

# Grammatically CORRECT

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*The* **WRITER'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE**

*to punctuation, spelling,  
style, usage and grammar*

**A N N E   S T I L M A N**

# Grammatically CORRECT

*The* **WRITER'S ESSENTIAL GUIDE** *to punctuation,  
spelling, style, usage and grammar*

In a world where clarity reigns supreme, your writing must be smooth, clear and as graceful as it is concise. Fortunately, being grammatically correct needn't be difficult. *Grammatically Correct: The Writer's Essential Guide to Punctuation, Spelling, Style, Usage and Grammar* is easy to use; it presents information in a way that is easy to access; and, most of all, it's comprehensive.

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- **Punctuation**—Learn how the use—and misuse—of punctuation can affect the clarity and tone of your work.
- **Spelling**—Learn why, even with computerized spell-checkers, writers still must know the rules of spelling, hyphenation and capitalization.
- **Structure**—Learn how to make sentences flow more logically and how to keep writing concise.
- **Style**—Discover ways to avoid wordiness, clumsiness and poor organization.
- **Usage**—Delve into issues such as active vs. passive voice.
- **Grammar**—Learn to avoid frequent stumbling blocks.

*Grammatically Correct* offers practical instruction and exercises, and examples that show how incorrect usage can alter your meaning. It not only covers writing rules, but also advises you on developing a smooth and graceful style. Use *Grammatically Correct* and you'll go beyond the mechanics: You'll learn how to write well.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anne Stilman has been a professional editor for more than 10 years. She teaches seminars in copyediting and technical writing, and has been a guest lecturer for writers' organizations.

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**WRITER'S DIGEST BOOKS**

CINCINNATI, OHIO

*To Greg,*

*Who helped me get the idea off the ground,  
provided suggestions, reality checks and a laser printer,  
and convinced me to work a little nonsense into the examples.*

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## P R E F A C E

A question that might reasonably greet the appearance of yet another handbook on English usage is, does the world really need one more? Presumably every author writing on a well-covered topic believes he or she has something different to contribute, and I am no exception. Many of the publications available on this subject are nothing short of excellent, and some of them delve into topics and levels of analysis not addressed here. I felt, though, that there was a niche for a book that might be seen in some ways as more useable—if less scholarly or broad-ranging—than much of what is already on the shelves.

For one thing, I've sought to liven up what can be a somewhat dusty subject by excerpting passages from very quotable literary works, both classic and modern. Academic explanations of how to use a certain punctuation mark or stylistic technique are all very well, but a "real-life" illustration can be a lot more convincing—and entertaining. My thanks here to all those authors whose work I have cited.

Second, in order to make things a bit more challenging, much of the information is presented in the form of test-yourself exercises. That is, rather than just giving examples of rights and wrongs, many sections contain problem words or sentences that the reader can work through before checking the answers or suggested revisions. Such a hands-on approach is often the most effective way of getting knowledge to stick, as it gives readers a chance to recognize and correct their own errors.

Finally, and most importantly, I have tried to steer a middle course between too little and too much, covering the necessary topics in sufficient detail while avoiding an overly earnest tone. Obviously no single book on this subject can meet everyone's needs, but many lie too close to either end of the spectrum to be fully helpful. At the low end are those that are outright superficial, stating flat do's and don'ts without providing a sense of proportion, and leaving readers confused or unsatisfied. Those at the high end, however may cover the subject with such thoroughness as to be overwhelming.



Readers may wish to know when to say *I* and when *me*, when to use *which* and when to use *that*, when to apply the semicolon, when the colon and when the dash. But many of them wish to know all this without having it explained through intimidating terminology and scholarly rules.

That is the premise on which I have based this book. To a large extent, one doesn't need a profound understanding of grammar in order to apply it: The world is filled with articulate individuals who have no aspirations to be linguistics scholars but simply want to learn *how* to do something the right way and get on with it. With this type of reader in mind, I have put together a book that steers clear of jargon and theory, focusing instead on practical strategies and intuitive explanations. A few terminology definitions are unavoidable, but in no case is an explanation presented solely in terms of grammatical constructs. The examples and exercises are designed to show what ambiguities or misinterpretations can result if the rules are not followed. In cases where there is more than one acceptable way to do something, my approach is not to prescribe one over another, but simply to describe the options.

This book is not as comprehensive as some of the others out there because I have chosen to concentrate on those areas that I know, from my years as an editor, to be the ones where writers are likeliest to need help. Many aspects of the language are intuitively understood by almost everybody, and it seems a waste of people's time to review what they are almost certain to already know. Those style guides that take the approach of "leave nothing out" are unquestionably the right choice for anyone learning English as a second language or with an interest in acquiring an academic understanding of how the language works. The readership I am envisioning, however, consists of individuals who already know English well and just want some specific answers on tricky topics. As it is, I realize that many readers will already have a firm handle on much of the material presented here, but I have attempted to provide answers to—or at least reassurance on—the most probable questions.

The book is organized as follows: Part One deals with spelling in a broad sense: hard-to-spell words, frequently confused homonyms, spelling variations and hyphenation. Part Two looks at the complexity and irregularity of English vocabulary: words that are frequently

confused with others or are used in the wrong way, or that are often mangled in their plural or negative forms. Part Three tackles the bugbear of punctuation, describing the role of each mark in achieving clarity and affecting tone, and showing how misuses can lead to ambiguity or misinterpretation. Part Four looks at grammar issues that systematically present difficulty: agreement of subject and verb, parallel construction, positioning of modifiers and use of pronouns; it also provides a brief review of some conventions that are sometimes taken too seriously. And finally, Part Five moves on to style issues, ranging from relatively mechanical aspects such as the use of capital letters and italics, to determining appropriate sentence length and avoiding a biased tone.

A perspective I have tried to maintain throughout is that knowing the rules of the language does not mean applying them rigidly and unthinkingly. For one thing, these rules are not carved in stone—a glance at any style guide of another era would show how significantly attitudes to language can and do change. More importantly, writing is a combination of science and art. The guidelines outlined in this handbook are concerned with the former: They are the tools you need in order to be able to express your ideas unambiguously and elegantly. To go beyond mere correctness, however, you must know when to accommodate your style to the expectations of your audience; when to bend a convention to capture a certain effect; when to go with common idiom instead of the rule book. Anyone armed with a pen or a keyboard can write. Good writing is achieved by those who understand innovation, creativity and the needs of their readers.

Anne Stilman

# Spelling

In this age of online dictionaries and other high-tech writing aids, need authors concern themselves with the details of spelling? For some, the advent of the word processor has relegated the typewriter practically to the status of the quill pen, and the most execrable speller can look good simply by running a spell-check on the finished document before hitting "Print."

The problem is, though, this isn't always the case. There is no denying the value of electronic dictionaries, but relying on them exclusively is risky because the English language just has too many twists. Most spell-check programs lack the sophistication to detect misuse of homonyms (would yours amend *Their maybe moor then won weigh two rite sum words?*), and if used unthinkingly can even introduce errors (witness the concert program that promised a performance of Beethoven's *Erotica* symphony). Some will recognize only one form of a word that can be spelled two ways, and will annoyingly "correct" already valid spellings. The dictionaries may themselves contain errors; after all, some human had to input what went into them, and there is no guaranteeing that accidental typos or outright spelling mistakes didn't occur along the way. And, of course—unthinkable as it may be to some—not everyone works on a word processor.

Hence the need for basic spelling skills remains, and is the focus of this chapter. The information that follows won't turn a poor speller into a good one, but can help alert the reasonably competent speller to some nuances and common pitfalls. It covers the topic in a broad sense, including aspects such as acceptable variations and appropriate use of hyphenation. A good writer is hardly expected to know the spelling of every word, but should have an eye for when something doesn't look quite right, and the common sense to reach for the dictionary if there's any doubt.

---

# Misspellings

## COMMONLY MISPELLED WORDS

### *Exercise*

The following list presents some words that many writers get wrong. Correct as many as you can without referring to a dictionary. If you caught the commonly misspelled word in the heading above, you're off to a good start.

abcess	diaphram	idiosyncracy	overlayed
accessable	diaresis	infinitesimal	paraphenalia
accomodate	diptheria	indispensible	passtime
aquisition	disasterous	innoculate	permissable
asterix	ecstasy	interruptable	perjorative
auxiliary	eminant	jackknifed	perogative
barbituate	epitomy	knowledgable	perseverence
bellweather	explanation	langour	Phillippines
boundry	fallable	liason	playwrite
Brittania	Febuary	loathesome	pronounciation
committment	flourescent	maintainance	quadriped
compatable	forgiveable	manouver	relevent
concensus	fuschia	mischievious	respondant
conjested	geneology	neccesary	seperate
consise	<i>grand dame</i>	noticable	silouette
contraversial	gutteral	<i>object d'art</i>	sympatico
deductable	hemorrhage	occurance	threshhold
desireable	hierarchial	opthamologist	underly

## Answers

<sup>s</sup> ab <sup>^</sup> cess	<sup>g</sup> diaph <sup>^</sup> ram	<sup>s</sup> idiosyncra <sup>^</sup> ey	<sup>i</sup> overla <sup>^</sup> yed
<sup>i</sup> access <sup>^</sup> able	<sup>e</sup> diares <sup>^</sup> is	<sup>i</sup> infinites <sup>^</sup> mal	<sup>r</sup> paraphen <sup>^</sup> alia
<sup>m</sup> accom <sup>^</sup> odate	<sup>h</sup> diph <sup>^</sup> theria	<sup>a</sup> indispens <sup>^</sup> ible	passtime
<sup>c</sup> aquis <sup>^</sup> ition	disasterous	innoculate	<sup>i</sup> permiss <sup>^</sup> able
<sup>sk</sup> aster <sup>^</sup> ix	<sup>s</sup> ecsta <sup>^</sup> ey	<sup>i</sup> interrupt <sup>^</sup> able	perjorative
<sup>i</sup> auxil <sup>^</sup> ary	<sup>e</sup> emin <sup>^</sup> ant	<sup>k</sup> jack <sup>^</sup> nifed	<sup>r</sup> perog <sup>^</sup> ative
<sup>r</sup> barbitu <sup>^</sup> ate	<sup>e</sup> epitomy <sup>^</sup>	<sup>e</sup> knowledg <sup>^</sup> able	<sup>a</sup> persever <sup>^</sup> ence
bellweath <sup>^</sup> er	explanation	<sup>uo</sup> lang <sup>^</sup> eur	Phillippines
<sup>a</sup> bound <sup>^</sup> ry	<sup>i</sup> fall <sup>^</sup> able	<sup>i</sup> liason <sup>^</sup>	<sup>ght</sup> playw <sup>^</sup> rite
<sup>n</sup> Britta <sup>^</sup> nia	<sup>r</sup> Febru <sup>^</sup> ary	loathesome	pronounciation
commitment	<sup>uo</sup> flu <sup>^</sup> orescent	<sup>e</sup> maintain <sup>^</sup> ance	<sup>u</sup> quadri <sup>^</sup> ped
<sup>i</sup> compat <sup>^</sup> able	forgiveable	<sup>e (manoeuvre)</sup> maneu <sup>^</sup> ver	<sup>a</sup> relev <sup>^</sup> ent
<sup>s</sup> con <sup>^</sup> ensus	<sup>chs</sup> fusch <sup>^</sup> ia	mischievious	<sup>e</sup> respon <sup>^</sup> dant
<sup>g</sup> con <sup>^</sup> tested	<sup>a</sup> gene <sup>^</sup> ology	<sup>s</sup> neces <sup>^</sup> ary	<sup>a</sup> seper <sup>^</sup> ate
<sup>c</sup> con <sup>^</sup> sis	<sup>e</sup> grand <sup>^</sup> dame	<sup>e</sup> notic <sup>^</sup> able	<sup>h</sup> silou <sup>^</sup> ette
<sup>o</sup> contra <sup>^</sup> versial	<sup>u</sup> gutter <sup>^</sup> al	objet d'art	<sup>i</sup> sympat <sup>^</sup> ico
<sup>i</sup> deduct <sup>^</sup> able	<sup>h (haemorrhage)</sup> hemorrage <sup>^</sup>	<sup>re</sup> occurrence	thresh <sup>^</sup> hold
desireable	<sup>c</sup> hierarch <sup>^</sup> ial	<sup>h l</sup> optham <sup>^</sup> ologist	<sup>ie</sup> underl <sup>^</sup> y

*Haemorrhage* and *manoeuvre* are the standard spellings in Britain and some other Commonwealth countries. For more, see “American/British Differences” on page 17.

The preceding may possibly have taught you some spellings you didn’t know, but obviously no such exercise could be comprehensive. Its larger aim is to demonstrate just how capricious and counterintuitive English spelling can be, and thereby drive home the importance of always checking the dictionary rather than trusting your memory or judgment. The words presented here have been chosen either because they are difficult to spell, or—more dangerously—because they are so frequently misspelled that the wrong version has become almost conventional and many people don’t realize it’s wrong. There is no shame in having to look up tricky words repeatedly; the best writers do. Don’t risk leaving in an error just because you’re “almost sure” something is right and it’s too much trouble to go to the dictionary.

The good news is that the majority of spelling errors fall into predictable categories. Keep these categories in mind as you write, so as to be particularly alert for “high-risk” words.

## COMMON TYPES OF ERRORS

### INTERCHANGING *ANT* AND *ENT* ENDINGS, OR *ANCE* AND *ENCE*

*eminent, occurrence, perseverance, relevant, respondent*

These endings sound virtually the same, and there’s no rule that will tell you which is correct for a given word. (Some words in fact may go either way: *dependant* or *dependent*, *dependance* or *dependence*, *descendant* or *descendent*.) Memorize what you can, and check any such word you’re not sure of each time you use it.

### INTERCHANGING *ABLE* AND *IBLE* ENDINGS

*accessible, compatible, deductible, fallible, indispensable, interruptible, permissible*

Like *ant* and *ent*, these sounds are indistinguishable to the ear, so you must memorize the right spelling for each word. The more common ending is *able*, so writers are more likely to err when the

ending should be *ible*. (Note that some words can go either way: For example, *extendable* and *extendible* are both correct.)

## INTERCHANGING *SOFT C* AND *S*, AND *SOFT G* AND *J*

*congested, consensus, concise, ecstasy, idiosyncrasy*

Watch out for these identical-sounding letters. (A few words can go either way: *jibe* or *gibe*; *supercede* or *supersede*; *offence* or *offense*; *defence* or *defense*; *practice* or *practise*. Note, though, that the British distinguish between *practise* as a verb [to practise medicine] and *practice* as a noun [a doctor's practice].)

## OMITTING A SILENT LETTER

*abscess, acquisition, diaphragm, hemorrhage (or haemorrhage), silhouette*

Often a letter whose omission wouldn't change a word's pronunciation is mistakenly left out.

## CONFUSION OVER DOUBLE CONSONANTS

*accommodate, Britannia, commitment, jackknifed, necessary, occurrence, Philippines, threshold*

Words with double consonants tend to be troublesome. Errors include doubling the wrong letter, wrongly doubling more than one and doubling just one instead of two. It's also a common mistake to omit the doubling altogether if the word is a compound where the last letter of the first part and the first letter of the second part happen to be the same (*jackknife, misspelling*—although note that some can go either way, such as *granddaddy/grandaddy*). Conversely, writers sometimes mistake a word for a compound, and double a letter that they shouldn't (*threshold* is *not* a combination of *thresh* and *hold*).

## SPELLING WORDS THE WAY THEY'RE MISPRONOUNCED

*asterisk, auxiliary, barbiturate, boundary, February, hierarchical, infinitesimal, mischievous, ophthalmologist, paraphernalia, pejorative, prerogative, separate*

Certain words are commonly mispronounced, ranging from a failure to enunciate subtle vowels to blatant solecisms. People then



may spell these words the way they say them, not realizing that both are wrong.

*Separate*, possibly the most frequently misspelled word of all time, is a subtle case of this type of error. It's fine to pronounce the first *a* like an *e*, but much of the population then thinks that's how it's spelled as well.

## MISTAKENLY SPELLING A DERIVATIVE THE SAME WAY AS ITS ROOT WORD

*disastrous, explanation, maintenance, pronunciation*

When one word derives from another, it's *often* the case that the spelling of the root word still holds—but not always. Be aware of the exceptions.

## MISTAKENLY KEEPING—OR NOT KEEPING— THE FINAL *E* OF A ROOT WORD

*desirable, forgivable, knowledgeable, loathsome, noticeable*

For some words the final *e* is kept and for some it isn't—and writers often guess wrong as to which way it should go. (Note in the discussion on “American/British Differences” on page 17 how some words can go either way.)

## GIVING AN UNFAMILIAR WORD THE SPELLING OF A MORE FAMILIAR ONE

*bellwether, guttural, pastime, playwright, simpatico*

When a relatively uncommon word sounds like a better-known one (*weather, gutter, pass, write, sympathy*), the spelling of the more familiar word is often mistakenly adopted.

## NOT RECOGNIZING EXCEPTIONS TO FAMILIAR LETTER SEQUENCES

*controversial, epitome, fuchsia, genealogy, inoculate, overlaid, quadruped, underlie*

Words such as *contradictory* and *contraindication* may take an *a*, *mythology* and *ethnology* an *o*, and *quadriceps* and *quadrilateral* an *i*—but not all words with these suffixes and prefixes follow suit. *School* and *schooner* contain *sch* sequences, while *chs* doesn't come up very often. Most words that end with an *e* or an *i*

sound take a *y*, so exceptions such as *epitome* and *underlie* often get overlooked. Familiar words such as *innocuous*, *innocent* and *innovate* contain a double *n*, so *inoculate* often picks up an extra one. And since the past tense form of most words that end in a *d* sound is spelled *e-d*, exceptions such as *laid* often get missed.

## CONFUSION OVER UNUSUAL LETTER SEQUENCES

*diaeresis*, *diphtheria*, *fluorescent*, *languor*, *liaison*, *maneuver* (or *manoeuvre*), *ophthalmologist*

Writers are understandably thrown by words that contain *uo* or *ae* sequences instead of the more familiar *ou* and *ea*, and by words that contain three vowels or four consonants (!) in a row.

## SPELLING FOREIGN WORDS AS IF THEY WERE ENGLISH

*grande dame*, *objet d'art*

It's easy to trip up on words borrowed from a language not one's own. Be particularly alert for those that are spelled *almost*—but not quite—the same way as their English counterparts.

## COMMON TYPES OF TYPOS

A particular variety of spelling mistake is the typo, defined as a spelling error that results from an accidental slip of the finger on the keyboard rather than through systematic ignorance of the correct form. Some words are more susceptible to being accidentally misspelled than others, so when proofing your work, be extra alert for the following:

### TRANSPOSITION OF LETTERS TO CREATE A SIMILAR WORD

Watch out for scared cows, casual factors, martial harmony, complaint pupils and the like—words that differ from another only by transposed letters. Note that such errors would not be picked up by a computer spell-checker!

### OMISSION OF ONE OCCURRENCE OF A REPEATED LETTER

A number of activites have been planned for the day.

With the advent of desktop-publishing software, typesetting is now often being done by nonprofessionals.

Did you spot the errors in *activities* and *typesetting*? They are easy to miss on a quick read, because the missing letters (*i* and *e*, respectively) are present in another position in the word. Double-check any such words very carefully.

#### “WORD STUTTER”

A common type of slip to make when typing is to repeat short words such as *the*, *is*, etc.

Even a sharp eye can easily miss the typo in the above sentence. Some computer spell-checkers are programmed to pick up on repeated words, which is a useful feature.

On a final note, when you are proofing your work, check to see if you have left any extra spaces between words or omitted the space between any sentences. Such typos may not be spelling mistakes, but nonetheless need to be rectified.

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# Frequently Confused Homonyms

A word may be spelled impeccably as far as the computer spell-checker is concerned—but still be wrong. English is replete with **homonyms**, words that are pronounced the same way but are spelled differently and mean different things. The majority present no problem; few people, for example, would write *brake* for *break* or *see* for *sea*. Certain words, however, get confused with their homonyms systematically. Often the cause is that one of the homonyms is less common than the other, and the writer puts down the more familiar spelling without realizing it has a different meaning from the word that he or she intended.

## *Exercise*

Which word in each of the following sentences is incorrect?

Gordon's face occasionally twitched with a nervous tick.

The wording of her ad peaked his interest.

The report was divided into discreet sections.

She could have born the news better if it had come later.

Tall vases of flowers stood on either side of the alter.

Things did not appear to auger well.

Emmeline's diamond weighed a full sixtieth of a caret.

The villagers struggled to throw off the yolk of their invaders.

The stationary supplies consisted of just a box of paper and a few pens.

It was the only sound piece of advise Bert had ever received from his father.

Dora's known for sticking to her principals.

Her office was little more than a cubical.

Verna believes in giving her staff free reign.

The car comes with dual airbags.

The council for the defendant insists that his client is innocent.

The patient complained that his head felt as if it were in a vice.

It was a considerable time before I regained piece of mind.

Pupils in Mr. Wigglesworth's class knew they had better tow the line.

Registration fees may be waved for low-income students.

The new curtains complimented the furnishings very well.

The campers fell quiet for the role call.

When the police arrived at the scene, they made a grizzly find.

Armand felt as if he'd been put through the ringer.

I was loathe to interfere, but I felt I must.

Philbert knew he would have to prove his metal if he won the promotion.

Her lawsuit claimed that there had been a breach of contract.

It took a long time, but Effie finally got her just desserts.

It was hard to say exactly how it happened; one thing just lead to another.

Usually, the last part of a book to be written is the forward.

## Answers

Gordon's face occasionally twitched with a nervous **tick**.

Should be *tic*—a periodic spasm of the facial muscles. Nothing to do with small bloodsucking arachnids.

The wording of her ad **peaked** his interest.

Should be *piqued*—aroused or excited. *Peak* means to be at the maximum (interest has peaked, and will probably soon decline).

The report was divided into **discreet** sections.

Should be *discrete*—individually distinct. (Unless the sections were particularly good at keeping a confidence.)

She could have **born** the news better if it had come later.

Should be *borne*—past tense of “to bear”; that is, handled, coped with. Nothing to do with being born. (Note, though, that another usage of this word is related to birth: To “bear children” is to bring them into being, so a sentence could read *She had borne two children*.)

Tall vases of flowers stood on either side of the **alter**.

Should be *altar*—the structure in a place of worship. *Alter* means to change something.

Things did not appear to **auger** well.

Should be *augur*—bode, portend. An *auger* is a tool for boring holes.

Emmeline's diamond weighed a full sixtieth of a **caret**.

Should be *carat*—a unit of weight for jewels. A *caret* is a small wedge-shaped mark used by editors to indicate where text should be inserted.

The villagers struggled to throw off the **yolk** of their invaders.

Should be *yoke*—bondage or servitude. (Unless the invaders had taken to throwing eggs at the locals.)

The **stationary** supplies consisted of just a box of paper and a few pens.

Should be *stationery*—writing materials. Of course, paper and pens *are* characteristically stationary—not moving. (A mnemonic that might help: Stationery includes envelopes.)

It was the only sound piece of **advise** Bert had ever received from his father.

Should be *advice*—the noun. *Advise* (pronounced differently) is the verb. When you advise someone, you are giving advice.

Dora's known for sticking to her **principals**.

Should be *principles*—code of conduct. *Principle* and *principal* are confused frequently. The first, which is always a noun, can also mean a fundamental law (*the principle of relativity*), an underlying phenomenon that accounts for something (*the principle of the steam engine*) or the essence or fundamentals of a situation (*in principle, this action should be possible*). The second has several meanings that all relate in some way to being first or primary. As a noun, it can mean the head of a school (*go to the principal's office*), a main player (*he's suspected of being one of the principals*) or the main sum of money owed on a loan (*the amount includes both interest and principal*). As an adjective, it describes something that is prominent (*she plays a principal role*) or important or pressing (*our principal concern is safety*). A mnemonic that might help: The *principal* is your *pal*. (Right.) Once you have this connection in place, think whether the meaning of the word you want has anything to do with “firstness.” If it does, the ending will be *pal*; if

it doesn't, the ending will be *ple*. Thus: Dora sticks to her principals if she is known to hang out with headmasters.

Her office was little more than a **cubical**.

Should be *cubicle*—a small partitioned space. *Cubical* means shaped like a cube, with six equal square sides.

Verna believes in giving her staff free **reign**.

Should be *free rein*—that is, not hauling on their reins to control them (figuratively speaking). *Reign* means to rule as a sovereign.

The car comes with **duel** airbags.

Should be *dual*—two, one on each side. *Duel* also has to do with two, but in a somewhat more antagonistic sense.

The **council** for the defendant insists that his client is innocent.

Should be *counsel*—lawyer. *Counsel* is also a verb, meaning to advise or consult with, so a *counselor* is one who counsels (a camp counselor, a guidance counselor, a marital counselor). *Council* is an administrative or legislative group that deliberates or governs, so a *councillor* is one who is a member of a council (a town councillor, a school board councillor). In Britain, government-funded housing is referred to as *council flats*.

The patient complained that his head felt as if it were in a **vice**.

Should be *vis*—a tool for gripping something strongly. Vises (or any other tool) are rarely noted for moral depravity.

It was a considerable time before I regained **piece** of mind.

Should be *peace of mind*—having one's mind at ease. This expression presumably gets confused with *giving someone a piece of one's mind*—that is, telling that person off.

Pupils in Mr. Wigglesworth's class knew they had better **tow** the line.

Should be *toe the line*—conform to expected behavior, as in walking along a prescribed line without deviating one's toes from it. (Unless, of course, Mr. Wigglesworth was in charge of a barge.)

Registration fees may be **waved** for low-income students.

Should be *waived*—to refrain from claiming, to voluntarily forgo something to which one is entitled. Flapping the fees up and down in front of the students would be to little purpose.

The new curtains **complimented** the furnishings very well.

Should be *complemented*—went well with, set off to advantage, enhanced. (Unless the curtains were telling the furniture how nice it was looking that day.) The word *complement* derives from *complete*, so a good mnemonic is to remember the connection between these two words. Thus, one can have a full complement (a complete set) of cutlery, or assign some complementary (additional) course readings along with the main text. A *compliment* is a courteous, admiring or flattering comment. Thus, one can offer compliments (best wishes, regards) of the season, write a complimentary (favorable) review, exchange complimentary (mutually esteeming) remarks or offer complimentary (free as a courtesy) drinks.

The campers fell quiet for the **role** call.

Should be *roll call*—checking attendance by calling names off a list (a roll). Unless the campers are waiting to learn who will play what part in a drama.

When the police arrived at the scene, they made a **grizzly** find.

Should be *grisly*—gruesome, ghastly. Assuming the scene didn't contain a large aggressive bear. Note: *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* permits *grizzly* as a variant of *grisly*; however, enough readers would consider this incorrect that writers are advised to make the distinction.

Armand felt as if he'd been put through the **ringer**.

Should be *wringer*—a device for wringing something out, squeezing it dry. The phrase means to feel pressured and exhausted by an ordeal. No bell clappers are involved. (Also note that if you ever say you want to *ring* someone's neck, this means you plan to put a circlet around it.)

I was **loathe** to interfere, but I felt I must.

Should be *loath*—reluctant. *Loathe* means to hate, despise. Note that the pronunciation is slightly different: *loath* rhymes with *oath*, while *loathe* ends in a softer sound, like the *th* in *the*. Note: *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* allows *loathe* as a variant of *loath*, but writers would be advised to stick with the traditional spelling. For more on this, see the discussion under “Spelling Variations” on page 16.



Philbert knew he would have to prove his **metal** if he won the promotion. Should be *mettle*—stamina, courage, worth. Quite unrelated to gold, brass, etc.

Her lawsuit claimed that there had been a **breech** of contract. Should be *breach*—violation. This word derives from *break*. Thus, a breach of honor, breaching a standard, a breach in a wall or a breach in continuity. *Breech* refers to the bottom or back end of something: the breech (rear) of a gun, a breech birth (feet or rear end first) or (archaically) a pair of pants.

It took a long time, but Effie finally got her just **desserts**. Should be *deserts*—getting what one deserves. Once you realize that this word derives from *deserve*, its spelling is obvious. All the bad puns that abound notwithstanding, it has no connection with post-meal sweets.

It was hard to say exactly how it happened; one thing just **lead** to another. Should be *led*—past tense of “to lead.” This common error likely results from a confusion with the metal *lead*, which is pronounced “led.”

Usually, the last part of a book to be written is the **forward**. Should be *foreword*—the words that appear at the front (the “fore”). Nothing to do with the direction of movement or with being uppity. (Note that if this is the very first word to appear in your book, it’s one you want to get right!)

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# Spelling Variations

English contains many words that can be correctly spelled more than one way. Two dictionaries may present the same word differently, and the same dictionary may present alternatives. Often the choice of which spelling to use is up to you—but not always. Writers should have a solid awareness of spelling variations for the following reasons:

- If you are being hired to write some sort of commercial publication, such as a technical manual for a software producer, marketing material for a bank or an information brochure for a government office, you are often expected to abide by a particular style guide. Organizations generally want their publications to have a uniform “look and feel,” which includes words always being spelled the same way. For example, a U.S.-based multinational corporation with branches in the United Kingdom might specify that all printed materials that go to the public follow the conventions of American spelling, including those produced by British writers.

- If your writing is “your own”—that is, something you are doing not as part of a job but as a personal project that will bear your name—you may still be expected to abide by the style guide of the publishing house that will be producing your work. Not all publishing houses require that writers go with a particular dictionary, but many do. If you disregard their specifications, it may well mean seeing your manuscript come back heavily marked up by the copyeditor.

- Just because a dictionary indicates that a variant spelling is *legitimate* doesn't always mean it's *appropriate*. If the dictionary you are using allows for unconventional spellings, consider what

effect these might have on the tone of your writing. Some dictionaries may endorse spellings that would send a majority of copyeditors lunging for their red pencils.

It is worth mentioning here that dictionaries can be roughly categorized as either “prescriptive” or “descriptive.” The former act as guardians of the language, strictly upholding conventional rules of spelling and word usage, and are conservative about adding new entries. Descriptive dictionaries, on the other hand, attempt to reflect language as it is used, whether supported by tradition or not. They are thus more flexible in incorporating unconventional spellings (along with slang, jargon and new terms) on the grounds that it is their responsibility not to decree but to record how words are being used in the real world. Both approaches have validity: Clearly, without the maintenance of standards the clarity of the language would degenerate; on the other hand, language is a fluid entity that changes year by year, driven more by common usage than by linguistic pundits. (Consider how quaint many terms that were in standard usage just a few decades ago now seem.) Hence, whether certain spellings are considered errors or acceptable variants may depend on what source is being used.

## AMERICAN/BRITISH DIFFERENCES

Many of the variant spellings in the English language are due to the differing styles of the United States and Britain. For staunch upholders of either the American or the Anglo tradition, the “right” way to spell something will be unambiguous; however, in many parts of the world the path is murkier. (Canadians in particular, with geographical proximity to one country and historical ties to the other, have adapted a hybrid style that borrows from both.)

The following describes several categories of differences between American and British spellings. In *general*—there are many exceptions—American style is to remove letters not necessary for pronunciation, while British style is to retain traditional spellings, which are often more complex.

*OR/OUR* ENDINGS

Some words end in *or* for American style, *our* for British style.

humor/humour	honor/honour	endeavor/endeavour
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(Canadians take note: Even with British style, certain derivative words such as *humorous*, *honorarium* and *laborious* do *not* take the *u*.)

*ER/RE* ENDINGS

Some words end in *er* for American style, *re* for British style.

center/centre	fiber/fibre	theater/theatre
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*IZE/ISE* ENDINGS

Some words end in *ize* (or *uze*) for American style, *ise* (or *yse*) for British style.

analyze/analyse	organize/organise
paralyze/paralyse	realize/realise

*ED/T* ENDINGS

Some past tense constructions that take *ed* for American style take *t* for British style.

burned/burnt	dreamed/dreamt	spoiled/spoilt
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## SINGLE/DOUBLE CONSONANTS

For some words where the root ends in *l*, *p*, *s* or *t*, American style leaves the consonant single before an *ed* or *ing* ending, and British style doubles it.

benefited/benefitted	focusing/focussing
canceled/cancelled	grueling/gruelling
kidnaped/kidnapped	worshiping/worshipping

DROPPING/RETAINING *E*

For some words where the root ends in *e*, American style is to drop the *e* before a suffix, British style is to retain it.

acknowledgment/	aging/ageing
acknowledgement	usable/useable

## *E/AE, OE*

For words originally spelled with ligatures, American style is to drop the silent vowel, British style is to keep it.

anesthetic/anaesthetic	estrogen/oestrogen
encyclopedia/encyclopaedia	fetus/foetus
medieval/mediaeval	maneuver/manoeuvre

## MORE PHONETIC/MORE TRADITIONAL

American style is to simplify spelling, whether by dropping silent endings or by using more phonetic constructions; British style is to retain traditional spellings.

catalog/catalogue	omelet/omelette	program/programme
check/cheque	draft/draught	plow/plough

A question that might arise for writers striving for consistency is, must one go exclusively one way or the other? If you have committed yourself to doubling the *l* in *cancelled*, need you also use *re* endings and *oe* ligatures? The answer is, unless you are expected to abide rigidly by a particular style guide, it's usually acceptable to use different styles for different words as long as you spell each individual word consistently. You should, though, treat all words in the same category alike—for example, if you are spelling *valour* with a *u*, do the same for *flavour*.

Note that, regardless of your style choice, you must always use the original spelling for proper nouns. Thus, for example, even if using American spelling, be sure the British political party appears as *Labour*, not *Labor*; if using British spelling, be sure the complex in New York appears as the Rockefeller *Center*, not *Centre*.

## OTHER SPELLING VARIATIONS

### *Exercise*

Outside of American/British differences, there are quite a few words that have acceptable variants within North America (and in other parts of the world as well). For example, every word in the following list is spelled correctly—but can be spelled correctly another way as well. Change it to its other acceptable form.

accidentally	dietitian	memento	skeptical
adviser	dissension	moniker	skullduggery
artifact	enroll	mustache	stony
balaclava	espresso	nerve-racking	sulphur
bandanna	fulfill	numbskull	tendonitis
bannister	gelatin	orangutan	tuque
bullrush	hankie	phony	whiz
caliph	license	pygmy	woollen
cantaloupe	liquefy	raccoon	yogurt

*Answers*

accident <sup>a</sup> lly	dietit <sup>i</sup> an	mem <sup>o</sup> ento	ske <sup>c</sup> ptical
adv <sup>o</sup> iser	diss <sup>t</sup> ension	mon <sup>c</sup> iker ^	skulldugg <sup>e</sup> ry
art <sup>e</sup> ifact	enroll <sup>t</sup>	must <sup>o</sup> ache ^	ston <sup>e</sup> y ^
balac <sup>k</sup> lava	es <sup>x</sup> presso	nerve-rack <sup>w</sup> ing ^	sulph <sup>f</sup> ur
bandan <sup>a</sup> a	fulfill <sup>t</sup>	numb <sup>e</sup> skull	tendon <sup>i</sup> itis
ban <sup>n</sup> ister	gelat <sup>e</sup> in ^	orang <sup>o</sup> utan ^	tu <sup>o</sup> que
bull <sup>r</sup> ush	hank <sup>y</sup> ie	phon <sup>e</sup> y ^	whiz <sup>z</sup> ^
cali <sup>f</sup> ph	lic <sup>c</sup> ense	py <sup>i</sup> gmy	wool <sup>l</sup> en
cantalou <sup>p</sup> e	lique <sup>i</sup> fy	race <sup>a</sup> oon	yog <sup>h</sup> urt ^

As with the review of misspellings on page 3, this exercise is less concerned with the specific words shown here than with raising your awareness of alternate spellings in general. There are a few words with similar variations (double or single *ls* or *ns*; *f* instead of *ph*; *y* or *ey* endings), but for the most part, what distinguishes these