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Factsheet 2: Spelling and punctuation

These articles on spelling and punctuation appeared on my website blog in 2016 under Tips for writers. They are reproduced here as they appeared.

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WHICH SPELLINGS TO USE: -ISE OR -IZE? -YSE OR -YZE?

Have you ever wondered why some books use -ise spellings , such as organisation, while others use the spelling organization? Usually, this is not merely an author's whim but follows a recognized spelling style.

In British-style books many verbs that end in -ise can also be spelt with an -ize ending: for instance, organise and organize, recognise and recognize. Also, some nouns can be similarly spelt either way: organisation and organization. Whether you use -ise or -ize spellings in your writing is a matter of personal choice or maybe to follow the required style of the publisher or institution you are writing for, but for whatever reason the spelling used should be consistent throughout the document or publication. For instance, Oxford University Press prefers -ize spellings.

However, the house style of a publisher might accept both spellings in the case of a large book with individual chapters contributed by a variety of authors, especially if some are British and others are from the US or other areas of the world. If a large book contains a collection of papers that have been previously published separately, then a mix of spelling styles would likely be accepted as long as each chapter is consistent within itself. The same goes for other cases of variant spellings such as focused and focussed, and judgment and judgement.

Some people might think that -ize spellings are customary in the US, which would be the case, and are not used in Britain, which would *not* be the case. Some also might think that the use of -ize spellings in the UK is a recent innovation, but it is not as there have been cases of its use in nineteenth century English literature:

http://random-idea-english.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/random-ise-novels-of-jane-austen-and.html

http://random-idea-english.blogspot.co.uk/2013/09/random-ise-works-of-george-eliot-ize.html

and even as far back as the fifteenth century according to the Oxford University Press:

http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2011/03/ize-or-ise/

There are a few verbs in British English (and usually in US English also) that can *only* be spelt with an -ise ending, such as advertise, chastise, comprise, compromise, exercise, improvise, premise, revise, surprise, and televise. This list is not exhaustive, but just gives a few examples.

There are also some verbs that *always* end in -yse in British English, but would be spelt ending in -yze in US English:

British / US

analyse / analyze

breathalyse / breathalyze

catalyse / catalyze

dialyse / dialyze

electrolyse / electrolyze

paralyse / paralyze

psychoanalyse / psychoanalyze.

Again, the above list is not exhaustive but just gives a few examples.

In summary, be consistent with your spelling patterns and refer to a good-quality dictionary.

KNOWING HOW TO USE HYPHENS AND DASHES

You might wonder what the difference is between hyphens (-) and dashes/rules (*– en, — em dash/rule) that are to be seen in publications. Well, they have distinct functions in punctuation. The main ones are covered below.

Hyphens

These are used

- to join two words together (e.g. 'mother-in-law', 'ill-natured child'), called a hard hyphen

- to indicate a word division at the end of a line, called a soft hyphen

- to indicate a missing element, called a floating hyphen (e.g. 'over- and under-paid', 'pre- and post-war history', 'seventeenth- and eighteenth-century architecture').

Pairs of words go through three stages of being used together: for example, initially coal field, then through increased use to coal-field, and finally through widespread use to coalfield.

 Hyphens are meant to assist in comprehension, as in 'a big boat captain'. Is it the boat or captain that is big? For clarity you would hyphenate as 'a big-boat captain' to indicate he is the captain of a big boat, rather than a tall or rather portly captain (eaten too many pies perhaps). Other examples would be a 'black-bearded man' or 'deep-blue sea'.

The current trend is to use hyphens sparingly and in the occasions mentioned in the previous paragraph, using them only to avoid ambiguity and confusion. American authors tend to use fewer hyphens than their British counterparts.

En dashes (–)

This is a dash or rule that is longer than the hyphen that can be used as follows:

- unspaced in number spans to replace the word 'to', such as pages 236–54, 492–6 (often in these cases minimum numerals are used – referred to as elision)

- unspaced between two items that are linked but not joined in a fixed sense, such as in the London–Birmingham railway

- spaced to indicate a parenthetical clause, such as in 'The party lasted – as we all knew it would – well into the early morning'. (Note that no punctuation should normally precede a single dash or the opening one of a pair.)

Em dashes (—)

This dash is longer than the en dash above and can be used as follows:

- parenthetically for clauses in the same way that en dashes are used above, a practice often adopted in US English texts and some UK journals, but where they are often unspaced (no space before or after them)

- in dialogue to indicate an interruption 'I warned him not to—'

- as two together, i.e. ——, to indicate a repeated author's name in bibliographic entries.

(*Note the terms 'en' or 'em' refer to a printer's measure.)