



Style Matters

Who sets the rules?

An important shift took place in the world of communication at the start of the 21st century: The number of people who use English as a foreign language surpassed the number of native speakers. This transition has had a great impact on the forms of spoken English around the world in terms of localized vocabulary and idiomatic phrasings. But in terms of written forms of English, with regard to vocabulary and technical aspects such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation, the British and American variants of [Standard English](#) (BSE and ASE) serve as the norms for English-language publications and communication in much of the world.

In English, there is no single authority to prescribe the rules for the language, which makes it unique in terms of its evolution when compared to other widely used languages such as German, French, and Italian. In Germany, for example, grammar and spelling rules are set by the publisher of Duden, the 12-volume Standard High German language dictionary. In France, it is the Academy Francaise that sets the language standards, whereas in Italy it is the Accademia della Crusca.

This can be confusing for some non-native English speakers. They might be accustomed to one definitive source providing all grammar and spelling rules, only to realize that in English there are several options available. But of the many reference sources for English, there are a handful of established, well-respected authorities and publishers that provide direction with their dictionaries and usage guides, for example the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) in the United Kingdom (UK) and [Merriam-Webster's Dictionary](#) in the United States (US).

The number of options available makes it even more important for an organization to decide upon one dictionary after it has agreed upon the language standard. One form of a word should be chosen and used for all official documents. The reason is that different dictionaries might offer various spellings of the same word. For example, which of the following is correct?

Website – Web site – web-site – web site – website

They are all accepted forms (or at one point they were anyway), although some have proven to be more popular than others, as a look at Google Ngram shows, both for BSE and ASE.

You can see that the lowercase form of “website” pulled ahead in the US only around 2007, whereas it had already become the norm in the UK already by the late 1990s:

Google Books Ngram Viewer

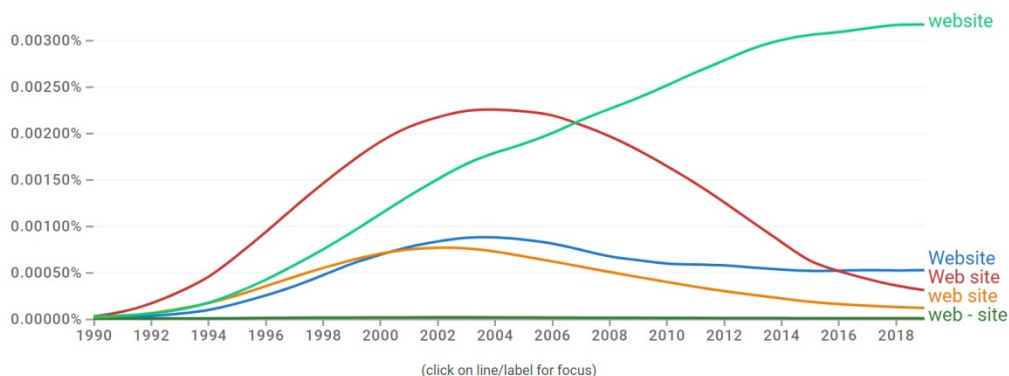
Website, Web site, web-site, web site, website

1990 - 2019

American English (2019)

Case-Insensitive

Smoothing of 4



Google Books Ngram Viewer

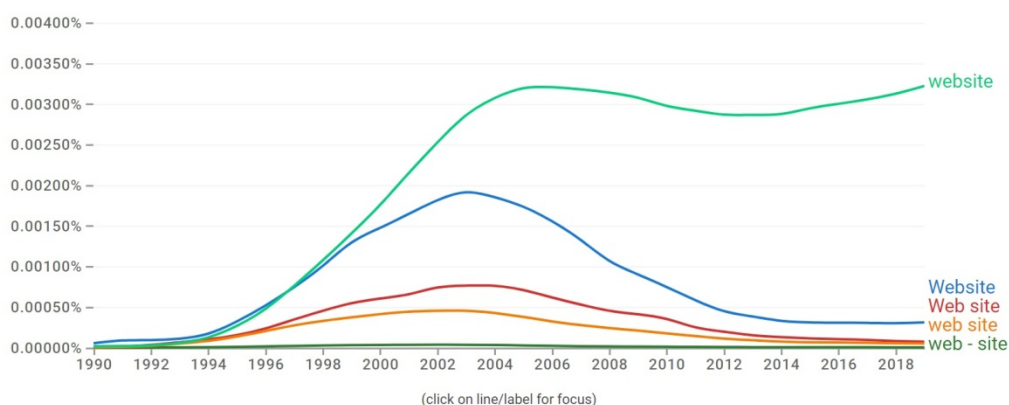
Website, Web site, web-site, web site, website

1990 - 2019

British English (2019)

Case-Insensitive

Smoothing of 4



How different are they really?

As the Irish playwright George Bernard Shaw once said: “England and America are two countries separated by a common language.”

To a new learner, the differences between BSE and ASE seem to be largely cosmetic. For example, BSE would call for “organisation,” “travelling,” and “colour,” (and all of the prior commas would be located *outside of* the quotation marks), whereas ASE would prescribe “organization,” “traveling,” and “color.” But there are greater differences when one digs further, especially with vocabulary. Just a few of the dozens of examples are:

UK	US
trainers	sneakers
motorway	highway
biscuit	cookie
field	pitch
football	soccer

There are also many differences between the two forms when it comes to prepositions and idiomatic phrasings:

UK	US
at the weekend	over the weekend
in Main Street	on Main Street
spot on	right on
tot up	add up
hotting up	heating up

Although these differences may not have a great impact on everyday communication, they can have an impact on global business communication. An American doing business with a potential European client (writing in BSE) might not know that a “bonus issue” is a “stock dividend” or that a “unit trust” is a “mutual fund.” Potential misunderstandings might not only result in delays and loss of productivity when having to ask for clarifications, they can also lead to actual material losses – or even litigation – where contracts and legal documentation are involved.

Keeping it all straight

Whether it is a corporation, an NGO, or a government ministry, there is often an in-house [style guide](#) for official publications and inter-office communications. Whatever the official language of the organization, a style guide ensures that all publications are uniform with regard to the multitude of technical and stylistic elements.

In the case of style guides for English, some basic elements will include those matters already mentioned earlier: whether to use American or British English; which dictionary to use for spelling reference; which form to use when multiple forms exist (e.g., “website”). In addition, it will often include the following elements:

- **specialized vocabulary and preferred spelling:** e.g., is “president,” chancellor,” or “prime minister” capitalized when not linked with a name?
- **treatment of acronyms:** W.T.O. vs. WTO
- **comma usage:** “red, green, and orange” vs. “red, green and orange”
- **title styles:** “Company predicts strong growth for next quarter” / “Company Predicts Strong Growth for Next Quarter”

Several choices also need to be made concerning the usage and formatting of numbers:

- €5,000 / 5,000 EUR / EUR 5,000 / 5,000 euro (or: euros)
- 2004-2006 / 2004-06 / 2004–2006 / 2004–06
- the eighties / the 1980s / the 80s / the 80’s
- ten / 10; tenth / 10th
- 20% / 20 percent / twenty percent (BSE: per cent)

Academic and research institutes will also have specific guidelines concerning citations as well as the formatting of footnotes/endnotes, bibliographies, and reference lists. Some popular style guides used by organizations for their own in-house guides are the *Oxford Style Manual*, *The Economist Style Guide*, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, among others. Each offers its own approach to the elements mentioned above (and thousands of others; the [Chicago Manual](#), for example, is more than 900 pages).

Aside from aesthetic concerns, consistency within and across all official publications of an organization – in addition to correct usage – inspires confidence in those reading them. It shows that the organization has a vision and has concerned itself with every last detail. The effort (or lack thereof) put into a publication reflects strongly upon an organization.

If publications are filled with errors, the message is likely to be compromised. It should also be noted that this editing process is not just necessary for publications produced by non-native speakers. Organizations in the US, for example, also have editors correct their publications. Most newspapers, magazines, and publishing houses in the US have departments for proofreaders and copy editors, who, in addition to working on the language, specialize in following the style guide of that organization.

Moving forward

Whether your organization is generating an English-language publication or outsourcing the writing and translation, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Choose either British or American standards for all of your publications. If your publications are more likely to focus on the North American business market, for example, then you might want to choose ASE. Whereas if you are publishing reports that target official EU institutions, you would probably want to choose BSE.
- Select an English-language dictionary (*not* a bi-lingual translation dictionary) for your chosen standard as well as a reputable style guide. From these, you can develop a condensed in-house style guide to establish basic usage, spelling, and style rules for your publications (or you can hire an editor to consult with and/or to write it). This will serve as a core reference source for the communications department and any external suppliers who regularly write or translate materials for you.
- Employ a professional proofreader or copy editor who is a native English speaker. In addition to specializing in the proper usage of written English, the editor will be the one to enforces the rules of your style guide and has the experience to spot inconsistencies in a text that a non-editor simply would not see. (Translations and texts written by native English speakers should also be proofread for the same reason, especially when multiple translators or writers are involved in a project.) The editor will be the last person to check the publication before it goes to press, so be sure to schedule this time into the workflow when preparing the project.