

# The Cambridge Guide to English Usage

The Cambridge Guide to English Usage is an A–Z reference book, giving an up-to-date account of the debatable issues of English usage and written style. Its advice draws a wealth of recent research and data from very large corpora of American and British English – illuminating their many divergences and also points of convergence on which international English can be based. The book comprises more than 4000 points of word meaning, spelling, grammar, punctuation and larger issues of inclusive language, and effective writing and argument. It also provides guidance on grammatical terminology, and covers topics in electronic communication and the internet. The discussion notes the major dictionaries, grammars and usage books in the US, UK, Canada and Australia, allowing readers to calibrate their own practices as required. CGEU is descriptive rather than prescriptive, but offers a principled basis for implementing progressive or more conservative decisions on usage.



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# The Cambridge Guide to English Usage

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#### **Preface**

The *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* is written for English-users in the twenty-first century. It takes a fresh look at thousands of questions of style and usage, embracing issues that are time-honored yet still current, as well as those newly arising as the language continues to evolve. Some of these come with electronic communication and online documentation, but there are numerous others among the more than 4000 headwords in the book.

At the threshold of the third millennium, English is more diverse than ever in all hemispheres. Research into "new Englishes" has flourished, supported by journals such as English World-Wide, World Englishes and English Today. At the same time, the quest for a single, international form for written communication becomes more pressing, among those aiming at a global readership. This book is designed to support both global and local communicators. It identifies regionalized elements of usage, grammar and style, with systematic attention to American and British English, and reference to Canadian, Australian and New Zealand English as well. It allows writers to choose styles and usage appropriate to their readership, according to how local or large it is. The local options help to establish and affirm regional identity within, say, North America or Great Britain. But communicating beyond those regions calls for reappraisal of the options, putting a premium on those with the widest distribution worldwide, ideally region-free. The Cambridge Guide to English Usage identifies "international English selections" wherever they can be distilled out of the alternatives available, and implements them on its own pages. It empowers readers (as writers, editors, teachers, students) to choose and develop their own style, for their particular purposes.

Many kinds of resource have been brought to bear on the style and usage questions raised. *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* is the first of its kind to make regular use of large databases (corpora) of computerized texts as primary sources of current English. Numerous examples of British usage have come from the 100 million word British National Corpus (see BNC); and of American usage from a subset of 140 million words of American English from the Cambridge International Corpus (see CCAE). The corpora embody various kinds of written discourse as well as transcriptions of spoken discourse – enough to show patterns of divergence between the two. Negative attitudes to particular idioms or usage often turn on the fact that they are more familiar to the ear than the eye, and the constructions of formal writing are privileged thereby. Corpus data allow us to look more neutrally at the distributions of words and constructions, to view the range of styles across which they operate. On this basis we can see what is really "standard," i.e. usable in many kinds of discourse, as opposed to the formal or informal. References to "formal" and "informal" within the book presuppose that they lie above and below the broad band of everyday written communication, and together form a three-point stylistic scale.

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#### Preface

The relative acceptability of a given usage can also be gauged by means of population surveys. This involves the use of questionnaires on doubtful or disputed usage in spelling, punctuation, the use of capital letters and certain points of grammar. A series of six questionnaires called the "Langscape survey" was published in *English Today* (1998–2001), with the support of the editor, Dr. Tom McArthur. Hundreds of questionnaires from around the world were returned by mail and fax, and through the Style Council website at Macquarie University, where they were analyzed in terms of regional and sociolinguistic trends. Results from Langscape are quoted in some of the book's entries for their insights into people's willingness to embrace particular spellings or usages. They are a litmus test of future directions.

Attitudes to usage often reflect what's said in the relevant language authorities, most notably the Oxford English Dictionary (2nd edition, 1989) for British English, and Webster's Third New International Dictionary (3rd edition, 1961, reprinted 1986) for American English. These unabridged dictionaries remain monuments to English language scholarship, to which we are all indebted. Though their latest editions are not so recent, their positions tend to be maintained in younger, abridged dictionaries, except where there are good reasons to diverge, e.g. on neologisms or previously unrecorded usage. The New Oxford Dictionary of English (1998) and Merriam-Webster's Collegiate (2000) have been used to update the verdicts of the unabridged dictionaries, where relevant; and the Canadian Oxford Dictionary (1998) and the Macquarie Dictionary (3rd edition 1997) are invoked for regional comparisons. Comparative reference is also made to regional usage books, including Fowler's Modern English Usage (1926; and later editions by Gowers, 1965, and Burchfield, 1996); to the excellent Webster's Dictionary of English Usage (1989), Garner's Modern American Usage (1999), and Fee and McAlpine's Canadian English Usage (1997). These secondary sources contribute to the diversity of views on changing usage, and articulate local reactions to worldwide innovations.

Issues of editorial style are also treated comparatively, to allow readers to position themselves relative to American or British style, as articulated in the *Chicago Manual of Style* (15th edition 2003) and the *Oxford Guide to Style* (2002). Reference is also made to *Editing Canadian English* (2nd edition 2000) by the Editors' Association of Canada, to the Australian government *Style Manual* (6th edition 2002), and to the New Zealand style manual *Write, Edit, Print* (1997). Those resident in non-English-speaking countries can forge a synthesis of regional styles appropriate to their readerships.

Grammatical cruxes of usage are discussed with reference to modern grammars such as the Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (1985), the Introduction to Functional Grammar (1985; 1994) and especially the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (1999). The latter is explicitly corpus-based, using data from the Longman corpus of over 40 million words in six registers, to complement or extend the data derived from the BNC and CCAE, mentioned above. The Cambridge Guide to English Usage aims to bridge the gap between traditional and modern grammar, and uses terminology from both (e.g. mood and modality) as entry points to discussing grammatical questions. Elements of discourse analysis are also discussed, for example information focus and sentence topic, as aids to writing and editing.

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Apart from its large range of primary and secondary sources, *The Cambridge Guide to English Usage* draws on the findings of numerous linguistic researchers, named within the text and in the bibliography. Their contributions to our understanding of the intricacies of the English language are legion. Many are corpus linguists associated with the ICAME group (International Computer Archive of Modern English), who have progressively developed the uses of corpora for linguistic description with each new generation of corpus. Other European and American linguists who have contributed greatly to this book are the distinguished consultants named on p. ii, whose careful reading of the MS has enhanced its relevance to different parts of the English-speaking world.

The Cambridge Guide to English Usage also owes much to undated and undatable discussions with colleagues and friends at Macquarie University, in the Linguistics department and associated with the Macquarie Dictionary. To Professor Arthur Delbridge, the foundation Professor of Linguistics and Editor-in-chief of the Dictionary who connected me with both, I owe a particular debt of gratitude. Others who provided invaluable support for the publication of the prototype Cambridge Australian English Style Guide (1995) were Dr. Robin Derricourt (formerly of Cambridge University Press, Australia), and Hon. Justice Michael Kirby (of the High Court of Australia). In the preparatory stages of The Cambridge Guide to English Usage, I was fortunate to be a visiting professor at the Englisches Seminar of the University of Zürich, which gave me access to their excellent BNC search tools and experience of teaching at a European university. Many thanks are due to those at Cambridge University Press (UK) who saw the project through from first to last: Adrian du Plessis, Kevin Taylor and Dr Kate Brett, and my copy-editor Leigh Mueller. Back home in Australia my warmest thanks go to my family, to Fliss, Greg, and especially to John, for his unfailing love and support.

**Pam Peters** 



#### Overview of Contents and How to Access Them

The alphabetical list in this book contains two kinds of entries: those which deal with general topics of language, editing and writing, and those dealing with particular words, word sets or parts of words. An overview of many general entries is provided on the opposite page. The particular entries, focusing on issues of usage, spelling and word form, are too numerous to be shown there, and simply take their places in the alphabetical list. But for many questions, either general or particular entries would lead you to the answer you're seeking, and the book offers multiple access paths via crossreferences.

Let's say you are interested in where to put the full stop in relation to a final bracket or parenthesis. Any of those terms (full stop, bracket, parenthesis) would take you to the relevant discussion under **brackets**. In addition the general entry on **punctuation** presents a list of all the entries dealing with individual punctuation marks, for both words and sentences.

Questions of grammar are accessible through traditional terms such as **noun** and **verb**, **clause** and **phrase**, and traditional labels such as **dangling participle** or **split infinitive**...though the entries may lead you on to newer linguistic topics such as **information focus** and **modality**. Aspects of writing and argument (when is it OK to use I? what does it mean to **beg the question**?) are discussed under their particular headings, but can also be tracked down through more general ones such as **impersonal writing** and **argument**.

If your question is about current use of a word such as **hopefully**, or a pair such as **alternate** and **alternative**, or **gourmet** and **gourmand**, the discussion is to be found under those headwords. When it's a question of spelling, e.g. **convener** or **convenor**, the individual entry may answer it, and/or direct you on to another (-er/-or) where a whole set with the same variable part is dealt with. In the same way, the entry -ize/-ise discusses the alternative spellings of countless verbs like recognise/recognize, although there are too many to enter alphabetically. The key spelling entries are listed under **spelling** sections 2 and 3, in case you're unsure what heading to look under. Alternative plural forms can be located via the entry on **plurals**.

As in the text above, the use of boldface means that the word is entered as a headword, and it identifies all crossreferences at the end of entries. Within any entry, further instances of the headword(s) are often boldfaced to draw attention to strategic points about them. Words related to the headword(s) or derived from them are set in italics, as are all examples.

 $\diamond$  Abbreviations used in the body of the text are explained at their alphabetical place.



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