

# A

**@** The “at sign” is a new recruit to the English alphabet, though its place in it is still unclear. Some dictionaries list it where the word *at* or the phrase *at sign* appear; others have it among the affixes using *a*. With its regular use in email addresses (*pam.peters@mq.edu.au*), its frequency on the internet is enormous, and there’s a case for putting it up front.

Compare the & sign, which owes its name to being used at the end of the alphabet. See **ampersand**.

**a or an** Should you say *a hotel* or *an hotel*, *a hypothesis* or *an hypothesis*, *a heroic effort* or *an heroic effort*, *a heaven-sent opportunity* or *an heaven-sent opportunity*?

1 *The general rule* is that **a** is used before words beginning with a consonant, and **an** before those beginning with a vowel:

<i>a doctor</i>	<i>a secretary</i>	<i>a teacher</i>
<i>an astronaut</i>	<i>an engineer</i>	<i>an undertaker</i>

But note that the rule depends on sounds, not on the spelling. We say and write *a union* and *a once-in-a-lifetime experience* because the words following **a** actually begin with a consonant sound (the “y” sound and the “w” sound respectively). The same principle makes it *an hour*, *an honor*, and *an honest man*, because the first sound of the following word is a vowel. When writing abbreviations, the choice between **a** or **an** depends again on the pronunciation of the first letter. We would say *an HD*, or *an LBW* and *a UNESCO project*, and it dictates what is written.

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I CAN FEEL  
 A XXXX  
 COMING ON . . .

AUSTRALIANS WOULDN'T GIVE  
 A XXXX  
 FOR ANYTHING ELSE

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These advertisements force us to think twice about how to say the unpronounceable XXXX. The use of **A** (rather than **AN**) shows it should be read as “four ex” not as “exexex”.

2 *Words beginning with h* are usually treated according to the general rule above. Most people nowadays would say **a** rather than **an** in the four cases at the top of this entry, because the consonant sound *h* is used at the beginning of the next word.

a-

But *h* has been an uncertain quantity over the centuries, a sound that comes and goes from people's pronunciation. Listeners notice this when they hear someone saying 'im and 'er, and call it "dropping the h's". It actually happened to most words beginning with *h* 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. In English there's an *h* in the spelling of *hour* but not in the pronunciation.

The tendency to drop the *h* affected many longer and more formal words in earlier times, including:

*habitual hallucination herb heroic historical history hotel*  
*hypothesis hypothetical hysterical*

And for those who said 'eroic or 'istorical, it was natural to use **an** before them. So the tradition of saying *an heroic effort* and *an historical event* developed in times when the *h* was not pronounced. These days, since we all pronounce the *h* in those words, there is no reason to use **an**. Old traditions die hard, however, and you may still see and hear *an historical town* etc. occasionally.

**3** *New words for old.* The alternation of **a** with **an** has actually altered the beginnings of some English words. Words such as *apron* and *auger* were originally *napron* and *nauger*. When they occurred as *a napron* and *a nauger* people misconstrued them as *an apron* and *an auger*, and so the *n* was deleted from the word itself. The word *orange* was created in the same way out of the Arabic word *naranj*.

For more about 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) the titles of books, periodicals, plays etc., see under **the**.

**a-** The **a-** prefixed to ordinary English adjectives and adverbs comes from two difference 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:

*ablaze abroad afoot ahead apart aside asleep*

Thus *asleep* was literally "on sleep". In each set of examples the two words have long since merged into one, but the past still shows through in the fact that as adjectives they are only used predicatively, that is, in structures like *The fire was ablaze*, not "The ablaze fire . . ." See further under **adjectives**.

**a-/an-** These are two forms of a negative prefix derived from Greek. In English it usually means "without" or "lacking". It appears as the first component in some of our more academic and technical words, such as:

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

As the list shows, the form **an-** occurs before vowels and *h*, and **a-** before all other consonants. In many cases the prefix combines with Greek stems which do not exist independently in English.

*Amoral* is an interesting exception, where **a-** combines with a Latin stem which is also an ordinary English word. The prefix **a-** then 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-**.

**-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 is a plural ending.

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. Loanwords which come with a plural **-a** ending pose other grammatical questions. Let’s deal with each group in turn.

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 ones, 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 *acacia*, *angophora*, *grevillea* and *protea*, all take English plurals. However some Latin loanwords, particularly those in academic fields, have Latin plurals formed with *-ae* as well: *formulae* and *formulas*; *retinae* and *retinas* etc. The plurals with *-ae* prevail in writing intended for scientists and scholars, and the forms with *-s* in nonspecialised writing and conversation. The group with both Latin and English plurals includes:

abscissa alumna am(o)eba 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

The words in italics are more likely overall to be found with English plurals, for various reasons. Those which serve as both the technical and the common term (e.g. *cicada*, *echidna*), and the more familiar medical words (*cornea*, *retina*) were voted English plurals by more than 85 percent of Australians of all ages, surveyed through the magazine *Australian Style* in 1999. For some other words (e.g. *trachea*) the occasions on which a plural might be needed are not very many, and the likelihood of an ad hoc English plural is all the greater.

Note that for *antenna* the two plurals are used in different fields (see **antenna**).

*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

## à deux

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 miasma schema stigma*

Note that for both *dogma* and *stigma*, the Greek plural is strongly associated with Catholic orthodoxy (see **stigma**).

**2** *Words with the plural -a* from Latin are often collective in meaning, like *bacteria*, *data* and *media*. We do not need to pluralise 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 they should be treated as singulars or plurals) is unclear, and can be hotly disputed.

Those who know Latin are inclined to insist on plural agreement in such cases, on the grounds that *data* and *media* (not to mention *candelabra*) “are plural”. Yet the argument appeals to Latin rather than English grammar; and it is surely undermined by other cases, such as *agenda* and *stamina*, which are also Latin plurals but are always combined with singular verbs in English. For more about the question of singular/plural agreement, see **collective nouns** and **agreement**, as well as **candelabra**, **data** and **media**.

Greek loanwords with a plural **-a**, such as *automata*, *criteria*, *ganglia* and *phenomena*, are discussed at **-on**.

For the choice between **-a** and **-er** in spelling some Australian colloquialisms, see **-er/-a**.

**à deux** See under **au pair**.

**a fortiori** This elliptical phrase, borrowed from Latin, means roughly “by way of something even stronger”. Far from being an oblique reference to fetching the whisky, it is used in debating and arguing to introduce a second point which the speaker or writer feels is more compelling than the first, and is intended to consolidate the argument.

**à la** With this French tag we sometimes create phrases on the spur of the moment: *à la Paul Hogan*, *à la Hollywood*, so as to describe a style or way of doing something by reference to a well-known name. Paraphrased, those phrases mean “in the style of Paul Hogan”, and “in the same way as Hollywood does it”. The roundaboutness of the paraphrases shows what useful shorthand **à la** is.

**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 a restaurant it gives you the freedom to choose what you will eat from a list of individually priced dishes—as well as the obligation to pay whatever the bill amounts to. The

**à la carte** method contrasts with what has traditionally been known as **table d'hôte** (“the table of the host”), which implies that you will partake of whatever menu the host (or the restaurant) has decided on, for a set price. The phrase goes back to earlier centuries, when the only public dining place available for travelers was the host's/landlord's table. But the **table d'hôte** menu is what most of us partake of when we travel as tourist class passengers on aircraft.

In restaurants more transparent phrases are used these days to show when the menu and its price are predetermined by the establishment itself—simply *fixed price menu*, or *prix fixe* (in France and francophone Canada). In Italy it's *menu turistico*. Many restaurants offer both fixed price and **à la carte** menus.

**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 generalisation. **A posteriori** arguments are thus concerned with using empirical observation as the basis of reasoning, and with inductive argument. 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 analysing the evidence. Compare **a posteriori**.

**a quattr'occhi** See under **au pair**.

**abacus** For the plural of this word, see under **-us**.

**abattoir or abattoirs** **Abattoir** is the older and more widely used form of this word worldwide, though **abattoirs** is certainly well used (in reference to a single establishment) in Australia. In Australian documents on the internet they appear in the ratio of 5:4. Of the two, **abattoir** is easier to work with, because there's no doubt that the following verb is singular. If you use **abattoirs**, it poses the further problem as to whether the verb should be singular or plural (see further under **agreement**).

**abbreviations** These are standardised short forms of words or phrases. A few of them, like *AIDS* and *RSI*, are better known than the full phrase; and some abbreviated words like *bus* and *pram* stand in their own right (see further under **clipping**). **Abbreviations** are accepted as ways of representing the full word or phrase in many kinds of functional and informative writing. Some would say that they are unacceptable in formal writing, though we might debate which types of writing are “formal”. **Abbreviations** would probably look strange in a novel or essay. Yet who can imagine a letter which does not carry **abbreviations** somewhere

## abbreviations

in referring to people and places. Business and technical reports can 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 either 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 CCC equals the *Canberra Cat Club*, the short form can be used regularly.

1 *Punctuating abbreviations* raises questions of policy because of the differing conventions practised in Australia. They include:

- a) using full stops with any shortened form:  
*C.S.I.R.O. Mr. Rev. mgr. incl.*
- b) using full stops with abbreviations, but not *contractions* (see below):  
*C.S.I.R.O. Mr Rev. mgr incl.*
- c) using full stops with abbreviations which have any lower case letters in them:  
*CSIRO Mr. Rev. mgr. incl.*
- d) using full stops with abbreviations which consist entirely of lower case letters:  
*CSIRO Mr Rev mgr. incl.*

The options all have their advantages and disadvantages.

Option (a) is the easiest option to implement, and was once standard practice in the US. But the Chicago *Manual of Style* (1993) recognised the worldwide trend to use less punctuation, or no more punctuation than is really necessary, and in the following edition (2003) finally modified its time-honored policy (in favor of Option (c) below). Many **abbreviations** are obviously such, and readers do not need full stops to remind them.

Option (b) turns on the distinction between **abbreviations** and *contractions*, which has developed in British editorial practice. (See further under **contractions**, section 1.) The distinction, also known in Australia, gives different punctuation to “true” abbreviations, that is, ones which cut words short (*Tas.* for Tasmania), and to contractions which telescope the word, keeping both the first and last letters (*Qld* for Queensland). Under this system the full stop only goes with **abbreviations**, and it shows where the word has been cut off. However it presents a conundrum with *pluralised abbreviations*. Should the plural of the abbreviation *fig.* be *figs*, *figs.*, or even *fig.s*? If we decide strictly by the abbreviation/contraction rule, as does the Australian Government *Style Manual* (2002), it would be *figs* because with the plural *s* added the abbreviation becomes a contraction. To treat singular and plural shortened forms differently may seem unfortunate. Yet if we adopt *figs.* we create other anomalies, because the full stop no longer marks where the word has been cut. *Figs.* is nevertheless the practice for plural abbreviations in *Butcher’s Copy-editing* (2006), and noted in *New Hart’s Rules* (2005). *Fig.s* does not seem to be recommended anywhere.

Option (c). According to this option, full 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. It accommodates the general trend towards leaving stops out of institutional abbreviations such as *ABC* and *ACTU*. So *NSW* is left unstopped, while *Tas.* and *Qld.* would have them. The treatment of abbreviated state names is thus still anomalous, and there are inconsistencies elsewhere where initialisms and capitalised abbreviations rub shoulders with each other, as in computer texts.

Option (d) simply draws a line between **abbreviations** which begin with a capital letter and those which do not. It leaves *NSW*, *Qld* and *Tas* all unstopped, while *a.m.*, *a.s.a.p.* and *fig.* are all stopped. The distinction between *contractions* and **abbreviations** is dropped, making for consistency in both capitalised examples (*Qld*, *Tas*) and lower case ones (*fig.*, *figs.*) whether singular or plural.

A fifth option, to use no stops at all in **abbreviations**, is not commonly practised though it would be easiest of all to implement. It would resolve the anomalies created by distinguishing contractions from abbreviations, and also break down the invisible barrier between abbreviations and symbols (see below). Removing stops from all abbreviations would (it's sometimes said) lead to confusion between lower case abbreviations and ordinary words. Yet there are very few abbreviations which could be mistaken for ordinary words. Those which are identical, such as *am*, *fig* and *no*, are normally accompanied by numbers: *10 am*, *fig 13*, *no 2*, and there is no doubt as to what they are.

**2 Policies and minimising anomalies.** Dictionaries, style guides, and publishers and their editors all have to determine a policy from among the options above. The Australian Government *Style Manual* (2002) uses a combination of options (b) and (c), preserving the abbreviations/contractions distinction, but recommending the removal of stops from **abbreviations** that consist entirely of capitals. Australia Post recommends the use of full caps and unstopped forms for the shortened forms of all states: *QLD*, *NSW*, *ACT*, *VIC*, *TAS*, *SA*, *WA*, *NT*, creating a self-consistent set with no distinction between abbreviations and contractions.

A majority of Australians surveyed in 1996 through the magazine *Australian Style* (63%) voted in favor of removing stops from fully capitalised abbreviations like *ACTU*. The distinction between abbreviations and contractions was maintained by a lesser majority, in withholding stops from words like *Pty* (61%) and *mgr* (53%). There was more conviction about continuing to use stops in abbreviations like *Rev.* which combine upper and lower case (73%), and very strong support (86%) for keeping stops in lower case abbreviations like *cont.* The results suggest that Australians at large incline towards option (c), though some would still combine it with option (b). Individual writers and editors who are not committed to a given house style are free to choose whatever policy minimises anomalies for them.

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 ABC
 

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The fourth option for punctuating abbreviations—using full stops only for abbreviations which consist entirely of lower case letters, and abandoning the distinction between contractions and abbreviations—has been adopted in this book.

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Note that when an abbreviation with a stop is the last word in a sentence, no further stop is added, according to the current convention of allowing the major stop to cover for any lesser ones. This poses a difficulty for readers who wish to know whether the abbreviation has its own full stop or not. Unless the matter is explained or exemplified nearby, it's best to remake the sentence so as to bring the abbreviation in from the end. (This was done in discussing *figs*, *figs.* and *fig.s* in option (b) above.)

**3 Special categories of abbreviations.** Some groups of abbreviations are always written without stops, whatever the writer's policy on upper and lower case, contractions etc. They include:

- a) the symbols for SI units: *kg*, *ml* etc. (See **SI units**.)
- b) the compass points: *N*, *NE*, *SW* etc.
- c) chemical **symbols**: *Na*, *Fe* etc.
- d) **symbols** for currencies: £, \$ etc.
- e) acronyms: *Anzac*, *laser* etc. (See further under **acronyms**.)

For the use of stops with the initials of a person's name, see under **names**. (See also **Latin abbreviations**.)

**ABC** In Australia these letters usually stand for the *Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, its name since 1983. It changed then from being the *Australian Broadcasting Commission* as it was for the first half-century of its existence. Founded in 1932, it was intended to be a national voice like the BBC; and since 1954 it has maintained a Standing Committee on Spoken English (SCOSE). The committee's prime role is to advise broadcasting personnel on the pronunciation of proper names, especially foreign ones. But it also gives attention to current usage issues such as the reporting of terrorist activities, and maintaining a nonsexist language policy over the airwaves. The ABC's nickname *Aunty* is itself sexist, but a harder nut for SCOSE to crack. (See further under **auntie**.)

Note also that **ABC** is used by sociologists and demographers to mean "Australian-born Chinese". (See further under **Chinaman**.)

**-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*.



**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 **case**.)

**-able/-ible** Many good spellers have trouble knowing which of these endings should be used. Both sound the same, and which one should be used often seems arbitrary. Compare *indispensable* with *comprehensible*, *traversable* with *reversible*, and *enforceable* with *forcible*. Just a handful of these words can be spelled in more than one way, for example *collectable/collectible* and *deductable/deductible*. But most are fixed one way or the other, and only one spelling will do.

Overall there are more words with **-able**, because it combines with any English or French verb, and also comes with those from the Latin first conjugation. By contrast, **-ible** is restricted to those based on verbs from the other Latin conjugations. That’s fine if you know Latin, but if you don’t the table below will help you with the most important **-ible** words. Where there are both positive and negative (i.e. *possible* as well as *impossible*) it gives one or the other, because there’s no difference in the way that their endings are spelled.

*accessible adducible admissible audible combustible compatible compressible  
 contemptible credible deducible digestible discernible divisible edible  
 eligible expressible feasible flexible forcible gullible impressive  
 incomprehensible incontrovertible incorrigible incorruptible indefensible  
 indelible indestructible inexhaustible infallible intelligible invincible  
 irascible irresistible legible negligible ostensible perceptible permissible  
 persuasible plausible possible reducible reprehensible repressible responsible  
 reversible sensible submersible suggestible suppressible susceptible tangible  
 terrible transmissible visible*

Note that if the word you wish to write is too new to be listed in a dictionary, you can confidently spell it with **-able** since all new formations go that way: *contactable*, *playable*, *ungetatable*. For the choice between *drivable* and *driveable*, *likable* and *likeable* etc., see further under **-eable**.

**Aboriginal or Aborigine** Which term to use when you refer to one of the original inhabitants of Australia has been a fraught question. The Australian Government *Style Manual* has changed its recommendation with every edition since 1978, reflecting the sensitivity of the issue. The sixth edition (2002) recommends **Aboriginal** (plural **Aboriginals**) in reference to individuals, and **Aboriginal people(s)** for use in official documents. But it acknowledges also that **Aborigine(s)** is strongly supported in common usage, and found in a wide range of publications “without disparaging overtones”. Its appearance in newspaper headlines is clear indication of its neutrality.

## Aboriginal names

In the past, a curious compromise was sometimes adopted, using **Aboriginal** for the singular noun, while **Aborigines** was allowed as its plural. This reflects an older concern that the *Oxford Dictionary* citations were only for the plural, and **Aborigine** was therefore an unacceptable backformation. However the *Australian National Dictionary* (1988) has citations for the singular form going back to the first half of the nineteenth century, and it has always been part of Australian English. In the Australian ACE corpus **Aborigine(s)** heavily outnumbers **Aboriginal(s)** for the noun, by 11:3 in the singular and 133:18 in the plural.

Among Aborigines themselves the issue is debated. Some, according to the Aboriginal Research Centre at Monash University, reject the name **Aboriginal** because it perpetuates the phrase *aboriginal natives* which was used by the Australian Government to deny them tribal identity and territory. Their own preferred solution is to find a more specific term wherever possible, depending on their region. Those in NSW and Victoria are **Koori(e)s** (see individual entry); while those in other states and regions are named as follows:

<i>Murri</i>	<i>south and central Queensland</i>
<i>Bama</i>	<i>northern Queensland</i>
<i>Yolngu</i>	<i>Northern Territory (northeastern Arnhem Land)</i>
<i>Mulba</i>	<i>Pilbara region, WA</i>
<i>Yammagi</i>	<i>Murchison River district and central WA</i>
<i>Wongi</i>	<i>around Kalgoorlie</i>
<i>(Y)a(r)nangu</i>	<i>Western Desert (WA, NT)</i>
<i>Nyungar</i>	<i>southwestern corner of WA</i>
or	
<i>Noongar</i>	
<i>Nung(g)a</i>	<i>South Australia (See further under Nyungar and Nungga.)</i>

Maps showing these areas can be found in the *Macquarie Atlas of Indigenous Australia* (2005). According to the Aboriginal Research Centre at Monash University, two of those names can refer to Aboriginal people more broadly: *Koori(e)* is acceptable to Aborigines throughout southern and central Australia, and *Murri* is the one used for those in northern Australia. See also **Black**.

Whichever word you use, it should have a capital letter, as with any ethnic or tribal name (see **capitals**). Without a capital letter, **aborigine(s)** means the original inhabitants of any continent, not Australia in particular.

**Aboriginal names** The names of some Aboriginal groups can be spelled in more than one way, for example *Pintupi*, *Pintubi* or *Bindubi*. It happens most often with ones containing the letters **p** or **b**, **t** or **d**, and **k** or **g**. A little phonetics helps to explain why. The sounds “p” and “b” are hardly different when you say them (except for the way the vocal cords vibrate for “b”), and the same is true for the other pairs. And though they are different sounds in English, most Aboriginal languages treat the members of each pair as one and the same. Whichever pronunciation you