A

@

This is a symbol in search of a name. English-speakers call @ the "*at* sign," which will do while it serves as the universal symbol of an e-mail address. Its shape is also used along with other *emoticons* to represent expressions of the human face (see **emoticons**). But its resemblance to animals emerges through ad hoc names in other languages. In Danish, it's seen as the "elephant's trunk," and in Chinese as "little mouse." Russian has it as "little dog," Swedish as "cat's foot," and Dutch as "monkey's tail." The best consensus is for "snail," which provides a name for @ in French, Italian, Hebrew and Korean.

◊ On quoting e-mail addresses, see under **URL**.

a or an

Which should it be?

a hotel	or	an hotel
a heroic effort	or	an heroic effort
a RAF training course	or	an RAF training course
a $8 ticket	or	an $8 ticket

A single rule resolves all such queries: **a** is used before words beginning with a consonant, and **an** before those beginning with a vowel. This is straightforwardly applied in *a doctor, a receptionist* and *an astronaut, an engineer*. But note that the rule depends on the sound not the spelling. We write *a union, a unique gift* and *a once-in-a-lifetime experience* because the words following the article actually begin with a consonant sound (the "y" sound in the first two cases, and the "w" sound in the third). The same principle makes it *an hour, an honor,* and *an honest man*. The word following the indefinite article begins with a vowel sound.

When writing abbreviations, the choice between **a** or **an** again depends on the pronunciation of the first letter. So *a US Marine* and *a Unesco project* are quite regular, as are *an MP* and *an HB pencil*. Any abbreviation beginning with F, L, H, M, N, R, S or X takes **an**, because of the way those letters are pronounced. The effect is exploited in advertising for a brand of beer, where the use of **A** (rather than **AN**) shows how to pronounce the ambiguous brandname:

I CAN FEEL A XXXX COMING ON AUSTRALIANS WOULDN'T GIVE A XXXX FOR ANYTHING ELSE

Preceded by **A**, the brandname must be read as "four ex" not as "exexexex." It nudges readers away from the unprintable or socially unacceptable interpretation of the word, while no doubt capitalizing on it.

Similar principles hold for writing sums of money. Pronounce them and they select **a** for *a £12 shirt* and **an** for *an $80m. loan,* taking the cue from the number (which is said first) rather than the currency symbol (which is written first).

Despite all that, certain words beginning with *h* are made exceptions by some writers and speakers. They would preface *hotel* and *heroic* with **an** rather than **a**, despite pronouncing the *h* at the start of those words. Other polysyllabic words beginning with *h* will be given the same treatment, especially if their first syllable is unstressed. In both American and British English the words *historic, historical* and *historian* are the most frequent of these exceptional cases, but the tendency goes further in Britain, by the evidence of matching databases (LOB and Brown corpora). They show that British writers use **an** to preface adjectives such as *habitual, hereditary, heroic, horrific, hypothetical, hysterical* (and their adverbs) as well as the noun *hotel*. There are far fewer examples in the American data, and the only distinctive case is *herb,* which is commonly pronounced without *h* in the US (though not in the UK or elsewhere). The King James bible (1611) records the use of **an** with other monosyllabic words, as in *an host* and *an house*, though they are supposed to go with *h*-less pronunciations, formerly much more common.

Over the centuries *h* has been an uncertain quantity at the beginnings of words in many European languages. Most words beginning with *h* lost it as they passed from Latin into French and Italian. The Latin word *hora* meaning "hour" became French *heure* (pronounced "err," with no *h* sound) and also the Italian *ora*, without an *h* even in the spelling. English retains an *h* in the spelling of *hour* but not in the pronunciation. The process also shows up in the contrasting pronunciations of *heir* (an early English loan from French) and *hereditary* (a Renaissance borrowing direct from Latin), which embody the same Latin stem. Spelling pronunciation has revived the *h* in some French loanwords like *heritage* and *historian* (those well used in English writing); while others such as *hour, heir, hono(u)r* are *h*-less, in keeping with French pronunciation. Classical loanwords (apart from *honorary, honorarium, honorific*) have settled on pronunciations with the *h* sounded; and they complement the many basic Anglo-Saxon words such as *here, how, him* and *hair, home, honey* in which *h* is pronounced. (See further under **h**.)

Nowadays the silent *h* persists in only a handful of French loanwords (*heir, honest, hono(u)r, hour* and their derivatives), and these need to be preceded by **an**. The *h* of other loans like *heroic, historical* and *hypothesis* may have been silent or varied in earlier times, leaving uncertainty as to whether **an** was required or not. But their pronunciation is no longer variable and provides no phonetic justification for **an**. Its use with them is a stylistic nicety, lending historical nuances to discourse in which tradition dies hard.

◊ For the grammar of **a** and **an**, see **articles**.

◊ For the presence/absence of **a/an** in (1) journalistic introductions, see **journalism and journalese**; and in (2) titles of books, periodicals, plays etc., see under **the**.

a-

The **a-** prefixed to ordinary English adjectives and adverbs comes from two different sources. In a few cases such as *afresh, akin* and *anew,* it represents the Old English preposition *of,* and so *anew* was once "of new." In many more cases it was the Old English preposition *on*, as in:

aback	*ablaze*	*abroad*	*afloat*	*afoot*
aglow	*ahead*	*ajar*	*alive*	*around*
ashore	*aside*	*asleep*	*astray*	

Thus *ashore* was literally "on shore."

In each set the two elements of the prepositional phrase have long since merged into one. But the past still shows through in the fact that as adjectives they are used only after the noun they qualify, either postpositively as in *the way ahead* or predicatively, i.e. as the complement of a verb, as in *Route 66 is ahead*. (See further under **adjectives**, section 1.) The adverbial functions of these words are also evident in collocations such as *taken aback*, *go astray* and *get ahold of* (see further at **ahold**). Others such as **around** are now both adverbs and prepositions.

Note the apparently similar *apart,* which consists of French elements (*à part*) rather than English ones. Its parity with *aside* is examined at **aside (from)**.

a-/an-

These are two forms of a negative prefix derived from Greek. In English its meaning is usually privative, i.e. "without" or "lacking." It appears as the first component in some academic and technical words, such as:

achromatic	*analgesic*
apathy, apathetic	*anarchy, anarchic*
aphasia, aphasic	*anhydrous*
atheism, atheist	*anorexia*

As the two lists show, the form **an-** occurs before vowels and *h*, and **a-** before all other consonants. In most cases the prefix combines with Greek stems which do not exist independently in English. In just a few, such as *amoral, asexual, atypical,* the **a-** combines with a Latin stem that is also an ordinary English word. In the case of *amoral,* the prefix makes the vital difference between *amoral* ("lacking in moral values") and *immoral* ("contrary to moral values," where *im-* is a negative).

◊ For more about negative prefixes, see **de-**, **in-/im-**, **non-** and **un-**. See also **dis-**, and other privative affixes such as **-free** and **-less**.

-a

This suffix is really several suffixes. They come into English with loanwords from other languages, including Italian, Spanish, Latin and Greek, and may represent either singular or plural. In *gondola* (Italian), *siesta* (Spanish), *formula* (Latin) and *dogma* (Greek), the **-a** is a singular ending, whereas in *bacteria* (Latin) and *criteria* (Greek), it represents the plural.

Loanwords ending in singular **-a** are not to be taken for granted because their plurals may or may not go according to a foreign pattern, as discussed in the first section below. Loanwords which come with a plural **-a** ending pose other grammatical questions, to be dealt with in the second section.

1 Words with the singular -a mostly make their plurals in the usual English way, by adding an *s*. This is true for all the Italian and Spanish words, and many of the Latin ones. So *gondola* becomes *gondolas, siesta* becomes *siestas,* and *aroma* becomes *aromas*. The numerous Latin names for plants, for example *mimosa*, *ponderosa, protea, sequoia,* all take English plurals. However, Latin loanwords which are strongly associated with an academic field usually have Latin plurals as well, thus *formulae* along with *formulas, retinae* and *retinas* etc. So plurals with *-ae* prevail in writing intended for scientists and scholars everywhere, though the forms ending in *-as* are also available and used in nonspecialized writing and conversation.

The major dictionaries differ over which words can take English plurals. *Webster's Third* (1986) indicates an English plural for all the words listed below – either explicitly, as first or second alternative, or by the lack of reference to the plural (this being the dictionary convention for regular inflections). The *Oxford Dictionary* (1989) allows either Latin or English plurals for those set in italics below, but Latin only plurals for those set in roman. Note also that while the *Oxford* presents the Latin plurals as ligatures, *Webster's* sets them as digraphs (see further under **ae/e**).

abscissa	*am(o)eba*	*antenna*	*aorta*
aura	*caesura*	*cicada*	*cornea*
echidna	*fibula*	*formula*	*hydra*
lacuna	lamina	larva	mora
nebula	nova	*patella*	*penumbra*
persona	*piscina*	*placenta*	pupa
retina	*stoa*	tibia	trachea
ulna	*urethra*	*vagina*	vertebra

An English plural is natural enough for those latinisms which are both common words and technical terms (e.g. *aura, cicada, cornea, retina*). For some (e.g. *aorta, urethra*), the occasions on which a plural might be needed are not very many, and, when it is, an ad hoc English plural is all the more likely. Note that for **antenna**, **patella** and **persona**, the two plurals are used in different fields (see under those headings). For the plural of *alumna,* see **alumni**.

Greek loanwords with singular **-a** can also have two plural forms. They bring with them their Greek plural suffix *-ta,* though they soon acquire English plurals with *s* as well. The Greek *-ta* plurals survive in scholarly, religious or scientific writing, while in other contexts the English *s* plurals are dominant. Compare the *traumas of everyday life* with the *traumata* which are the concerns of medicine and psychology. Other loanwords which use both English and Greek plurals are:

dogma *lemma* *magma* *schema* *stigma*

For both *dogma* and *stigma,* the Greek plural is strongly associated with Catholic orthodoxy (see **stigma**). The Greek plural of *miasma* (*miasmata*) seems to have lapsed in C21 English (see **miasma**).

2 Words with plural -a from Latin are often collective in meaning, for example *bacteria, data* and *media*. There's no need to pluralize them, nor do we often need their singular forms, though they do exist: *bacterium, datum* etc. (For more information, see **-um**.) The grammatical status of words like *media* (whether to construe them as singular or plural) is still unsettled. Those who know Latin are inclined to insist on plural agreement, on the grounds that *data* and *media* (not to mention *candelabra*) "are plural." Yet the argument depends on Latin rather than English grammar; and is undermined by other cases

such as *agenda* and *stamina,* which are also Latin plurals but now always used with singular verbs in English. The issues of singular/plural agreement are further discussed under **collective nouns** and **agreement** section 1; and at individual entries for **candelabra**, **data** and **media**.
◊ For Greek loanwords with a plural **-a**, such as *automata, criteria, ganglia, phenomena,* see **-on**.

a fortiori

This elliptical phrase, borrowed from Latin, means roughly "by way of something stronger." Far from being an oblique reference to fetching the whisky, it's used in formal discussion to mean "with yet stronger reason" and to introduce a second point which the speaker or writer feels will clinch the argument. Compare **a priori**.

à la

In contemporary English this versatile French tag is deployed on many of the frontiers of taste, apart from *haute cuisine*. It is still exploited on *à la carte* menus that offer you taste-tempting dishes *à la duchesse* or *à l'indienne;* and in countercuisine, it can be found in *fast foods à la McDonalds*. But beyond the restaurant business, *à la* can refer to a distinctive style in almost any domain, and the reference point is usually ad hoc, as in *makeup [used] to amuse, à la Mick Jagger,* or *an oversight committee à la New York in the 1970s*. As in those examples, the construction often turns on the proper names of persons or places, titles and institutions. It creates reference points in film – *à la "Casablanca"* – and fiction – *à la "Portnoy's Complaint"* – not to mention health management: *whether to quarantine people with AIDS à la TB*. Increasingly **à la** is found with common nouns as well, as in *law à la modem,* and *seats covered with vinyl à la taxicab,* among the examples from CCAE.

A la is a clipped form of the French *à la mode (de),* which explains the feminine form of the article (*la*). In English it works as a fixed phrase, rather like a compound preposition, and there's no suggestion of adapting its grammatical gender from **à la** to *au* when the following name is masculine (see the Mick Jagger example above).

The grave accent is still often printed on **à la** in English, especially British English, though it is by no means a recent borrowing (first recorded in 1589). No doubt its use is often prompted by a taste for the exotic; and the accent – and the fact that the phrase still tends to be italicized – help to emphasize its foreignness. The *Oxford Dictionary* (1989) updates the entry on **à la** without registering the accentless form, whereas it appears as an alternative in *Webster's Third* (1986).

à la carte

This is one of the many French expressions borrowed into English to cover gastronomic needs. Literally it means "according to the card." At restaurants it gives you the freedom to choose from individually priced dishes – and the obligation to pay whatever the bill amounts to. The **à la carte** system contrasts with what has traditionally been known as *table d'hôte*, literally "the host's table." This implies partaking of whatever menu the restaurant has decided on, for a set price. The phrase goes back to earlier centuries, when the only public dining place for travelers was at the host's/landlord's table. But *table d'hôte* is what most of us partake of when traveling as tourist-class passengers on aircraft. In restaurants more transparent phrases are used to show when the menu and its price are predetermined: *fixed price menu* (in the UK and US), or *prix fixe* (in France and francophone Canada). In Italy it's *menu turistico*.

Though dictionaries such as *New Oxford* (1998) and *Merriam-Webster* (2000) continue to list **à la carte** and *table d'hôte* with their French accents, they are commonly seen without them in the English-speaking world.

a posteriori

Borrowed from Latin, this phrase means "by a later effect or instance." It refers to arguments which reason from the effect to the cause, or those which work from a specific instance back to a generalization. *A posteriori arguments* are concerned with using empirical observations and induction as the basis of reasoning. They contrast with *a priori arguments,* on which see next entry.

a priori

This phrase, borrowed from Latin, means "from the prior [assumption]." It identifies an argument which reasons from cause to a presumed effect, or which works deductively from a general principle to the specific case. Because such reasoning relies on theory or presumption rather than empirical observation, an *a priori argument* is often judged negatively. It seems to make assertions before analyzing the evidence. Compare **a posteriori**.

abacus

What if there's more than one of them? Technical uses of this word in classical architecture have no doubt helped to preserve its Latin plural *abaci*. This is the only plural recognized in the *Oxford Dictionary* (1989), and the one given priority in *Webster's Third* (1986). But *Webster's* also recognizes the English plural *abacuses,* which comes naturally when **abacus** the word refers to the low-tech, finger-powered calculator. See further under **-us**.

abbreviations

These are the standardized short forms of names or titles, and of certain common words and phrases. The term covers (i) *abbreviated words* such as *cont.* and *no.*, i.e. ones which are cut short or contracted in the middle; and (ii) *abbreviated phrases* such as *AIDS*, *RSI*, formed out of the first letters of words in a phrase. Both groups can be further divided (see under *contractions* section 1 for **abbreviations** v. *contractions*; and under *acronyms* for the distinction between *acronyms* and *initialisms*). The punctuation given to each group varies according to American and British style, and within them, as discussed below in section 2. However, there's a consensus that most types of symbol should be left unpunctuated (see section 1 below).

Abbreviations of all kinds are now accepted in many kinds of functional and informative writing, as neat and clear representations of the full name or title. Certain **abbreviations** such as *EFT* or *ftp* are in fact better known than their full forms (*electronic funds transfer, file transfer protocol*). The idea that they are unacceptable in formal writing seems to derive from writing in the humanities, where they are less often

needed. **Abbreviations** may indeed look strange in the text of a novel or short story. Yet who can imagine a letter which does not carry **abbreviations** somewhere in referring to people and places? Business and technical reports could hardly do without them.

Provided they are not obscure to the reader, **abbreviations** communicate more with fewer letters. Writers have only to ensure that the abbreviations they use are too well known to need any introduction, or that they are introduced and explained on their first appearance. Once the reader knows that in a particular document *CBC* equals the *Children's Book Council* or the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* or the *Carpet Bowls Club,* as the case may be, the short form can be used from then on.

1 Abbreviations which are never punctuated. Certain special categories of symbol never appear with a stop/period, anywhere in the world. They include:

- symbols for SI units: *kg, ml* etc. (See **SI units**.)
- compass points: *N, NE, SW* etc.
- chemical symbols: *Mn, Ni* etc.
- symbols for currencies: GB£, A$ etc. (See **Appendix ix**.)

One other group of **abbreviations** which never take stops are *acronyms* like *laser, scuba* (i.e. those which are pronounced like words and written in lower case: see **acronyms**).

2 Abbreviations which may or may not be punctuated, according to regional editorial practice (all other groups of **abbreviations**, of titles, institutions, placename elements and ordinary words and phrases). The various practices and their applications are illustrated below, followed by a discussion of each:

a) using stops with any kind of **abbreviation** (= traditional American style)

G.A.T.T. U.K. Mr. Rev. mgr. incl. a.s.a.p.

b) using stops with **abbreviations** but not *contractions* (= traditional British style)

G.A.T.T. U.K. Mr Rev. mgr incl. a.s.a.p.

c) using stops for short forms with any lower case letters in them

i) *GATT UK Mr. Rev. mgr. incl. a.s.a.p.* (all **abbreviations**)

ii) *GATT UK Mr Rev. mgr incl. a.s.a.p.* (excluding *contractions)*

d) using stops for short forms consisting entirely of lower case letters:

GATT UK Mr Rev mgr. incl. a.s.a.p.

*Option (a) is the easiest to implement, and has been the traditional practice in the US, though the *Chicago Manual* (1993) noted its erosion amid the worldwide trend to use less punctuation. Familiar **abbreviations** can be left unstopped because the reader needs no reminder that they are shortened words or phrases.

*Option (b) turns on the distinction between **abbreviations** and *contractions,* and gives punctuation to the first group but not the second. In theory a contraction like *mgr* ("manager") is not a "true" abbreviation, but a telescoped word with its first and last letters intact. Compare *incl.* which is clearly a clipped form of "including," and in which the stop marks where it has been abbreviated. This distinction developed in C20 British style (see **contractions**, section 1) but has never been fully standardized (Ritter 2002), and is varied in particular fields (e.g. law) and by publishing houses. It never was part of American style. Canadian editors note the distinction, though they call *contractions* "suspensions," in keeping with French editorial practice. However, the consistency of the traditional American style is appreciated when the two types of **abbreviation** are juxtaposed (*Editing Canadian English*, 2000). In New Zealand and Australia, the government *Style Manuals* (1997, 2002) have maintained the distinction, though the majority of Australian editors, writers and English teachers surveyed through Style Council in the 1990s (Peters, 1993c) begged to differ.

A particular conundrum for those who observe the distinction is what to do with pluralized abbreviations. Should the plural of *vol.* be *vols, vols.* or *vol.s?* Because the plural abbreviation preserves the final letter, there's an argument for treating it as a contraction and abandoning the stop, although it seems odd to have different punctuation for the singular and plural: *vol.* and *vols* respectively. The stopped alternatives are themselves anomalous. In *vol.s* the plural inflection is separated by a stop from the word it should be bound to; and in *vols.* the stop no longer marks the point at which the word has been clipped. *Vols.* is in fact the British choice (Butcher's *Copy-editing,* 1992, and Ritter, 2002) as well as the American, generally speaking. However, the *Chicago Manual* (1993) embeds the curiosity that Protestant scholars use *Pss.* for *Psalms*, where it's *Pss* for their Catholic counterparts in the *New American Bible*.

*Option (c) According to this option, stops are dispensed with for abbreviations which consist of full capitals, but retained for those with just an initial capital, or consisting entirely of lower case. This is in line with style trends in many parts of the English-speaking world. Capitalized acronyms and initialisms like *OPEC, UNICEF, BBC* are normally left unstopped, as indeed they appear in the *Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors* (1981), and are now explicitly endorsed in the *Chicago Manual* (2003). This was the preferred practice of freelance editors in Canada (*Editing Canadian English,* 1987), and those surveyed in Australia via Style Council in 1992. Stopless acronyms/initialisms are normal in the world of computing, witness *ASCII, CD-ROM* etc. Standardized abbreviations for nation-states such as *NZ, SA, USA* usually appear without stops these days. They do contrast, however, with other national abbreviations such as *Can., Germ.* and *Mex.,* which are still to be punctuated, according to both British and American references. Within the US, the two-letter abbreviations used in revised zip codes are standardized without periods, whether they consist of one or two words. Compare *NY* and *WY* (*New York / Wyoming*); *RI* and *WI* (*Rhode Island / Wisconsin*). Despite this growing consensus on leaving stops out of capitalized acronyms and abbreviations, the distinction between abbreviations and contractions still divides British and American style on lower-cased short forms. Hence suboption (ii) involving contractions, which is British-preferred; and (i) the more fully regularized suboption, which accords with American traditional practice.

*Option (d) builds on the trend described in (c). It takes its cue from the presence/absence of an initial capital letter, and applies stops only to those that begin with a lower case letter. The option brings abbreviations such as *Can* into line with *USA,* and

makes no attempt to distinguish between contractions and abbreviations in lower case. This gives it more appeal in America than Britain, because it would require stops to be put back in contractions such as *mgr,* which the British are accustomed to seeing in stopless form. For Americans it goes furthest in the direction of reducing the "fussiness" of word punctuation mentioned by the *Chicago Manual* (1993) – and is easily applied by printers and publishing technicians.

A fifth option, to use no stops in any kind of **abbreviation**, is not commonly seen on the printed page, but appears increasingly in digital style on the internet. It is easiest of all to implement, and would resolve the anomalies created by distinguishing contractions from **abbreviations** (options b, c (ii)). It would also break down the invisible barrier between **abbreviations** and symbols (section 1 above). Leaving all **abbreviations** unstopped is sometimes said to be a recipe for confusion between lower case abbreviations and ordinary words. Yet there are very few which could be mistaken. Those which are identical, such as *am, fig* and *no* are normally accompanied by numbers: *10 am, fig 13, no 2,* and there's no doubt as to what they are. The idea of leaving abbreviations totally without stops may seem too radical for the moment, but it would streamline the anomalies and divergences outlined in this entry.

International English selection: The third option (c (i)) for punctuating **abbreviations** – using periods/full stops for **abbreviations** containing one or more lower case letters – recommends itself as a reasonable compromise between American and British style. It is in keeping with the worldwide trend to reduce punctuation, without any commitment to different punctuation for *contractions* and **abbreviations,** and the anomalies that it creates. (That distinction is embedded in option c(ii), for those who wish to maintain it.)

3 Stopped abbreviations at the end of a sentence. When an **abbreviation** with a stop/period is the last word in a sentence, no further stop needs to be added:

> *Remember to acknowledge all contributors – the producer, director, screenplay writer, cameramen etc.*

In such cases, the "stronger" punctuation mark (the period / full stop that marks the end-of-sentence) covers for the lesser stop marking the **abbreviation**. This is in keeping with the normal convention (see **multiple punctuation**). By the same token, it masks the editorial decision as to whether the abbreviation should be stopped or not – which readers sometimes need to know. When necessary, it's best to remake the sentence so as to bring the abbreviation in from the end. This was done in discussing examples such as *vol* and *vols* in section (b) above.

◊ For the use of stops with the initials of a person's name, see under **names**.

◊ For the use of the stop/period in **Latin abbreviations**, see under that heading.

abide and abode

At the turn of the millennium, neither of these is much used. The verb **abide** appeared quite often in the King James bible, translating an array of Hebrew and Greek verbs meaning "dwell," "stay," "continue," "remain" and "endure" – senses which linger in the Victorian hymn "Abide with me," often sung at funeral services. Otherwise it survives mostly in the phrase *abide by (a decision),* and in the slightly colloquial idiom *can't/cannot abide* or *couldn't abide* [something or someone]. The participle *abiding* serves as adjective in combination with certain abstract ideals, for example *an abiding concern, his abiding faith in humanity;* and in the compound *law-abiding*. Yet shrinking usage overall leaves people unsure about the past tense. Is it the regular *abided* or **abode**, which was used consistently in the King James bible? The evidence of British and American dictionaries and corpora is that *abided* is preferred. As a noun, **abode** is mostly restricted to legal phrases such as *no fixed abode* and *right of abode*. Other uses, including the cliché *my humble abode,* and freely formed expressions such as *the abode of my forebears,* have an archaic ring to them.

-ability

This ending marks the conversion of adjectives with *-able* into abstract nouns, as when *respectable* becomes *respectability*. Adjectives with *-ible* are converted by the same process, so *flexible* becomes *flexibility*. The ending is not a simple suffix but a composite of:

- the conversion of *-ble* to a stressed syllable *-bil* and
- the addition of the suffix *-ity*. (See further under **-ity**.)

ablative

This grammatical case operates in Latin and some other languages, but not English. It marks a noun as having the meaning "by, with, or from" attached to it. For some Latin nouns, the **ablative** ending is *-o,* and so *ipso facto* means "by that fact." (See further under **cases**.)

The *ablative absolute* is a grammatical construction found in Latin which allows a phrase (all inflected in the ablative) to stand apart from the syntax of the clause or sentence in which it appears. The Latin tag *deo volente* ("God willing") is used in the same way in contemporary English.

able and able to

The use of *(be)* **able to** as a semi-auxiliary verb dates from C15, though it is not equally used in the US and the UK. The British make more of it, in the ratio of 3:2 according to the evidence of comparable C20 databases (**LOB** and **Brown**). It reflects the greater British use of modals and modalized verb phrases generally (see **modality**, and **auxiliary verbs**).

In both varieties of English, **able to** takes animate subjects much more often than inanimate ones, as in:

> *Thompson was able to smell a bargain a continent away.*

As in that example, **able to** normally combines with an active verb (see further under **voice**). This was the pattern in hundreds of corpus examples, the only counter example with a passive verb being *the chapel was still able to be used* (from LOB). **Able to** seems to insist on being construed with animate, active participants, as if it still draws on the energy of the adjective **able**, expressed in *an able politician* and *able-bodied citizens*. **Able** appears much less often as an adjective than as an auxiliary verb in both British

and American data: in the ratio of 1:11 in LOB and 1:12 in the Brown corpus. It occurs mostly in nonfiction genres of writing, perhaps because the approval expressed in it seems detached rather than engaged with the subject.

-able/-ible

Which of these endings to use is a challenge even for the successful speller. They sound the same, and the choice between them often seems arbitrary. In fact the choice is usually fixed by the word's origins. Unabridged British and American dictionaries – *Oxford* (1989) and *Webster's Third* (1986) – do allow that certain words may be spelled either way in contemporary English, although they diverge on which have the option, and only a handful of words are given alternative spellings in both:

collapsable/collapsible *collectable/collectible*
condensable/condensible *ignitable/ignitible*
preventable/preventible

Those apart, the following are independently credited with alternative spellings by *Oxford* and *Webster's,* marked *O* and *W* accordingly:

avertable/avertible (O)
confusable/confusible (O)
connectable/connectible (O)
contractable/contractible (O)
deductable/deductible (O)
detectable/detectible (O)
diffusable/diffusible (O)
discernable/discernible (W)
expressable/expressible (W)
extendable/extendible (W)
extractable/extractible (W)
impressable/impressible (W)
perfectable/perfectible (W)
suggestable/suggestible (O)
transfusable/transfusible (W)

Others such as *digestable/digestible* and *resistable/resistible* could probably be added to that list, but for the fact that *Oxford* presently marks their **-able** spellings as cutting out in C19.

The **-able** suffix is the more widely used of the two in English at large, partly because it combines with any Anglo-Saxon or French verb (*believable, enjoyable*), as well as neo-Latin ones, as in *retractable* or *contactable.* Fresh formations based on neo-Latin can provide alternatives to the well-established loan from Latin, as with *contractable/contractible,* where the first (in the sense "able to be contracted") is a modern word, whereas the second "able to contract" goes back to C16. Yet the opposite tendency is also to be found: *Oxford Dictionary* citations show that some start life with **-able**, as did *deductable* and *detectable,* and later acquired neo-Latin spellings with **-ible**. The forces of analogy compete with regular wordforming principles among these words, and because they are readily coined on the spur of the moment, the dictionary records are necessarily incomplete. Any word of this type not yet listed in the dictionary can legitimately be spelled **-able**, if it's based on a current English verb stem, simple or compound, e.g. *gazumpable, upgradable*. In fact the stem is often a useful clue for spelling the established words. Compare *dispens**able*** (whose stem is the same as the verb *dispense*) with *comprehens**ible,*** for which there is no English verb "comprehens-." Most words with **-ible** embody Latin stems with no independent verb role in English. (This is also true of a very few **-able** words such as *educable* and *navigable,* derived from the Latin first conjugation, but with enough relatives in English such as *education, navigation,* to secure their spelling.) The **-ible** words often lack close relatives, and the rationale for the spelling is not obvious unless you know Latin conjugations. The table below lists the most important **-ible** words, though where there are both positive and negative forms (e.g *credible* as well as *incredible*), it gives just one of them.

accessible	*adducible*	*admissible*
audible	*combustible*	*compatible*
contemptible	*credible*	*deducible*
divisible	*edible*	*eligible*
feasible	*flexible*	*incomprehensible*
incontrovertible	*incorrigible*	*incorruptible*
indefensible	*indelible*	*indestructible*
infallible	*intelligible*	*invincible*
irascible	*irrepressible*	*irresistible*
legible	*negligible*	*ostensible*
perceptible	*permissible*	*persuasible*
plausible	*possible*	*reducible*
reprehensible	*responsible*	*submersible*
susceptible	*tangible*	*terrible*
transmissible	*visible*	

The stems of **-ible** words come straight from Latin paradigms and are not normally usable as English verbs (*access* and *flex* are exceptions in so far as they now serve as verbs). Most **-ible** words express rather abstract senses, unlike those ending in **-able**, which typically build in the active sense of the verb: compare *defensible* and *defendable*. Note also that words ending in **-ible** take the negative prefix *in-* (as in *indefensible*), whereas those with **-able** and based on English verbs are usually negated with *un-* (e.g. *undefendable*). See further under **in-/un-**.

◊ For the choice between *drivable* and *driveable, likable* and *likeable* etc., see **-eable or -able**.

abled

See under **disabled and disability**.

abolition or abolishment

Though both terms are current, the Latin-derived **abolition** holds sway in British as well as American English. In the UK **abolition** is effectively the only term, in data from the BNC, whereas **abolishment** plays a minor part in the US, appearing in the ratio of about 1:17, in data from CCAE. We might expect more of **abolishment**, which is just as old (dating from C16) and has more direct connections with the verb *abolish*. Yet legal and institutional uses of **abolition** give it strong social and political connotations, in the discontinuance of slavery and the death penalty. The productivity of the word is also reflected in derivatives such as *abolitionist*.

Aboriginal and Aborigine

Since around 1800 the term **aboriginal** has been used as a generic reference to native peoples encountered by colonialists in (for them) remoter parts of the world. The capitalized form **Aboriginal** still serves as a collective reference to indigenous groups within the population, especially in Australia, but also in Canada, where it complements the use of *First People / First Nation*. In the US the general term is *Native American* or *American Indian,* and *Indian* is used by the peoples themselves. Use of the term

Amerindian for the North American Indian is mostly confined to linguistics and anthropology. In South Africa the indigenous people are referred to as *black South Africans*. No collective name is needed in New Zealand for the *Maori,* because they are ethnically homogeneous.

In current English, the noun **aborigine** is particularly associated with Australia, but always capitalized as **Aborigine/Aborigines**. Its status vis-à-vis using **Aboriginal** as a noun has been much debated on diplomatic and linguistic grounds. **Aborigine** was believed by some to be more pejorative than **Aboriginal** (though this view is not shared by the people themselves). Others argued that **Aborigine** was an illegitimate *backformation* from **Aborigines**, though few would now call it a linguistic crime (see **backformation**). Neither argument carries weight in terms of common usage. Australian sources on the internet return almost three times as many instances of **Aborigines** as of **Aboriginals** (Google 2002). Successive Australian government *Style Manuals* have swung from one paradigm to another (Peters 1995), and the sixth edition (2002) proposes **Aboriginal(s)** for the noun (singular and plural) as well as the adjective. So **Aborigine(s)** is currently ruled out of official documents, though other publications such as newspapers, magazines and monographs make free use of it.

For indigenous people themselves, generic terms are unsatisfactory whenever a more specific name can be found. Those preferred for particular regions of Australia are listed in the government *Style Manual* (2002), and for the First Nations of Canada in *Editing Canadian English* (2000). The names of federally recognized Native American tribes are listed on the internet at www.healing-arts.org/tribes.htm.

◊ For the use of **Black**, see under that heading.

about, about to, and not about to

The fluidity of its meaning makes **about** a word to watch. But as adverb/preposition, and as a semi-auxiliary in *be about to,* its uses are more generally accepted and more international than is sometimes thought.

About *as preposition and/or adverb* has several meanings which are widely used and current in both the US and the UK:

1) "close to"/"approximately" in time, as in *"come (at) about ten o'clock."* The approximation is handy whether the writer is unsure of the time, or prefers not to put too fine a point on it (see **vague words**). Though often presented as the British counterpart to American use of *around*, the construction is just as familiar in the US, according to *Webster's English Usage* (1989). See further at **around**.

2) "close by," "in the vicinity" (but not visible): *"George is about. Could you hold on?"* The adverbial use is conversational in tone, though it also appears in everyday writing, as in *seeing who is about*. This is sometimes said to be strictly for the British, because Americans prefer *around*. But the US preference is not so strong as to exclude **about**, by the evidence of the Brown corpus.

3) "concerning" or "concerned with," as in *the letter is about reconciliation* (preposition); *that's what it's about* (adverb). The preposition has always been standard usage, and the adverb is freely used in a variety of everyday prose in British and American databases. The emphatic form *that's what X is all about* is also alive and well, despite the view of *Webster's English Usage* (1989) that it was on the decline. There are hundreds of examples in data from CCAE and the BNC. Most involve impersonal subjects, as in *that's what art / life / free enterprise is all about*. But in American data there are a few examples with a personal subject, as in *that's what this candidate is all about* and *we know what we are all about*.

The most important use of **about** is in the collocation **be about to,** used as a semi-auxiliary verb to express future events or intentions (see **auxiliary verbs** section 3). Its shades of meaning vary with the grammar of the subject (first, second or third person): compare *I'm about to go home* (said with intent) and *The judge was about to pronounce the sentence* (future event). But the negative counterpart **not about to** seems to have developed its own strong sense of determination, irrespective of person. Intention and resolve are both expressed in *I'm not about to stop you* and *Fox was not about to risk waiting for her inside her room* (these examples from the BNC, showing its use in British English). The idiom **not about to** seems to have originated in the American South and South Midland, and it was being used in nationwide publications by the 1960s, and even by two American presidents (Truman and Johnson). Its potential ambiguity attracted the attention of usage commentators including Bernstein, writing in *The New York Times* (1968/9), but there's no hard evidence of confusion with ordinary uses of the semi-auxiliary. **Not about to** probably has some rhetorical value in its negative understatement. See under **figures of speech**.

about face or about turn

See under **U-turn**.

abridgement or abridgment

The *Oxford Dictionary* (1989) prefers the regular **abridgement**, and in British English it's way out in front of **abridgment**, by 34:1 in data from the BNC. In American English the difference is less marked. *Webster's Third* (1986) gives priority to **abridgment**, yet it's only slightly ahead of **abridgement** in data from CCAE. See further under **-ment**.

International English selection: The spelling **abridgement** recommends itself for the purposes of international English, given its regularity and substantial use in American English as well as British.

abscissa

The *Oxford Dictionary* (1989) gives only *abscissae* as the plural of this word, in keeping with its use in formal mathematical contexts. Compare *Webster's Third* (1986), where the absence of plural specifications implies that the regular English plural is to be expected. See further under **-a** section 1.

absent

A new prepositional role for this word has emerged from American legal usage since the 1940s. In examples like *"Absent any other facts, there arises an implied contract"* (from *Webster's English Usage*, 1989), it works like a Latin ablative absolute construction

absente (quo) "in the absence of (which)." (See further under **ablative**.) It provides a convenient hedge for a conclusion, and, not so surprisingly, has begun to appear in US academic and argumentative writing outside the law itself. There's scant evidence of it in British English.

absolute

This uncompromising word has been put to various grammatical purposes, in reference to (1) adjectives, (2) pronouns, (3) verbs, (4) clauses. In essence it means that the word concerned stands alone in the sentence, without the usual grammatical connections to the phrase, clause or sentence being expressed. Some of the applications outlined below belong to traditional grammar, but collectively they show how freely the term has been applied. Overuse of the term **absolute** would explain why there are alternatives, also noted below.

1 Absolute adjectives. The term **absolute** is usually applied to parts of adjectives which by their grammar or meaning are not involved in comparison. Many grammarians use it to refer to the uninflected form of any adjective, e.g. *bright*, as opposed to *brighter, brightest*. (See further under **adjectives**, section 2). An alternative older name for this part of the adjective paradigm is the "positive" form.

The phrase *absolute adjective* is applied by usage commentators, e.g. *Webster's English Usage* (1989), to adjectives whose meaning doesn't permit comparison. They are also called "uncomparable adjectives," by Garner (1998) and others. Either way the quality they refer to either is or is not, and there are no grades in between. They resist being modified by words such as *rather* and *very,* for the same reason. But the phrase *absolute adjective,* as applied to *unique* and others, suggests that they have only one meaning (see **unique** for its several meanings). The fact that a word may have both comparable and noncomparable senses seems to be overlooked. The lists of supposed *absolute adjectives* varies considerably from one authority to the next – itself a sign of the fuzziness of the category. Most include *complete* and *unique*, but there the similarities end. Among those sometimes included are:

countless	*eternal*	*fatal*	*first*
impossible	*infinite*	*last*	*paramount*
perfect	*permanent*	*previous*	*simultaneous*
supreme	*total*	*ultimate*	*universal*

Many of these are commonly modified by words such as *almost* or *nearly*, which Fowler (1926) allowed even for *unique*. You can posit approximations to an **absolute** state, if not gradations of it. That apart, comprehensive dictionaries show that such adjectives have both nongradable and gradable senses. The gradable sense is clearly being used in "a more complete account of events than ever before." So the notion of *absoluteness* needs to be attached to the sense, not the whole word. If the term *absolute adjective* has any value, it would be to refer to *defining* adjectives (see under **adjectives**):

auxiliary	*classic*	*horizontal*	*ivory*
second-hand	*steel*		

With their categorial meanings, they cannot be compared. Fowler also used **absolute** to refer to adjectives that serve as the head of a noun phrase: as in *the underprivileged, the young*. In these generic phrases the adjective behaves like a noun, in that it can be pre- or post-modified: *the very young, the young at heart* (*Comprehensive Grammar*, 1985). They are otherwise relatively fixed, always prefaced by *the,* and construed in the plural.

***Absolute** comparatives* are expressions in which a comparative form of an adjective appears, but no real comparison is made. In fact comparisons are often implicit: they were explicit in only 25% of the examples in the Survey of English Usage, according to the *Comprehensive Grammar* (1985). But there could be no comparison at all in conventional or institutionalized expressions such as: *my better half, the finer things of life, Greater London, higher education, the younger generation*. We never imagine a starting point for them in "my good half," "high education" etc., so they are *absolute comparatives*. This is not of course the case with the familiar advertising line: BRAND XXX WASHES WHITER – which invites consumers to conjure up the comparatively murky linen produced by an unnamed competitor, while avoiding any claims for libel.

***Absolute** superlatives* embody the superlative form of an adjective without any specific comparison. Like *absolute comparatives* they are often conventional expressions, and often involve *best* as in: *best practice, best seller, all the best, put your best foot forward*. Others are *worst-case scenario, worst enemy; do one's darndest; on/from the highest authority*. Freely formed examples like *the kindest person, the loveliest day* involve a kind of **hyperbole** (see under that heading).

2 Absolute pronouns. This is the term used by some grammarians (Huddleston, 1984) for possessive pronouns which stand as independent nouns, such as: *hers, ours, yours, theirs*. The *Comprehensive Grammar* (1985) calls them *independent* pronouns. See further under **possessive pronouns**.

3 Absolute verbs are those not complemented by the usual object or adjunct, as in *They ate*. (See further under **verb phrase** section 3.) This use of **absolute** is also at least as old as Fowler (1926), and appears in some older dictionaries.

4 Absolute constructions or clauses are grammatically independent phrases or nonfinite clauses, not integrated with the sentence in which they appear. Some are so conventional as to pass unnoticed, e.g. *that being so*, *all things considered*. Others created ad hoc by the writer may be censured as *dangling participles* or *unattached phrases:* see further under **dangling participles**.

abstract nouns

These words carry broad, generalized meanings that are not tied to the specific instance or a tangible, concrete item. The essential *abstract noun* is the name for an intangible such as *honesty, justice* or *knowledge,* though modern grammarians recognize many other kinds of words which refer to abstractions or to imputed entities such as *energy, luck* and *research*. Many **abstract nouns** are constructs of the language itself, built up out of other, more specific words. Thus abstractions such as *formality, graciousness, prevention* and *severance* are generated out of descriptive adjectives such as *formal, gracious,* and action verbs such as *prevent, sever*. Even ordinary and familiar words can take on abstract meanings in analytical writing. Think of *field* and *grain*. We usually imagine them in concrete terms, but in expressions like *field of study* and *grain of truth,* they

become detached and abstract. Broad cover terms such as *article, creature* and *vehicle* are also abstract until applied to a particular object. A *vehicle* may thus take shape as a car, tram, bus, truck, bicycle or perhaps even a skateboard or wheelbarrow. (For more on the distinction between *abstract* and *concrete nouns,* see **nouns**.)

Abstract nouns are a useful means of building ideas. They help writers to extend their arguments and develop theories. They can encapsulate remarkable insights, and summarize diffuse material under manageable headings. The downside is their too frequent appearance in academic and bureaucratic clichés. In his classic *Complete Plain Words* (1962), Gowers talks of the "lure of the abstract [word]" for British civil servants, and of the need to "choos[e] the precise word." Most American students are familiar with the injunction of their "freshman composition" textbooks to "prefer the concrete to the abstract," although the prevalence of the opposite in professional writing has been noted by researchers such as Lanham (1974) and Couture (1986). Computer software is able to identify some of the abstract language in a text, i.e. words ending in *-tion, -ness, -ity, -ance, -ancy, -ence* and *-ency* and other characteristic suffixes. It cannot identify ordinary words used in abstract senses, let alone decide whether they are appropriate for the subject. *Abstract words* are not necessarily reprehensible, but their cumulative effect on the weary reader needs to be factored in.
◊ For further discussion of related issues, see **gobbledygook** and **nominal**.

abstracts

An **abstract** is a distinctively structured summary, used especially in academic contexts. See under **summary**.

academia, academe and academy

The first of these words is both the most ancient in form and the most popular now, at the start of C21. **Academia** (*Akademeia*) was the name of the Athenian garden associated with the legendary Greek hero Akademos (in medieval times called **Academe**). Plato's school of philosophy took its name from the garden, hence later references to "Plato's Academy."

The use of **academe** to mean "place of learning" is first recorded in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost,* where it appears in the singular as well as plural (alongside "books") as the source of "the true Promethean fire." Fowler (1926) took Shakespeare to task for using **academe** in reference to an institution rather than a person, and would have liked even less its extended use to refer to the whole academic community and environment. *Merriam-Webster* (2000) embraces all these senses, whereas only the institutional ones appear in *New Oxford* (1998), *Canadian Oxford* (1998) and the Australian *Macquarie* (1997). In American and British usage, **academe** most commonly appears in sets like *arts, academe and the professions*. Otherwise it provides the context for many a work of fiction – apart from Mary McCarthy's novel *The Groves of Academe* (1952), and Mark Stein's play (c. 1980) of the same name. The phrase *groves of academe* now has more than a whiff of cliché about it, but at least it can be varied. Large databases such as the BNC and CCAE show a range of alternatives: *halls of academe* (hybridized with "halls of [higher] learning"), *realms of academe, world of academe, ivory towers in academe,* and even *the ghetto of academe.*

Fowler's criticism of using **academe** in the sense "academic world" could perhaps have prompted the rise of **academia** as an alternative term since World War II. In fact **academia** outnumbers **academe** by 4:1 in both the BNC and CCAE, and it collocates in much the same way with "halls," "ivory towers," "cloisters," and "groves" itself. Like **academe**, it appears in sets like "labor, business and academia" to designate a sphere of activity and influence. No doubt its more transparent form (ending in the abstract suffix *-ia*) gives it an advantage over its competitor, which lacks formal analogues in English. (See further under **-ia**.)

The phrase *the academy* is very occasionally found as a synonym for **academia** and **academe**, but its usage is mostly worlds apart and has been much broader than either, especially in C19 and earlier C20. In the UK, **academy** served as the common term for an alternative type of school to the classically oriented grammar school; and in North America it was used in reference to private schools. It's now more familiar as the key word in the names of various specialized institutes of the performing arts – *the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Franz Liszt Academy of Music* – as well as visual arts and sciences. In the US, the word **academy** is built into the names of defense force training centres such as the *West Point Academy,* not to mention the metropolitan *Police Academy,* immortalized through movies. The American *Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences* lends its name to the *Academy Awards,* and winners there enjoy professional esteem comparable to that of the *Academy exhibitor* among the British art establishment. These various institutions give a specialized meaning to **academy** that distinguishes it from **academe** and **academia**, yet it now lacks generic usages enough to guarantee it a long future.
◊ For the *Académie Française* and other *language academies,* see **language academy**.

accents and diacritics

In speech, an **accent** is a general style of pronunciation which strikes the listener as different, as in *a foreign accent, an Irish accent*. It may involve the stress patterns of words as well as the way sounds are pronounced. The **accents** of written language mostly relate to individual sounds. When superimposed on a particular letter of the alphabet, **accents** show that the pronunciation differs in some way from the unmarked letters. The English spelling system does without **accents**, except for the occasional foreign word (see below). Many other languages make systematic use of **accents** to indicate aspects of sound, stress and pitch. The technical term for *accent marks* is *diacritics*.

The most familar **accents** are those of European languages, such as the French *acute* and the German *umlaut* which mark particular vowels, and the Spanish *tilde* and the Slavonic *háček*, used with particular consonants. Less well-known ones are the small circle used over *u* in Czech, and over *a* in Danish, Norwegian and Swedish, and the slash used with *l* in Polish and with *o* in Danish and Norwegian. (See further at individual entries on **acute**, **cedilla**, **circumflex**, **dieresis**, **grave**, **háček**, **tilde**, **umlaut**.) **Accents** are also used to mark the strongly stressed syllables of some words of Italian, Spanish and Irish.

Some Asian languages written in the Roman alphabet, such as Vietnamese, have **accents** to show the different tones or pitch that go with a particular word: rising, falling, level etc. The use of **accents** shows the limitations of the alphabet for writing the sounds of diverse modern languages. (See further under **alphabets**.)

Foreign accents/diacritics in English **Accents** may be included in the English spelling of loanwords, depending on whether the word is a common noun or proper name, and the context of communication.

a) Loanwords which become English common nouns tend to lose their **accents** in the course of time, witness French loans such as *crepe, debut, elite, facade,* and *role*. Their disappearance is helped by the fact that English typewriters and wordprocessors rarely have accents in their repertoire, neither does the internet. In fact there's no reason for **accents** to be retained in words such as *role* or *elite,* where the vowel letters themselves match the pronunciation. The **accents** would mostly be missed by francophones and those for whom it adds cachet or a hint of sophistication. In *Webster's Third* (1986) the unaccented form of all those words is given priority, whereas the opposite holds true for the *Oxford Dictionary* (1989). This difference probably correlates with divergent regional trends, as well as the fact that the original *Oxford* (1884–1928) was much more inclined to mark loanwords as "not naturalized," with **accents** shown to correlate with their perceived foreignness. Though the "foreign" symbol has been removed from many of these loanwords in the second edition (1989), the **accents** remain and accentless alternatives are not yet recognized. *Copy-editing* (1992) suggests that if **accents** are to be marked, all those belonging to the word should be there, e.g. *protégé, résumé*. The more functional approach is to use whatever **accents** are essential to distinguish loanwords from their English homographs. Hence *resumé* with one **accent** to contrast with *resume*. (See further under **resumé**.) Even so, the context may provide all that's needed to identify them as noun and verb respectively, just as it does for *exposé* and *expose*. Only the first could appear in *an exposé of corruption* and the second in *the will to expose corruption*. The difference between *pique* and *piqué* is embedded in their particular collocations: *a fit of pique* v. *a pique table cloth*. When both are adjectives, readers may depend more on the accent to distinguish their attributive use, as in a *flamboyant lamé suit* and *a lame duck*. The accent is more crucial when the homographs work in the same grammatical slot.

b) Well-known foreign names with **accents/diacritics** generally lose them when reproduced in English. Thus *Dvorak* is usually written without the **háček**, *Zurich* without the **umlaut**, and *Montreal* without its **acute**. In some contexts of communication, however, retaining such **accents** assumes some strategic and diplomatic importance. This would be so for British or American authors writing for EU readerships; or for anglophone Canadians when writing French-Canadian names and titles into public documents, such as *Sept-Îles* and *Musée de Nouveau Brunswick*. Note also that **accents** are used on capital letters in Canadian French, though not regularly in Metropolitan French. For further details, see *Editing Canadian English* (2000).

acceptance or acceptation

At the start of C21, these two are scarcely interchangeable as the noun counterpart to the verb *accept*. The latinate **acceptation** could once be used to mean "a state of being accepted or acceptable," but the last trace of it was around 1800, by which time the French-style **acceptance** had replaced it for all practical purposes. Just one application remains for **acceptation**: to refer to the interpretation or understanding of a word which is the focus of academic or legal discussion. American data from CCAE provides a single example in which a court found that "by common acceptation, the description [*white pine*] has acquired a secondary meaning as firmly anchored as the first." On that one showing, and the two British instances in BNC, **acceptation** is close to extinction.

accessory or accessary

Accessory is now the all-purpose spelling for most contexts. **Accessary** used to be reserved for legal discourse, when talking about a person as the *accessary to a crime* or *an accessary after the fact*. But **accessory** is now used in those expressions too, as evidenced by data from very large corpora (BNC, CCAE). They contained no examples of **accessary** apart from a very dubious British example, in which the word was flanked by three misspelled words. Dictionaries which continue to present **accessary** as an alternative spelling are presumably justifying it from specialized legal documents, which perpetuate archaic writing conventions. Meanwhile the spelling **accessory** has always been preferred for the extra item(s) that go with any complex outfit, whether it is a set of clothes, a car or a computer.

accidentally or accidently

The second and shorter spelling is not as obsolete as the *Oxford Dictionary* (1989) claims. Databases show its currency, with a score of British examples in the BNC and almost 100 American ones in CCAE. These numbers suggest that **accidently** is somewhat commoner in American English, and its relative frequency vis-à-vis **accidentally** confirms it: about 1:15 in American data, whereas it's 1:28 in the British data. **Accidently** is sometimes regarded as a spelling mistake or malformation, but its pedigree is obscured by the fact that *accident* was once an adjective, from which it could be derived quite regularly. Common pronunciation of the word (with stress on the first syllable) also supports the shorter form. This is not to say we should prefer it to **accidentally**: rather that it cannot be dismissed as a solecism.

acclaim

Note that the associated noun is *acclamation*. See **-aim**.

accommodation, accomodation and accommodations

Accommodation, and the related verb *accommodate,* may well qualify as the most widely misspelled words in otherwise standard writing of the late C20. Yet "accomodate" was not uncommon in earlier centuries, as the *Oxford Dictionary* (1989) shows. Celebrated authors such as Defoe, Cowper and Jane Austen used it. The insistence on two *m*s thus seems to have firmed