

Spelling Traps for Australian Journalists

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 2 min read

Australian English sits between British and American conventions, closer to the British but with its own character. A working journalist needs to know the difference, the house style of the publication, and the words most often mangled.

American vs Australian spelling

Australian style follows British spelling in most respects. A few of the common differences:

-our vs -or. Australian: colour, favour, labour, honour, neighbour, behaviour. American: color, favor, labor, honor, neighbor, behavior. The Australian Labor Party is the exception by its own choice of spelling since 1912.

-re vs -er. Australian: centre, theatre, fibre, metre (as a unit), litre. American: center, theater, fiber, meter, liter. A meter in Australian English is a measuring device (parking meter, gas meter). A metre is a unit of length.

-ise vs -ize. Australian: realise, organise, recognise, specialise, criticise. American: realize, organize, recognize, specialize, criticize. Some Australian publications permit -ize as an Oxford variant. Most prefer -ise. Know your house style.

-yse vs -yze. Australian: analyse, paralyse, catalyse. American: analyze, paralyze, catalyze.

-ce vs -se (nouns and verbs). Australian keeps the British distinction: licence (noun), license (verb); practice (noun), practise (verb); advice (noun), advise (verb). American uses license and practice for both. A driver has a driver's licence (noun). A pub is licensed (verb).

Doubled consonants. Australian: travelling, travelled, cancelled, modelled. American: traveling, traveled, canceled, modeled.

-ogue vs -og. Australian: catalogue, dialogue, analogue. American: catalog, dialog, analog. Computing terms often use the American spelling even in Australian copy (analog signal, dialog box).

Aluminium vs aluminum. Australian: aluminium (four syllables, matches other -ium elements). American: aluminum.

Common traps

Separate. Not "seperate." This is probably the most common spelling error in Australian newsrooms. Check it every time.

Privilege. Not "priviledge." There is no "d."

Definitely. Not "definatly." Contains "finite."

Occurrence. Two c's, two r's. "Occurred" has two r's as well.

Accommodate. Two c's, two m's. Think of it as a room with double everything.

Embarrass. Two r's, two s's.

Liaison, liaise. The "i" before the "a." One of the trickiest.

Minuscule. Not "miniscule" despite how often it is written that way. The root is "minus," not "mini."

Supersede. Not "supercede." From Latin *sedere*, to sit.

Unprecedented. Not "unprecedented." From "precedent."

Judgement or judgment. Both are acceptable in Australian English. "Judgment" is the preferred form in legal contexts. House styles vary. Be consistent within a piece.

Ageing or aging. "Ageing" is the preferred Australian form. American and some British usage drops the e.

Gaol or jail. Both were Australian for decades. "Jail" is now standard in almost all Australian publications.

Internet-era words

The spelling of digital vocabulary has mostly settled. A few still wobble.

Email. One word, no hyphen. "E-mail" is dated. Write "email" as a noun and a verb.

Website. One word. "Web site" was briefly correct; it is now archaic.

Online. One word. "On-line" is obsolete.

Internet. Lowercased in most Australian publications since the late 2010s. The Oxford and Macquarie dictionaries both accept lowercase.

Wi-Fi. Hyphenated, both words capitalised. It is a trademark.

Smartphone. One word.

Podcast. One word. "Podcaster" and "podcasting" follow normal -er and -ing conventions.

App. Lowercase. An app is not an App unless it is a brand name.

Social media. Two words. Still takes a plural verb in formal writing: "social media are" not "social media is," though usage is shifting.

Hashtag. One word.

Live-stream. Hyphenated as a verb. "Live stream" as a noun in most Australian house styles, though "livestream" is catching up.

Cryptocurrency. One word.

AI. Capitalised initials. Avoid writing out "artificial intelligence" every time; use "AI" on first reference if the context is already about AI.

When you are not sure

The Macquarie Dictionary is the standard Australian reference. Use it. It takes thirty seconds to check, and the alternative is seeing the wrong spelling in print with your byline above it.

Simon's version: "Good journalists do not trust their memory for spelling. They check. Every time. That is why their copy runs clean."

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