

## American vs. British English

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### Basic Differences and Influences of Change

American English acquired international significance after World War II, when the United States assumed a more global role and political, economic and technological developments promoted American influence worldwide. American English currently asserts a dominant influence on "world English" (cf. British English) largely due to the following:

1. Population: U.S. vs U.K. (SAE/SBE ca 70% vs 17% of all native English; Dibal #68)
2. Wealth of the U.S. vs the U.K. economy, & influences
3. Magnitude of higher education in America vs the U.K.
4. Magnitude of the publishing industry in America
5. Magnitude of mass media and media technology influence on a worldwide scale
6. Appeal of American popular culture on language & habits
7. International political and economic position of the U.S. (cf. Kennedy)

American and British English are both "variants" of the English Language, more similar than different, especially with "educated" or "scientific" English. Most divergence is due to differences in national history and national cultural development, varying regional and local idioms and colloquialisms, and media/advertising influences.

The following general categories of difference between standard American English (SAE) and standard British English (SBE) each have their own sociolectic value:

#### I. Different Pronunciation, Although Same Spelling:

- Advertisement (advert, ad)
- Controversy, Laboratory, Secretary
- Leisure, schedule, dynasty, dance
- Renaissance, oregano, clerk [bank, office], ate
- 'PC'-influence examples: harass & harassment, Uranus, etc.

#### II. Different Spelling, Although Same Pronunciation:

Colour — color, Centre — center  
Cheque — check (noun form [bank]; verb "to check" the same)  
Defence — defense (noun form), Licence (noun form) — license  
Alright — all right; Manoeuvre — maneuver; tyre — tire  
Ageing — aging; Whisky — whiskey (U.S. & Ireland)  
Gaol — jail



### III. Same Term, Different But Similar Spelling and Pronunciation:

Aluminium — aluminum  
Polythene — polyethylene  
Maths — math (shortening of "mathematics")  
Rise — raise (more money in salary, wages)

### IV. Same Words, But Different or Additional Meanings:

I married a **homely** girl.  
The opening of our new play was a **bomb**!  
Nigel and Trevor **purchased** 7-day Travelcard season tickets.  
Evelyn took a coin out of [his/her] **purse** (GB=male, coin purse; US=female, handbag)  
Ralph **needs to** write an essay for his university course.  
The committee **tabled** the motion (GB: put it on the table).  
We all had tea and biscuits. (cf. Harry Potter, 'crumpets' vs 'English muffins', etc.)  
The **corn** harvest was exceptional this year. (cf. "maize", "sweetcorn")  
We needed a **torch** for the dark trail. (cf. flashlight, electric torch, flaming torch)  
IBM made over a **billion** dollars last year. (cf. "thousand million"; changing GB standards)  
**Trousers** (GB) = Pants (US); Pants (US) = underwear (GB)  
**Jumper** (GB) = Sweater (US); Jumper (US) = pinafore [dress] (GB)  
**Shorts** (US) = underwear (GB); Vest (US) = underwear (GB)  
Pekka was climbing in the **lime** tree (lehmus, cf linden, basswood, common lime)

### V. Grammar, Syntax, Punctuation, General Usage

#### A - Punctuation:

- Date writing, number/word order (Never use only numbers!)
- Capitalization of titles of articles, essays
- Use of commas and periods inside quotation marks
- Business letter salutations, colons vs commas

#### B - Grammar:

- (U.S.) Finnair **has** a flight to London today.  
(G.B.) Finnair **have** a flight to London today. (large collective nouns)
- (U.S.) England **has** played well today, even if it lost.  
(G.B.) England **have** played well today, even if they lost.
- (G.B.) Have you **got** your grade in history yet?  
(U.S.) Have you **gotten** your grade in history yet?
- (G.B.) He **went on** a course. How many were on the course?  
(U.S.) He **was** in a course. How many were in the course?
- (G.B.) We lived **in the** High Street. (cf 'street people' ...)  
(U.S.) We lived **on** Main Street ("on" plus article plus High/Main)



- f. (G.B.) He's in hospital with a broken leg.  
(U.S.) He's in **the** hospital with a broken leg.
- g. (G.B.) I **have got** a car.  
(U.S.) I **have** a car. I got a car. (different implications)
- h. (G.B.) We weren't able to **catch him up**  
(U.S.) We weren't able to **catch** him, catch up **with** him, catch up [with him].

## VI. Divergence and Overlap:

To post **vs** to mail a letter  
an art gallery **vs** an art museum  
Autumn **vs** fall  
tap **vs** faucet  
luggage **vs** baggage  
shop **vs** store, etc.

## VII. Same Concept, Different Terms or Expressions; (or) Same Word, Differences in Style, Connotation and Frequency:

Hire a car — rent a car (hire-purchase vs installment plan)  
Petrol — gasoline; Saloon — sedan, Estate car — station wagon  
Boot — trunk (storage area); silencer — muffler (to reduce exhaust noise)  
Bonnet — hood; Dynamo — generator; Gear lever — shift  
Sweet — dessert; Red whortleberries — lingonberries  
Fortnight — two weeks; Goods train — freight train  
Barrister vs. solicitor — lawyer, attorney-at-law

## VIII. "Inventiveness"; Spinoffs; Combinations; Brand Names:

Hamburger — cheeseburger, beefburger, fishburger, lobsterburger ..  
Hotel, motel, floatel, boatel  
Hardware, software, firmware, shareware, freeware, vaporware; "treeware ..."  
Suburb, exurb, cyburb, technoburb; citizen, netizen  
Smog, litterbug, 'pleather' (fabric), cosmeceuticals, pharming, etc.  
Sexploitation, cityscape, zeroscaping (xeric plants)  
a "spin doctor" (political aide), "what was the spin on that story?"  
"Half and half"; "A six-pack of PBR tallboys..." (cf. "short dogs")  
"Let's go and visit the Colonel ..."; "Tell them Charley sent you"  
(Roz, on Frasier): "I'm going to climb into a hot tub with my good friends Ben and Jerry"

## IX. Euphemistic References:

Senior citizen, emeritus professor  
Sanitary engineer, environmental technician (janitor)  
Security officer, hair stylist, household manager  
Powder room, ladies' lounge; motion discomfort bag  
Pre-owned car, "Culturally-deprived area"



"The loved one..." (cf death and funeral jargon generally)  
"Air support missions", "ordnance delivery", "pacify an area" (cf military generally)  
"To deselect, dehire" employees; to "downsize, right-size" the company  
an "involuntary conversion" of our 727 equipment (plane crash)

#### **X. "Equality" Vocabulary:**

Fireman — firefighter, Policeman — police officer  
Mailman — mail carrier, Salesman — sales person  
Manmade — artificial, synthetic, manufactured  
Maid — house cleaner. Stewardess — flight attendant  
Chairman — chairperson, Chair, presiding officer

#### **XI. "Politically Correct" Terminology:**

Elderly or "old" people vs senior citizens; seniors; "older" adults, adults 55 & older  
Differently-abled or physically-challenged (vs "handicapped")  
People of Color vs "blacks" (or any non-whites); "Canola" vs "rapeseed" oil  
Animal companion vs "pet", Native American vs "Indian"  
International Wildlife Conservation Park (former Bronx Zoo - "zoo" connotations)

#### **XII. "Black English" (specific terminology in cultural context):**

Everybody look down at they feet; I ain't afraid of nuthin'  
You ugly, man; I the baddest cat around; He be good.  
Boy, Nigger, Soul food, Honkie, rapping, gig, cool!

#### **XIII. Yiddish Influence:**

Schlock, Goy, Schlemiel, schlep, chutzpa, nebbish, shtik  
He should live so long! I should have such luck!  
He's complaining yet! This I need? All right already.  
Fat-shmat, so long as she's happy. Smart, he's not...

#### **XIV. Other Ethnic Influences Abound...**

"Gay" liberation movement (drag, closet, fairy, fruitcake, 'to out' - 'he was outed')  
Organized crime, crime syndicate (vs "Mafia")  
"Chicano" (vs 'hispanic') culture vs "wetbacks," etc...

#### **XV. Jargon; "Professional" influences, Media conveyance...**

Computer: ASCII text, fonts, justified margins, a windowed environment, mouse-compatible, on-line access, upload/download, e-mail "flaming..."  
Drugs: Cocaine (coke, leaf, snow, angel dust); crack, valise, kilos, brick, 'trips'  
Social Position: Yuppie, Buppie, Puppie, Dinks, Woofs ...



Business: Power breakfast, Valium picnic, warm fuzzies ...

Youthisms: dork, nerd, geek, dweeb; psyched, pumped, barf...

Technology and Media in Culture: technocrat, technopeasant, techno-potato, tech-nomads; digerati, virtual corporation, telecommuting, edutainment, 'terrestrial' TV (vs satellite); [broadcasting to] 'narrowcasting', [human] 'multitasking'

## XVI. Regional and Class Terminological Stereotyping:

### *The South vs California*

"bourbon and branch," "blues, banjos, Billy Bob, Bubba & baptists" "good ole' boys," "ice tea, grits & red-eye; pecan pie"

"Awesome," "mondo," "tubular" (Rhonda, Kim, Tracy, & Kelli [Valley Girls])

### *Terms for general, unknown, 'anonymous' or 'stereotypical' persons*

"Uncle Sam" (U.S.) vs "John Bull" (U.K.)

John Doe, John Q. Public, Joe Citizen

Joe Blow, Joe Shmoe, Joe Six-Pack, "Mac", "brother", "sister"

### *Varying implications (region, education, ethnic) of "non-grammatical" language*

(a) "He ain't done nothin' yet" (uneducated, rural?)

(b) "He done et over at th' Hatfields" (hillbilly...)

(c) "You be late...the food be cold." (Black English)

## XVII. "Four-letter words", Obscenities and Implied Obscenities:

Damn, fart, piss, crap, turd, shit, fuck, cunt; vs GB bloody, bugger, bollocks, sod, etc.

"A five-letter woman married to a four-letter man."

His daughter was a thespian who matriculated at the state college.

She came to the party with a homo sapiens!

The dean said he was an extrovert. He masticated during the meal



While there are certainly many more varieties of English, American and British English are the two varieties that are taught in most ESL/EFL programs. Generally, it is agreed that no one version is "correct" however, there are certainly preferences in use. The most important rule of thumb is to try to be consistent in your usage. If you decide that you want to use American English spellings then be consistent in your spelling (i.e. The color of the orange is also its flavour - color is American spelling and flavour is British), this is of course not always easy - or possible. The following guide is meant to point out the principal differences between these two varieties of English.

### **Use of the Present Perfect**

In British English the present perfect is used to express an action that has occurred in the recent past that has an effect on the present moment. For example:

I've lost my key. Can you help me look for it?  
In American English the following is also possible:  
I lost my key. Can you help me look for it?

In British English the above would be considered incorrect. However, both forms are generally accepted in standard American English. Other differences involving the use of the present perfect in British English and simple past in American English include already, just and yet.

British English:

I've just had lunch  
I've already seen that film  
Have you finished your homework yet?

American English:

I just had lunch OR I've just had lunch  
I've already seen that film OR I already saw that film.  
Have your finished your homework yet? OR Did you finish your homework yet?

## Possession

There are two forms to express possession in English. Have or Have got

Do you have a car?  
Have you got a car?  
He hasn't got any friends.  
He doesn't have any friends.  
She has a beautiful new home.  
She's got a beautiful new home.

While both forms are correct (and accepted in both British and American English), have got (have you got, he hasn't got, etc.) is generally the preferred form in British English while most speakers of American English employ the have (do you have, he doesn't have etc.)

## The Verb Get

The past participle of the verb get is gotten in American English.

He's gotten much better at playing tennis.  
British English - He's got much better at playing tennis.

## Vocabulary

Probably the major differences between British and American English lies in the choice of vocabulary. Some words mean different things in the two varieties for example:

Mean: (American English - angry, bad humored, British English - not generous, tight fisted)  
Rubber: (American English - condom, British English - tool used to erase pencil markings)

There are many more examples (too many for me to list here). If there is a difference in usage, your dictionary will note the different meanings in its definition of the term. Many vocabulary items are also used in one form and not in the other. One of the best examples of this is the terminology used for automobiles.

|                          |                          |
|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| American English - hood  | British English - bonnet |
| American English - trunk | British English - boot   |
| American English - truck | British English - lorry  |

Once again, your dictionary should list whether the term is used in British English or American English. For a more complete list of the vocabulary differences between British and American English use this British vs. American English vocabulary tool.

## Prepositions

There are also a few differences in preposition use including the following:

|   |   |
|---|---|
| American English - on the weekend       | British English - at the weekend          |
| American English - on a team            | British English - in a team               |
| American English - please write me soon | British English - please write to me soon |

## Past Simple/Past Participles

The following verbs have two acceptable forms of the past simple/past participle in both American and British English, however, the irregular form is generally more common in British English (the first form of the two) and the regular form is more common to American English.

|       |                   |
|-------|-------------------|
| Burn  | Burnt OR burned   |
| Dream | dreamt OR dreamed |
| Lean  | leant OR leaned   |
| Learn | learnt OR learned |
| Smell | smelt OR smelled  |
| Spell | spelt OR spelled  |
| Spill | spilt OR spilled  |
| Spoil | spoilt OR spoiled |

## Spelling

Here are some general differences between British and American spellings:

Words ending in **-or** (American) **-our** (British) color, colour, humor, humour, flavor, flavour etc.  
Words ending in **-ize** (American) **-ise** (British) recognize, recognise, patronize, patronise etc.

The best way to make sure that you are being consistent in your spelling is to use the spell check on your word processor (if you are using the computer of course) and choose which variety of English you would like. As you can see, there are really very few differences between standard British English and standard American English. However, the largest difference is probably that of the choice of vocabulary and pronunciation.