

Advanced English Spelling and Usage

A practical guide to advanced spelling, punctuation and usage for confident English writers.

Good to know

English spelling differs between British and American usage. The most important principle in professional writing is consistency: choose a style and apply it throughout the document.

1. Punctuation and sentence structure

Colon and semicolon

- Use a colon before an explanation or list: The result was clear: the figures were wrong.
- Use a semicolon between closely related independent clauses: The deadline is near; we must act now.
- A colon can introduce a precise summary: The contract contains three priorities: accuracy, consistency and confidentiality.

Commas in clauses

- Introductory phrase: After reviewing the contract, we sent our comments.
- Essential information takes no comma: The documents that we received yesterday are complete.
- Additional information is set off by commas: The documents, which arrived yesterday, are complete.
- Do not separate the subject from its verb: The final report, is attached is incorrect.

2. Precision in formal English

Fewer, less and amount

- Use fewer with countable nouns: fewer errors, fewer applicants, fewer than ten pages.
- Use less with uncountable nouns: less confusion, less time, less information.
- Use number for countable nouns and amount for uncountable nouns: a large number of cases; a small amount of data.

Who, whom and whose

- Who is the subject: Who approved the translation?
- Whom is the object in formal style: Whom did you contact?
- After a preposition, formal writing uses whom: to whom it may concern.
- Whose asks about possession: Whose document is this?

3. British and American English

Both varieties are correct. Problems arise when they are mixed within one text.

- British colour, favour, labour; American color, favor, labor.
- British commonly uses organise; American uses organize.
- British centre, metre; American center, meter.
- British travelling, cancelled; American traveling, canceled.
- Choose one style guide for a project and record the preferred variant in your glossary.

4. Comparatives and superlatives

Use -er/-est with most short adjectives and more/most with longer adjectives.

- Short adjectives: small - smaller - the smallest; fast - faster - the fastest.
- Long adjectives: important - more important - the most important; reliable - more reliable - the most reliable.
- Adjectives ending in -y: change y to i: happy - happier - the happiest.
- Some two-syllable adjectives allow both forms: cleverer / more clever.
- Irregular forms: good - better - the best; bad - worse - the worst; far - farther/further - the farthest/furthest.

5. Parallel structure and consistency

Parallel structure makes complex professional writing easier to read.

- Keep verbs parallel: The role requires writing reports, analysing data and presenting results.
- Use the same structure in lists: to review, to revise and to approve.
- Do not mix spelling, punctuation or heading conventions in one document.
- Write dates unambiguously: 15 September 2026 or September 15, 2026, not 09/15/26.

6. Apostrophes and hyphens

- Possession: one client's file; two clients' files.
- Contractions: do not - don't; they are - they're.
- Use a hyphen where it improves clarity: well-known author, user-friendly software.

6. Frequently confused words

These pairs are frequent sources of errors, even in otherwise polished texts.

- their / there / they're: belonging to them / in that place / they are.
- its / it's: belonging to it / it is or it has.
- complement / compliment: The colours complement each other. She paid me a compliment.
- principal / principle: The school principal announced a new principle.
- stationary / stationery: The car remained stationary. Please order new office stationery.
- British English: practice is the noun and practise the verb. American English uses practice for both.

7. Spelling patterns worth checking

- -able / -ible: reliable, manageable, possible, responsible. There is no universal rule.
- -tion / -sion: decide - decision, permit - permission, create - creation.
- Silent letters occur in knowledge, receipt, island, subtle and Wednesday.
- Double consonants: run - running and plan - planned.
- Check a dictionary when pronunciation does not clearly indicate the spelling.

Professional writing tip

Comparatives and superlatives

Use -er/-est with short adjectives and often with two-syllable adjectives ending in -y, -ow, -le or -er. Use more/most with longer adjectives and many other two-syllable adjectives.

Examples: happy - happier - the happiest; narrow - narrower - the narrowest; simple - simpler - the simplest; modern - more modern - the most modern; careful - more careful - the most careful. Both forms are possible with some words: cleverer / more clever.

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A reliable dictionary and a consistent style guide are essential for polished English. SATZGEWINN supports you with proofreading, editing and professional translations.