

David Appleyard's

Guide to English Spelling Rules

Basics of British and American spelling with a
minimum of effort

Page Contents

- [Noun Plural Formation](#)
- [Dropping and Doubling of Letters](#)
- [Troublesome Suffixes and Endings](#)
- [General Observations](#)
- [Words Commonly Confused](#)
- [Troublesome Prefixes](#)
- [One Word or More?](#)

Noun Plural Formation

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>To form the plural of most nouns, simply add -s</p>	<p>cat > cats dog > dogs</p>	<p>Surviving Old English plural forms: <i>deer > deer; sheep > sheep;</i> <i>ox > oxen; man > men;</i> <i>woman > women; child > children; brother (in a religious sense)</i> <i>> brethren; foot > feet;</i> <i>tooth > teeth.</i></p> <p>Some compound nouns: <i>passer-by > passers-by;</i> <i>mother-in-law > mothers-in-law.</i></p> <p>Plural forms of not fully naturalized foreign words: <i>chateau > chateaux;</i> <i>crisis > crises; formula > formulae; index > indices;</i> <i>stimulus > stimuli</i></p> <p>Plural forms of metric abbreviations: <i>100 km (kilometres)</i> <i>60 g (grams)</i> <i>2.5 l (litres)</i></p> <p>Note that with non-metric measurements plural s is optional: <i>60 lb</i> or <i>60 lbs</i></p>

Noun Plural Formation

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>To form the plural of nouns ending in s, sh, ss, z, x or ch, add -es to facilitate pronunciation</p> <p>To form the plural of nouns ending in y preceded by a consonant, change the y to an i and then add -es</p>	<p>gas > gases dish > dishes boss > bosses box > boxes watch > watches</p> <p>lady > ladyies baby > babyies strawberry > strawberries laboratory > laboratories</p>	<p><i>lay-by</i> > <i>lay-by</i>s (BrE); <i>stand-by</i> > <i>stand-by</i>s</p> <p>Family names: <i>Mr. & Mrs. Brady</i> > <i>The Bradys</i></p>

Noun Plural Formation

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>To form the plural of a number of long established English nouns ending in f or fe (but <u>not</u> <i>ff</i> or <i>ffe</i>!) change the f to a v and then add -es</p> <p>To form the plural of imported nouns ending in o and long established in English, add -es</p>	<p>half > halves leaf > leaves life > lives knife > knives</p> <p>cargo > cargoes domino > dominoes echo > echoes embargo > embargoes hero > heroes potato > potatoes tomato > tomatoes tornado > tornadoes torpedo > torpedoes veto > vetoes</p>	<p>Most other nouns ending in f or fe simply add -s as usual, but there are some cases in which the -ves plural formation is optional: <i>belief</i> > <i>beliefs</i>; <i>chief</i> > <i>chiefs</i>; <i>handkerchief</i> > <i>handkerchiefs</i> (but note <i>handkerchieves</i> is an option in British English); <i>safe</i> > <i>safes</i></p> <p>Caution is advised and, if in doubt, consult a dictionary.</p> <p>For less naturalized nouns ending in o, add -s only: <i>kilo</i> > <i>kilos</i>; <i>piano</i> > <i>pianos</i>; <i>kimono</i> > <i>kimonos</i>; <i>radio</i> > <i>radios</i></p> <p>In a few cases the -es plural formation is optional. When in any doubt, consult your dictionary! <i>archipelago</i> > <i>archipelagos/archipelagoes</i> <i>fiasco</i> > <i>fiascos/fiascoes</i> <i>halo</i> > <i>halos/haloes</i> <i>mango</i> > <i>mangos/mangoes</i></p>

Dropping and Doubling of Letters

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>A final silent e is usually dropped before adding a suffix beginning with a vowel</p>	<p>-able It is not so easy to predict when a final e should be dropped before adding the suffix -able. Generally speaking, this is more common in American English. In some cases it is optional: e.g. likable or likeable age store > storage</p> <p>-ed Clone > cloned</p> <p>-est cute > cutest</p>	<p>Words ending in -ce and -ge usually keep their e to clarify the pronunciation of a preceding consonantal sound: <i>noticeable, peaceeable, knowledgeable, manageable</i></p> <p>The final e is also retained for words ending in -ee: <i>agreeable, foreseeable</i></p> <p><i>acreage and mileage</i></p> <p>Note that <i>linage</i> and <i>lineage</i> are entirely different words</p>

Dropping and Doubling of Letters

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
	<p>-ing dive > diving write > writing</p>	<p>You must retain the e when it is needed to distinguish meaning (cf. <i>dying</i> & <i>dyeing</i> or <i>singing</i> & <i>singeing</i>).</p> <p>Sometimes the e is kept to clarify pronunciation of a preceding consonantal sound (e.g. <i>ageing</i>). American English seems to be less particular about this (<i>aging</i>).</p> <p>The final e is also kept for words ending in -ee, -oe, or -ye: <i>fleeing</i>, <i>canoeing</i>, <i>eyeing</i></p>

Dropping and Doubling of Letters

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
	<p>-ous</p> <p>fame > famous pore > porous</p> <p>-y</p> <p>ice > icy bone > bony</p>	<p>Words ending in -ge keep their e to clarify the pronunciation of a preceding consonantal sound: <i>advantageeous, courageeous</i></p> <p>For words ending in -ce this final e becomes an i: <i>space > spacious</i></p> <p>The final e is not dropped before adding the suffix -y if the preceding letter is u: <i>gluey</i> (but note <i>gluier</i>).</p> <p>Note also <i>pricey</i> and <i>spacey</i></p> <p>Remember that <i>holy</i> and <i>holey</i> are very different words!</p>

Dropping and Doubling of Letters

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>When a suffix beginning with a vowel is added to a stressed syllable ending in a</p>	<p>-able control > controllable</p>	<p>In British English, a final letter l following a single vowel is doubled even if the syllable is unstressed: <i>travel</i> > <i>travelled</i>.</p> <p>American English not only adheres to the usual rule requiring the final syllable to be stressed before doubling, it doubles the final l in <u>all</u> forms of the verb, thereby</p>

Dropping and Doubling of Letters

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>single consonant preceded by a single vowel, the consonant is usually doubled</p>	<p>-ed stop > stopped admit > admitted <i>In the following cases the stress in the final syllable is secondary:</i> kidnap > kidnapped program > programmed</p>	<p>eliminating this particular spelling headache altogether: AmE <i>enroll</i> > <i>enrolled</i> and <i>fulfill</i> > <i>fulfilled</i>; BrE <i>enrol</i> > <i>enrolled</i> and <i>fulfil</i> > <i>fulfilled</i>.</p> <p>Consult a dictionary before doubling a final s to form noun plurals, especially in monosyllabic words: <i>gas</i> > <i>gases</i>; <i>bus</i> > <i>buses</i> (but AmE <i>busses</i>).</p> <p>A final z is always doubled: <i>fez</i> > <i>fezzes</i>; <i>quiz</i> > <i>quizzes</i>.</p> <p>In words of more than one syllable, both British and American English follow the usual stress rule when adding -es to form the third person singular of the present tense: <i>focus</i> > <i>focuses</i>; <i>nonplus</i> > <i>nonplusses</i>.</p> <p>In British English (as in the case involving a <u>final l</u> above), a stressed syllable is not a prerequisite for doubling the s before -ed and -ing to form past tenses and gerunds. So BrE grants you the option of either <i>focussed</i> or <i>focused</i> and <i>focussing</i> or <i>focusing</i>. AmE, on the other hand, prefers the latter variants (<i>focused</i> and <i>focusing</i>), which follow the general rule about stress</p>

Dropping and Doubling of Letters

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
	<p>-er big > bigger</p> <p>-ing begin > beginning refer > referring</p> <p>-ish red > reddish</p>	<p>Instead of doubling a final consonant c, which only occurs in unstressed syllables, it becomes ck before the addition of a suffix: <i>traffic</i> > <i>trafficking</i>; <i>frolic</i> > <i>frolicking</i>.</p> <p>The consonants h, w, x and y are <u>never doubled</u> (e.g. <i>affix</i> > <i>affixing</i>), and neither are silent consonants found in words of foreign origin: <i>crochet</i> > <i>crocheting</i>; <i>ricochet</i> > <i>ricocheting</i>.</p>

Troublesome Prefixes

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p><i>ante-</i> or <i>anti-</i> ? Choose the prefix <i>ante-</i> if your word has connotations of <i>before</i> or <i>ahead</i>, and <i>anti-</i> if it means <i>opposite</i> or <i>against</i></p>	<p><i>ante-</i> does not usually have to be followed by a hyphen: <i>antecedent</i>, <i>antedate</i>, <i>antenatal</i>, <i>anteroom</i></p> <p>Even with <i>anti-</i> most words require no hyphenation: <i>antibiotic</i>, <i>anticlockwise</i>, <i>anticyclone</i>, <i>antidepressant</i>, <i>antifreeze</i></p> <p><i>anti-</i> is always followed by a hyphen before an <i>i</i> or a capital letter: <i>anti-inflammatory</i> <i>anti-French</i></p>	<p>There are, however, many other <i>anti-</i> words that are hyphenated by convention, according to personal preference, or to avoid a vowel clash: <i>anti-aircraft fire</i>, <i>anti-establishment</i>, <i>anti-government</i>, <i>anti-gravity</i>, <i>anti-personnel mines</i>, etc. Whenever you're in doubt, please consult a good dictionary!</p>

Troublesome Prefixes

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>fore- or for- ? Choose the prefix</p> <p>fore- if your word has the meaning of before or ahead; otherwise you need for-</p>	<p>forefather, foresight, forecast, forerunner, foreshadow, forestall, foretaste, foretell, forewarn, etc.</p> <p>forbid, forfeit, forget, forgive, forgo, forlorn, forsake, forswear, etc</p>	

Troublesome Suffixes and Endings

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>-able or -ible ? The suffix -able is far more common than -ible</p> <p>-ance or -ence & -ant or -ent ? Here we present a few useful rules for when to add the suffixes -ance or -ence and -ant or -ent.</p> <p>However, because these rules are not 100% reliable, it's safest to consult a dictionary!</p>	<p>Most roots, including <u>all</u> modern ones, add -able: drink > undrinkable read > readable wash > washable</p> <p>-ance is always added to a <u>hard</u> c or g: elegance, significance. If the preceding c or g is <u>soft</u> choose -ence: innocence, intelligence. If other forms of the word end in an a-suffix, then your choice is likely to be -ance/-ant: dominatate > dominance ignoramus > ignorant vigilante > vigilance</p> <p>Verbs ending in -ear, -ure and -y have noun forms ending in -ance: appear > appearance endurure > endurance defy > defiance</p>	<p>You'll find -ible only in a few old words that are derived directly from (or modeled on) Latin: <i>flex</i> > <i>flexible</i> <i>comprehend</i> > <i>comprehensible</i> <i>respond</i> > <i>responsible</i> Lat. <i>edere (to eat)</i> > <i>edible</i></p> <p>Note the unique spellings of <i>allegiance</i> and <i>vengeance</i></p> <p><i>violate</i> > <i>violence</i></p>

Troublesome Suffixes and Endings

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
	<p>Verbs ending in -ere will have noun-forms ending in -ence: interfere > interference</p> <p>The core syllables -cid-, -fid-, -sid-, -vid-, -flu-, -qu- and -sist- are <i>usually</i> followed by -ence: incidence, confidence, subsidence, evidence, influence, consequence, insistence</p>	<p><i>persevere</i> > perseverance</p> <p><i>assistance</i>, <i>resistance</i></p>

Troublesome Suffixes and Endings

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
	<p>To form nouns from verbs ending in a stressed -er or -ur, add -ence:</p> <p>confer<u>er</u> > confer<u>ence</u> concur<u>ur</u> > concurr<u>ence</u> (Note here the typical doubling of the r in a stressed syllable before the addition of a suffix beginning with a vowel.)</p> <p>To form nouns from verbs ending in an unstressed -er, add -ance:</p> <p>utter<u>er</u> > utter<u>ance</u> hinder<u>er</u> > hinder<u>ance</u></p>	<p><i>differ</i> > <i>differ<u>ence</u></i></p>

Troublesome Suffixes and Endings

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>-ce or -se ?</p> <p>During centuries of separation from the motherland, American English retained the original -se ending in certain words borrowed from French.</p> <p>British English modified it to -ce</p>	<p>AmE: defense^{se}, license^{se} (noun & verb), offense^{se}, pretense^{se}, vise (tool)</p> <p>BrE: defence^{ce}, licence^{ce} (noun form only [cf. to license^{se}]), offence^{ce}, pretence^{ce}, vice</p> <p>Note from the example of <i>licence/license</i> above that <u>British English</u>, perhaps under the influence of <i>advice</i> (n.) and <i>to advise</i>^{se}, sometimes utilizes -ce/-se to help distinguish between a noun and a verb:</p> <p>BrE:</p> <p><i>practice</i> (n.) > <i>practise</i> (v.)</p>	<p>Note that even in British English any related adjectives have to be spelt with an s:</p> <p><i>defensive</i>^{se}, <i>offensive</i>^{se}</p> <p>American English, which tends to prioritize simpler orthography, often loses out on the ability to make such subtle distinctions:</p> <p>AmE: <i>license</i> (n.) > <i>license</i> (v.) <i>practice</i> (n.) > <i>practice</i> (v.)</p>

Troublesome Suffixes and Endings

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>-cede or -ceed ? The ending -cede is far more common than -ceed</p> <p>-ch or -tch ? Choose -ch if it is to be preceded by either a consonant or two vowels. If it is to be preceded by a single vowel, you need -tch</p>	<p>concede, precede, recede</p> <p>filch, bench, church</p> <p>approach, touch, coach</p> <p>catch, fetch, watch</p>	<p>You'll find -ceed only in <i>exceed</i>, <i>proceed</i> and <i>succeed</i>. Note the unique spelling of <i>supersede</i></p> <p>One exception to this rule, namely the letter h: <i>aitch</i></p> <p>A handful of very common words are exceptions to this rule and so you should try to memorize them: <i>attach</i>, <i>detach</i>, <i>enrich</i>, <i>much</i>, <i>rich</i>, <i>sandwich</i>, <i>spinach</i>, <i>such</i>, <i>which</i></p>

Troublesome Suffixes and Endings

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>-ction or -xion ? The ending -ction is far more common than -xion</p> <p>-er or -or ? The ending -er is far more common than -or</p>	<p>reaction, reduction, etc.</p> <p>connection, deflection, inflection, reflection</p> <p>er is added to most <u>verbs</u> (and certainly all modern ones) for someone or something that performs an activity: player, baker, singer, etc.</p> <p>A few -er nouns are created from <u>nouns</u> or <u>adjectives</u>: law > lawyer prison > prisoner foreign > foreigner</p>	<p>-xion is only found in a few words like <i>complexion, crucifixion, effluxion, flexion, fluxion, prefixion, retroflexion</i> and <i>transfixion</i></p> <p>In BrE only, you may come across the following variants: <i>connexion, deflexion, inflexion</i> and <i>reflexion</i>.</p>

Troublesome Suffixes and Endings

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
	<p>Note the following <u>words</u>: adapter (a person who adapts); adviser; caster, conjurer and conveyer; and resister (a person who resists).</p> <p>-or is found in words of French or classical origin: mayor, donor. Many end in -ator, -itor, -ctor, -essor and -utor: curator, auditor, director, professor, tutor</p>	<p>Especially in British English, an <i>adaptor</i> is a device to make two pieces of (usually electrical) equipment compatible, as well as being an accepted variant of <i>adapter</i> (someone who adapts something); the variant <i>advisor</i> is not uncommon but is still rather controversial; the variants <i>castor</i>, <i>conjuro</i> and <i>conveyer</i> are quite correct; and a <i>resistor</i> is an electronic component.</p>

Troublesome Suffixes and Endings

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>-ise or -ize ? The verbal suffix -ize is far more common than -ise</p>	<p>criticize, demoralize, realize, vandalize</p>	<p>In BrE, under the influence of neighboring French, the -ise ending is a widespread alternative, but if chosen it should be used consistently: <i>criticise</i>, <i>demoralise</i>, <i>realise</i>, <i>vandalise</i>, etc.</p> <p>Note these common verbs, which are <u>always</u> spelt with -ise: <i>advertise</i>, <i>chastise</i>, <i>despise</i>, <i>disguise</i>, <i>franchise</i>, <i>merchandise</i> and <i>surmise</i></p> <p>Note, too, all verbs ending in -cise, -prise and -vise: <i>exercise</i>, <i>surprise</i>, <i>advise</i></p>

Troublesome Suffixes and Endings

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>-or or -our ? Words of primarily French origin ending in -our in British English end in -or in American English</p>	<p>BrE: colour, favour, honour AmE: color, favor, honor</p>	<p>British English also often uses -or: error, terror, stupor</p> <p>Note that even British English drops the u before the addition of a suffix to certain words: <i>vapour</i> > <i>vaporize</i>; <i>honour</i> > <i>honorific/honorary</i></p> <p>Please refer to a dictionary!</p>
<p>-re or -er ? While British English retains the -re ending in words of French origin, American English generally prefers -er</p>	<p>BrE: centre, metre, theatre AmE: center, meter, theater</p>	<p>Even in American English -re is found in some words, especially if the stem ends in the letter c: <i>acre, massacre, mediocre</i>; but note also <i>cadre</i> and <i>ogre</i>.</p>
<p>-yse or -yze ? The verbal suffix -yse is British and -yze is American</p>	<p>BrE: analyse, paralyse AmE: analyze, paralyze</p>	

General Observations

Spelling Rules	Examples	Exceptions
<p>-ae/oe or -e ? ae and oe in words of Greek or Latin origin are retained in British English and replaced with a simple e in American English</p> <p>-ie- or -ei- ? In the case of 'ee' /i:/ sounds i goes before e except after c</p> <p>q_? q is almost invariably followed by u</p>	<p>BrE: archaeology, gynaecology, haemoglobin, diarrhoea, foetus, oesophagus</p> <p>AmE: archeology, gynecology, hemoglobin, diarrea, fetus, esophagus</p> <p>believe, chieff, siege <u>ce</u>iling, receive, deceit</p> <p>quack, quality, queen, question, quiz, quote</p>	<p>Even in British English there is a slow trend toward simplification: For example, the form <i>encyclopedia</i> is now much more common than <i>encyclopaedia</i>.</p> <p>Beware of words that have varied pronunciation: <i>either, neither, heinous</i> Some common names: <i>Keith, Sheila, Neil, Madeira</i></p> <p>Latin words like <i>species</i> Others: <i>caffeine, protein, inveigle, seize, weird</i></p> <p>Acronyms & non-English words: <i>Qantas</i> (Australian Airline), <i>Al Qaeda</i> (Islamist terror franchise), <i>Qatar</i> (Gulf state), <i>etc.</i></p>

One Word or More?

Spelling Rules	Examples
alright / all right	all right is widely regarded as the correct form
Already / all ready	<i>Are you all ready to leave? It's already 8 o'clock.</i>
altogether / all together	<i>There are altogether two occasions per year when the family are all together.</i>
anyone / any one	<i>Anyone can use the library and borrow any one of 10,000 books.</i>
cannot / can not	cannot is the correct form in British English, while can not is generally preferred in American English. Note that even BrE sometimes allows you to use can not for emphasis: <i>She can not only speak French but German too!</i>
ever / -ever	ever is only separated from a wh -word for the sake of emphasis: <i>"You can go wherever you like and do whatever you want!" <u>but</u> "Where ever have you been and what ever have you been up to?"</i>

One Word or More?

Spelling Rules	Examples
everyone / every one	<p>Everyone is the same as 'everybody' and applies to people only. Every one means 'each single one' and applies to both people and things: <i>Everyone went to the restaurant and every one of them chose spaghetti.</i></p>
inasmuch as / in as much as	<p>Both forms are correct but inasmuch as now seems to be the more common variant: <i>He is responsible for the accident inasmuch as he failed to prevent it.</i></p>
insofar as / in so far as	<p>Both forms are correct but in so far as now seems to be more common variant: <i>She appreciated him in so far as he was always very positive.</i></p>
as far as	<p>These forms mean slightly different things and are sometimes confused in modern English. Into is a preposition: <i>They got into their car.</i></p>
into / in to	<p>With in to we have the adverb in followed by the preposition to: <i>She accompanied her friend in to dinner.</i></p>

One Word or More?

Spelling Rules	Examples
maybe / may be	<i>He may be moving to Chicago, but maybe he'll stay in LA a while longer .</i>
no-one / no one	Nowadays both forms are considered correct, but purists would make this fine distinction: No-one (= nobody) <i>has so far been charged with causing the accident because no one person (= no particular individual) is to blame.</i>
onto / on to	It seems that onto does not enjoy the same dominant status as <i>into</i> above. In modern-day English, onto and on to are both regarded as correct prepositional forms. In cases where the on is an adverb, however, on to must be used: <i>He got up onto the stage, smiled and then went on to talk about his amazing experience.</i>
sometime / some time	<i>She'll do it sometime when she gets some time.</i>