



---

TRANSCRIPT: SEASON 3, EPISODE 3  
THINK IT'S AMERICAN? THINK AGAIN!

---

**Louise Harnby:** Hello and welcome to this episode of The Editing Podcast. So this week we're going to chat about 4 writing-related bits and pieces where we frequently hear people saying, 'Oh, but that's a US English thing', when in fact the usage has broader appeal.

**Denise Cowle:** I've really been looking forward to the episode because I think that even in the professional editorial community there are still some misunderstandings around certain aspects of written language, and it's really important that we knock these on the head, particularly given that writers and editors are often working with colleagues, and for audiences, beyond their national borders.

**LH:** Exactly right. So the first one is **-iz- spellings**. So we're talking about words like organization, realizing, rationalized. Using a 'z' is *not* an Americanism. It's a standard variant in British English, though most of the time, using an 's' is fine too. Now the other thing to say is that this use of the 'z' is far from new. It hasn't just crept in in the past few decades. In fact, the 'z' spelling has been around since, wait for it, the 16th century. That's old.

**DC:** It's really old! And just to reiterate what Louise said, it's not quirky usage in British English. It's standard. Lots of publishers ask for it in their style guides. So if you're planning on submitting, say, a paper to a British journal, don't assume they'll want the 's' variant. Check the style guide first. You'll be surprised how many publishers prefer the 'z' style.

**LH:** Now there are some verbs that in US English that take a 'z' whereas UK English asks for an 's'. We'll put together a little PDF resource for the show notes with a reminder of these, but for now we're looking at: analyse, catalyse, electrolyse, paralyse, breathalyse, dialyse, hydrolyse and psychoanalyse.

**DC:** And there are verbs that always take an ‘s’ rather than a ‘z’ in *both* American and British English, including advertise, compromise, exercise, revise, advise, despise, improvise, supervise, comprise, and promise. Again, we’ll include the full list in the PDF.

**LH:** So next up is **the serial comma**. This is the final comma that can be placed in a list before a coordinating conjunction. So, for example,

- Denise edits academic, business, and education texts.

That comma before *and* is the serial comma. Some people think this is an American convention, that Brits don’t favour serial commas. That’s *not* the case. We do use them – it’s a question of style choice and clarity.

**DC:** Absolutely. In fact, some editors, writers, printers and publishers in the UK call it the Oxford comma because it was traditionally favoured by Oxford University Press. Serial commas are *not* right or wrong – they are optional in the broadest sense, and sometimes essential in order to avoid confusion, regardless of where you live.

Next up are **em dashes**. Those are the dashes that are three times as long as a hyphen. If you think Brits don’t use them, think again. We do.

**LH:** Yes, in fiction they’re the mark of choice for end-of-line interruptions in dialogue. Now, it is true that closed-up em dashes are more common in American English writing than in British English when used parenthetically, but even that’s not clear-cut. I’ve worked on US English books that chose spaced en dashes instead, and Oxford University Press calls for closed-up em dashes in its style guide.

**DC:** Yes, absolutely. Now let’s talk about the **which/that conundrum**. Here we’re talking about restrictive relative clauses, and whether to use ‘which’ or ‘that’. So an example would be:

- Anything WHICH gets kids eating vegetables is worth talking about.

versus

- Anything THAT gets kids eating vegetables is worth talking about.

**LH:** Now, while it’s true that British English is less prescriptive about this, it’s *not* true to say that the use of ‘that’ is an Americanism, and the use of ‘which’ is a Britishism. That’s not the case. Most professional editors, regardless of where they live, would bend towards ‘that’ because the distinction is recognized in

British English grammar, and because British editors recognize that many writers are penning for a global audience.

**DC:** Absolutely. You and I would both use ‘that’ in the example I gave. It really is one of those things that’s not about *Americans do it this way, Brits do it that*. It’s far more nuanced.

**LH:** And we certainly wouldn’t want any American writers or editors thinking, Oh, well this book file is going to be in British English so I’d better choose ‘which’ for all my restrictive relative clauses. That would be a massive and unnecessary hypercorrection.

**DC:** We recommend in thinking in terms of style, clarity and audience when it comes to any of these issues.

**LH:** Yes, that’s a more purposeful approach rather than labelling things as ‘This is the American way and this is the British way’. Because so often, there are variations. And preferences are changing all the time.

**DC:** So now it’s time for Editing Bites – the regular bit of the show where we each recommend a favourite resource that we think you’ll find useful. So mine is Lynne Murphy’s video on British and American English.

**LH:** I wish I’d blagged that one! Lynne’s perspective is always considered, thoroughly researched and full of good humour. So mine is a complementary resource on the Oxford/Lexico website, called ‘The Differences Between British And American Terms’. So this is a handy list of British terms and expressions and their more common American variants, though our languages are merging all the time. Anyway, it’s the biscuit/cookie, braces/suspenders thing. Some of the stuff will be obvious, but there were some things in that list that I didn’t know the US variations for so it’s a good first stop.

**DC:** Great. So we hope you’ve enjoyed this episode. Thank you so much for listening to The Editing Podcast. You can rate, review and subscribe to us via Apple Podcasts, Spotify or whichever platform you prefer.

**LH:** And we’ve put all the links we’ve mentioned in the show notes so you can grab everything there. And if you have any questions about whether something is standard in one English but not another, drop us a line via The Editing Podcast Facebook page and we’ll tackle it in another episode.

## Editing bites

- Lexico/Oxford: ‘The Differences Between British and American Terms’
- Lynne Murphy on British and American English (video)

- Free PDF booklet: Verbs ending in -ize, -ise, -yze and -yse



## Ask us a question

The easiest way to ping us a question is via Facebook Messenger: Visit the podcast's Facebook page and click on the **SEND MESSAGE** button.

## Denise and Louise

- Denise Cowle Editorial Services
- Louise Harnby | Fiction Editor

## Music credit

‘Vivacity’ Kevin MacLeod (incompetech.com). Licensed under Creative Commons: By Attribution 3.0 License.