally has an indefinite function, covering women as well as men.

However, it has come more and more to be seen as invidious to use a masculine pronoun to refer to women, and users of the language have been seeking an alternative. *He or she*, and *she or he*, are cumbersome, especially if they need to be repeated several times, and anyway they give precedence to males or females.

Increasingly *they*, together with its possessive forms *their* and *theirs*, is becoming the preferred option: *If anyone finds my glasses, could they let me know?*

It is not yet completely established in standard English, and some people still object to it, but its usefulness is widely recognized, and it seems likely that in due course it will become generally accepted.

Remember that the third person plural possessive adjective is *their*: *They've sold their house*. Don't confuse it with the adverb *there*, 'in that place' or with *they're*, which is the shortened form of 'they are'.

The third person plural possessive pronoun is *theirs* (not their's): *If this is theirs, they'd better take it*.

---

### **this (Tuesday, etc)**

Beware of possible ambiguity when using **this** with days of the week. *This Tuesday* will usually be taken to mean 'the Tuesday of this week', but if the time of speaking is midway between two Tuesdays, *this Tuesday* might refer to the one passed or the one to come. The same is true of **next** and **last**. If said on a Sunday, *next Tuesday* might be the day after tomorrow or the Tuesday of the following week; on a Thursday, *last Tuesday* could be the day before yesterday or the Tuesday of the previous week. Avoid using these terms in writing, as you do not know when it may be read; give the date.

---

### **threshold**

Spelling: note the single **h** in the middle.

---

### **thriftiness**

Spelling: the **y** of *thrifty* changes to an **i**.

---

### **tidiness**

Spelling: the **y** of *tidy* changes to an **i**.

---

### **timid or timorous**

Spelling: the **y** of *tidy* changes to an **i**.

---

## timorous

See timid.

---

## titillate

Spelling: remember the single **t** and double **l**.

---

## tobacco

Spelling: remember the single **b** and double **c**.

---

## toboggan

Spelling: remember the single **b** and double **g**.

---

## tomato

Spelling: note that there is no **e** at the end.

---

## torpor

Spelling: note the ending **-or**.

---

## torque

Spelling: note the ending **-que**.

---

## tortuous or torturous

If something is **tortuous** it is full of twists and turns or long and complicated: *We climbed the tortuous path up the hill; The negotiations for the release of the hostages were protracted and tortuous.* If a thing is **torturous** it relates to torture: *Families of the trapped men waited in torturous silence for news.*

---

## **torturous**

See tortuous.

---

## **touchiness**

Spelling: the **y** of *touchy* changes to an **i**.

---

## **toward or towards**

Spelling: the **y** of *touchy* changes to an **i**.

---

## **Tracey or Tracy**

This is usually a feminine name, but can also be a masculine name. Either spelling can be used for a girl or a boy.

---

## **trait**

The standard British pronunciation is [tray], the final **t** in the spelling being silent as in the original French word. However, [trayt], with the final **t** pronounced, is also an acceptable pronunciation. It is the only US pronunciation.

---

## **transcend**

Spelling: remember the **c**.

---

## **transferred**

Spelling: note the double **r**, unlike *transfer*.

---

## **transhipment**

Spelling: note there is only one **s**.

---



## transitive verb

A verb that can take a direct object: *Alison loved her cat*. The action passes directly from the subject to the object noun or pronoun. A verb that cannot take a direct object is an intransitive verb.

---

## transparent

The most common British pronunciation has the stress on the middle syllable, which is pronounced like the beginning of *sparrow*. Some people pronounce the first syllable [trɑːn] and some pronounce the second syllable [peər]. The US pronunciation starts with [trɑːn] and ends with [erənt].

---

## trauma

Two pronunciations are standard in Britain, [**trɒr**-mer], the most usual, and standard in medical English, and [**trɔw**-mer].

---

## tremor

Spelling: note the ending **-or**.

---

## trestle

Spelling: remember the **t**.

---

## tricycle

Spelling: remember **i** then **y**.

---

## trooper or trouper

Use **trooper** if you mean a soldier. Use **trouper** if you mean a loyal or dependable person. See also troop.

---

## troop or troupe

Remember that **troop** means a group of people or animals. Use **troupe** if you mean a company of actors or performers. See also trooper.

---

### **troupe**

See troop.

---

### **trouper**

See trooper.

---

### **truculent**

This is pronounced [**truck**-yer-luhnt] and rhymes with *succulent*.

---

### **truism**

Spelling: note there is no **e** after the **u**.

---

### **truly**

Spelling: note there is no **e** after the **u**.

---

### **trustworthiness**

Spelling: the **y** of *trustworthy* changes to an **i**.

---

### **tryst**

Spelling: note the **y**.

---

### **tsar**

See czar.

---

## tubiness

Spelling: the **y** of *tubby* changes to an **i**.

---

## twelfth

Spelling: remember the **f**.

---

## type

See kind.

---

## tyranny

Spelling: remember the **y**.

---

## tyre

US spelling: *tire*.

---

## tzar

See czar.

---

## ugliness

Spelling: the **y** of *ugly* changes to an **i**.

---

## ukulele

Spelling: remember the two **us** and two **es**.

---

## umbilical

The standard pronunciation is [um **-bill**-ickle] with the stress on the second syllable. [Umbill-**lie**-kle] is also used, if the word is not before a noun.

---

## underrated

Spelling: note the double r.

---

## unduly

Spelling: note that there is no **e** after the second **u**.

---

## uneasiness

Spelling: the **y** of *uneasy* changes to an **i**.

---

## unevenness

Spelling: remember the double **n**.

---

## unfriendliness

Spelling: the **y** of *unfriendly* changes to an **i**.

---

## uninterested

See disinterested.

---

## unique

**Unique** means 'being the only one of its kind, without equal or like'. It is sometimes used with adverbs like *very*, *more*, *rather*, *somewhat*, or *comparatively*, which dilute its meaning to 'unusual' or 'exceptional'. Many people object to this, and it is best to avoid it, especially in formal writing.

---

## United Kingdom

See Britain.

---

### unlike

This can precede a noun or a pronoun: *She is quite unlike her brother; A book unlike any other.* It can also introduce a whole clause: *Unlike those in poorer countries, people here seldom go hungry.* Do not say *Unlike in poorer countries, people here seldom go hungry*, as *people* is not being compared to anything.

Make sure that the things said to be unlike each other can actually be compared: a sentence such as *Unlike Colin, Jacky's talent is for business* compares *Colin* with *Jacky's talent*, not with *Jacky* herself. Use *Unlike Colin's, Jacky's talent is for business* or, more elegantly, *Unlike Colin, Jacky has a talent for business.*

---

### unnamed

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

### unnatural

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

### unnecessary

Spelling: note the double **n**, single **c** and double **s**.

---

### unnerving

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

### unsightliness

Spelling: the **y** of *unsightly* changes to an **i**.

---

### unskilful

Spelling: note the single **l**s. US spelling: *unskillful*.

---

## **unsociable or unsocial**

Spelling: note the single **l**s. US spelling: *unskillful*.

---

## **unsocial**

See unsociable.

---

## **until**

Spelling: remember only one **l** (unlike *till*).

---

## **unusual**

Spelling: note that there is no **h** after the **s**.

---

## **unwanted or unwonted**

Someone or something **unwanted** is not wanted: *What do you do with your unwanted presents?* Something **unwonted** is out of the ordinary or unusual: *That was an unwonted liberty on your part.*

---

## **unwonted**

See unwanted.

---

## **upper case**

See case, upper and lower.

---

## **Uranus**

In British English the traditional pronunciation [yer-**eh**-nus] is giving way to a pronunciation with the stress on the first syllable [**yure**-ernus]. The US pronunciation is [yure-**eh**-nus].

---

## used to

*Used to* expresses the idea of something we did in the past but no longer do: *When I was a child, we used to go to Scarborough for our holidays.*

Using *used to* in questions and negative sentences can present problems. The usual way of turning a sentence like *He used to snore* into a question is with the word *did*. This is straightforward in spoken English, but there are two possible ways of writing it. The more logical is: *Did he use to snore?* The alternative, *Did he used to snore?*, is becoming more accepted, but it still strikes many people as odd. You can also make a question by reversing the word order: *Used he to snore?* But this is becoming less common.

The usual way of making *used to* negative is with *didn't*. But again, there's a problem with how to write it. *He didn't use to snore* is more widely acceptable than *He didn't used to snore*. You can also put *not* after *used*, although this is becoming less common: *He used not to snore*. The contracted written form is *usedn't*, not *usen't*. You can avoid any difficulty by using *never*. *He never used to snore*.

For negative questions, you can say: *Didn't he use (or used) to snore?* or *Usedn't he to snore?* (the uncontracted form of this, *Used he not to snore?*, is rather pompous and old-fashioned).

---

## utilize

Avoid using *utilize* to mean simply 'use'. *Utilize* is best confined to the sense 'put something to an unusual or unexpected practical use': *The children made a tent, utilizing the clothes-line and some old curtains*. Even in this sense, it is nearly always possible, and more elegant, to say *use*.

---

## vaccinate

Spelling: remember the double **c**.

---

## vacillate

Spelling: remember the single **c** and double **l**.

---

## **vacuum**

Spelling: remember the double **u**.

---

## **vague**

Spelling: note the ending **-gue**.

---

## **valet**

Spelling: note the ending **-et**.

---

## **vanilla**

Spelling: note the single **n** and double **l**.

---

## **vaporous**

Spelling: note that there is no **u** before the **r**.

---

## **variegated**

Spelling: remember **e** in the middle, not **a**.

---

## **vegetable**

Spelling: remember the second **e**.

---

## **venal**

See venial.

---

## **vendor**



US spelling: *vender*.

---

## venial or venal

A **venial** offence is a slight or excusable one: *Some dogs are punished for relatively venial offences.* A **venal** offence is a serious one that involves corruption and bribery: *The candidate committed the venal offence of bribing colleagues to vote for him.*

---

## venue

Spelling: remember the ending **-ue**.

---

## veranda or verandah

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## verb

This is a grammatical part of speech for what someone does: *I work*, experiences: *I feel silly*, or is: *I am old*. Verbs involve the grammatical categories of number, mood, and tense. Many verbs are formed with affixes: *prison, imprison; light, enlighten; pure, purify*. Some words function as both nouns and verbs: *crack; run*, as both adjectives and verbs: *clean*, and as nouns, adjectives, and verbs: *foul*.

---

## vermilion

Spelling: note there is only one **l**.

---

## veterinary

Spelling: note the **er** which is often not pronounced.

---

## vice

(meaning a tool). US spelling: *vise*.

---

## vicious

Spelling: note **ci**, not **sh**.

---

## victuals

Spelling: remember the **c**.

---

## vigorous

Spelling: note that there is no **u** before the **r**.

---

## vilify

The stress is on the first syllable, which is pronounced like the beginning of *village*.  
Spelling: note the single **l**.

---

## villain or villein

Spelling: remember that a **villain** is a bad person, and a **villein** is a serf in a feudal country.

---

## villein

See villain.

---

## vineyard

Spelling: remember the **e**, as in *vine*.

---

## violoncello

Spelling: note that it is not *violin-*.

---

## virulent

Spelling: note the single **r**.

---

## viscount

Spelling: remember the **s**.

---

## visor or vizor

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## Vivian

Strictly speaking this is a masculine name, with an alternative spelling *Vyvyan*. The feminine forms are *Vivien*, *Vivienne*, or *Vivianne*. However, while the feminine forms are not used for men, all the forms are now used for women.

---

## vizor

See visor.

---

## vol-au-vent

This word comes from the French and literally means 'flight in the wind'.

---

## vouch

See avow.

---

## vowel

Any of the five letters of the English alphabet *a*; *e*; *i*; *o*; *u*.

---

## waive

Note the spelling of this word: *I waived my rights to the house*. Do not confuse it with *wave* (as in, for example, *I waved my hand* or *the waves of the sea*).

---

## wake, waken

See awake, awaken.

---

## walnut

Spelling: note the single **l**.

---

## wanness

The stress is on the first syllable, which is pronounced to rhyme with *Ron*[**won**-nuhs]. Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

## wantonness

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

## wariness

Spelling: the **y** of *wary* changes to an **i**.

---

## was or were

In the ordinary past tense of the verb *to be*, **was** is the first and third person singular: *I was late* and **were** is the second person singular and the plural: *You were right*. It is not acceptable in standard English to use *were* for the first and third person singular: *I were late*, and *was* for the second person singular and the plural: *You was right*.

In the past subjunctive, however, the situation is more fluid. Historically the past subjunctive of *be* is **were** for all persons, singular and plural: *I wish she were here*; *Suppose I were rich*; *If only they weren't so expensive*. It is quite common, though, to use *was* instead of *were* for the first and third person singular: *I wish she was here*; *Suppose I was rich*. This is perfectly acceptable in colloquial English, but in formal

writing it is better to stick to *were*. Remember that the fixed phrase *as it were* cannot be changed – never *as it was*. See also subjunctive.

---

## wave

See waive.

---

## weariness

Spelling: the **y** of *weary* changes to an **i**.

---

## wearisome

Spelling: the **y** of *weary* changes to an **i**.

---

## Wednesday

Spelling: remember the **d**.

---

## weightiness

Spelling: the **y** of *weighty* changes to an **i**.

---

## weir

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## weird

Spelling: note the **ei**.

---

## were

See was.

---

## whence

See hence.

---

## whetstone

Spelling: note the **h**.

---

## which or that

*Which* and *that* are both relative pronouns: they introduce relative clauses. The main difference between them is that while **which** can introduce both restrictive relative clauses: *The zebra which the lion picked on was clearly sick*, and non-restrictive relative clauses: *The zebra, which lives in southern Africa, is related to the horse*, **that** can introduce only restrictive relative clauses: *The zebra that the lion picked on was clearly sick*.

*Which* and *that* are equally acceptable in restrictive relative clauses; *that* is perhaps the less formal of the two.

*Which* can be used after a preposition: *Is this the coat for which you paid 300?*, but *that* cannot (you cannot say *Is this the coat for that you paid 300?* – although you can say *Is this the coat that you paid 300 for?*).

*Which* can refer to both nouns and pronouns: *This is the one which I prefer* and whole sentences: *He's off sick, which is rather a shame*, but *that* can refer only to nouns and pronouns: *This is the one that I prefer*.

When two separate relative clauses in the same sentence refer to the same noun, they should both be introduced by either *which* or *that* (or by *who*, if the noun refers to a person). *Which* is perhaps preferable to *that* in these parallel clauses: *This is the system which Parsloe invented, and which has been used in the service for over twenty years*. Don't mix *which* clauses with *that* clauses: *This is the system that Parsloe invented, and which has been used in the service for over twenty years* is not to be recommended.

Take care not to begin a relative clause with *and which* when there was no previous *which* clause for the *and* to relate to: *This is the system invented by Parsloe, and which has been used in the service for over twenty years* is not grammatical.

---

## while and whilst

*Which* and *that* are both relative pronouns: they introduce relative clauses. The main difference between them is that while **which** can introduce both restrictive relative

clauses: *The zebra which the lion picked on was clearly sick*, and non-restrictive relative clauses: *The zebra, which lives in southern Africa, is related to the horse*, **that** can introduce only restrictive relative clauses: *The zebra that the lion picked on was clearly sick*.

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Take care not to begin a relative clause with *and which* when there was no previous *which* clause for the *and* to relate to: *This is the system invented by Parsloe, and which has been used in the service for over twenty years* is not grammatical.

---

## whir or whirr

This word can be spelled either way but in American English *whir* is preferred.

---

## whisky or whiskey

**Whisky** is the spelling for Scotch whisky, while **whiskey** is the spelling for Irish, and also the US spelling.

---

## whither

This word (meaning 'where to') is easy to misspell. Remember the **h**, as in *where*, and do not confuse it with *wither* which means 'to dry up'.

---

## whizz or whiz

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## wholly

This word (meaning 'completely') is easy to misspell. Do not confuse it with *holy* (meaning 'sacred').

---

## whooping

(as in *whooping cough*). Spelling: remember the **w**.

---

## who orwhom

**Who** is the subject of a verb: *Who said that?* **Whom** is the object of a verb or preposition: *To whom can we turn?*

So far so good. But *whom* is quite a formal word, and many people feel uncomfortable using it in ordinary contexts.

There are some circumstances in which you can avoid it. In questions, it is acceptable to use *who* instead: *Who have you told?* And in questions ending with a preposition, it is preferable to use *who*: *Who were you talking to?* (It would sound very stilted to ask *Whom were you talking to?* or *To whom were you talking?*).

It is sometimes possible to use *that* instead of *whom*: *He is a man that you can trust.*

And in non-formal contexts you can simply leave out the *whom*: *He is a man you can trust.*

People who are aware of the 'correctness' of *whom* can be tempted to use it in circumstances where it does not belong. This is particularly common where there is a short parenthetical clause: *A man who I had supposed was dead* is correct, *A man whom I had supposed was dead* is not. If you take out the parenthetical clause (here, *I had supposed*), you can see that *who* is the subject of the verb *was*, so it cannot be *whom*.

There is also a tendency to use *whom* as the complement of the verb *to be*. This should be resisted: *Do you realize who I am?* is right, *Do you realize whom I am?* is wrong.

---

## who's

See whose.



---

## whose or who's

See whose.

---

## wildebeest

Spelling: note **ee**, not **ea**.

---

## wilful

Spelling: note the single **l**s. US spelling: *willful*.

---

## wiliness

Spelling: the **y** of *wily* changes to an **i**.

---

## wiriness

Spelling: the **y** of *wiry* changes to an **i**.

---

## -wise

This suffix originally meant 'in this manner or way', and formed words such as *slantwise*; *crosswise*; *otherwise*. In recent years it has often been used to mean 'in this respect', 'as regards': *Moneywise*, *the job's much better, although it's not as interesting*. This is useful and acceptable in informal speech, although some people dislike it. Writingwise, avoid it.

---

## wistaria or wisteria

This word can be spelled either way.

---

## wither

See whither.

---

## withhold

Spelling: note the two **hs**.

---

## woke, woken

See awake, awaken.

---

## woman

See girl, lady.

---

## wondrous

Spelling: note that there is no **e** after the **d**.

---

## woodenness

Spelling: note the double **n**.

---

## woollen

Spelling: note the double **l**. US spelling: *woolen*.

---

## woolliness

Spelling: note the double **l**, and the **i**.

---

## wrack

See rack.

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## wraith

Spelling: remember the **w**.

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## wrath

The standard current British pronunciation is [roth], but some older well educated people say [rawth]. The US pronunciation is [rath], to rhyme with *Kath*.

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## wreak

Spelling: remember the **w**.

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## wretch

This word (meaning a pitiable person) is easy to misspell. Do not confuse it with *retch* (meaning to strain as if to vomit).

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## xenophobia

Spelling: remember that it begins with **x**, not **z**.

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## xerox

Spelling: remember that it begins with **x**, not **z**.

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## Xmas

This abbreviation has a very limited range of acceptable use. There is really no reason to use it in speech, as it is no shorter than *Christmas*, and it should not be used in formal writing. Many Christians dislike it, although the **X** is not just an arbitrary letter but represents *chi*, the initial letter of Christ's name in Greek. It is probably best to think of **Xmas** as an abbreviation like *Thurs* or *Fri*, and avoid using it anywhere you would write *Thursday* or *Friday* in full.

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## xylophone

Spelling: remember that it begins with **x**, not **z**.

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## yacht

Spelling: note the **ach**.

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## yearn

Spelling: remember the **ea**.

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## yeoman

Spelling: remember the **eo**.

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## yoghurt, yoghurt or yogurt

This word can be spelled in all three ways. The standard British pronunciation has a first syllable that rhymes with *jog*. The second syllable is weak, like the end of *nugget*. The US pronunciation start with [yo] as in *yo-yo*.

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## yoke

See yolk.

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## yolk

This word (meaning the yellow part of an egg) is easy to misspell. Do not confuse it with *yoke*, which is what joins a pair of oxen together, or part of a dress.

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## you're

See your.

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## your or you're

See your.

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## yours

**Yours** is a pronoun. It means 'the one(s) belonging to you': *Is this car yours?*  
Remember, it's *yours*, not *your's*.

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## zaniness

Spelling: the **y** of *zany* changes to an **i**.

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## zealous

Spelling: remember the **ea**, as in *jealous*.

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## zephyr

Spelling: note the **ph** and the **y**.

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## zoology

Both [zoe-**oll**-ogy] and [zoo-**oll**-ogy] are standard pronunciations. Purists prefer the first, the beginning of which rhymes with *toe*.

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## zucchini

The US word for *courgette*. Spelling: note the **cch**.