

J. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICAN AND BRITISH ENGLISH

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DESPITE WHAT MANY PEOPLE would have you believe, there are far more similarities than differences between American and British English. There are, however, a few areas of language where the differences can cause confusion and, in some cases, even embarrassment. The differences fall into four main areas: pronunciation, grammar, spelling, and vocabulary.

Pronunciation

There are many ways in which the pronunciation of American English is noticeably different from the pronunciation of British English. In this section we discuss three types of difference that are easy to notice if you listen carefully: vowels followed by 'r', stress, and suffixes.

Vowels followed by 'r'

Most speakers of American English pronounce written 'r' whenever it appears in a word, but most speakers of British English only pronounce 'r' when it is immediately followed by a vowel. Here are some examples:

Word	American English	British English
mother	/ˈmʌðər/	/ˈmʌðə(r)/
card	/kɑrd/	/kɑ:(r)d/

In the *Macmillan English Dictionary*, the pronunciations use an 'r' in brackets to indicate that the 'r' is pronounced in American English, but not in British English.

Stress (emphasis on a sound or syllable)

Two-syllable words ending in -ate

In most two-syllable words ending in -ate, American speakers stress the first syllable and British speakers stress the second. Examples include:

Word	American English	British English
donate	/ˈdɒn.ət/	/dɒˈneɪt/
rotate	/ˈrəʊ.tət/	/rəʊˈteɪt/

Words ending in unstressed -ile

Words ending in -ile, when this syllable is not stressed, are usually pronounced /əl/ or /(ə)l/ in American English, but /aɪl/ in British English. Examples include:

Word	American English	British English
fragile	/ˈfrædʒəl/	/ˈfrædʒaɪl/
missile	/ˈmɪs(ə)l/	/ˈmɪsaɪl/

Words ending in -ary, -ery, or -ory

In words of several syllables, like *dictionary*, where there is an unstressed syllable before -ary, -ery, or -ory, American speakers emphasize the second syllable from the end, so that the word has an extra syllable. Examples include:

Word	American English	British English
secretary	/ˈsekɹəˌteri/	/ˈsekɹətəri/
cemetery	/ˈseməˌteri/	/ˈsemətəri/
dormitory	/ˈdɔrmiˌtɔri/	/ˈdɔ:(r)mətəri/

Grammar

The differences in grammar between American and British English are relatively few and do not usually cause confusion. In this section we discuss three areas where the differences are particularly noticeable.

Collective nouns

A collective noun is a word that refers to a group of people, such as *company*, *team*, or *family*. With collective nouns, American speakers always use a singular verb form (*is*, *have* etc) whereas British speakers often use a plural verb form (*are*, *have* etc), for example:

American English	British English
<i>The class <u>is</u> going on a trip.</i>	<i>The class <u>are</u> going on a trip.</i>
<i>The family <u>isn't</u> close.</i>	<i>The family <u>aren't</u> close.</i>

Use of the present perfect

British English uses the present perfect tense to talk about actions in the recent past that have an effect on the present moment. In American English, these actions can be described with either the present perfect or the simple past, even with the adverbs *already*, *just*, and *yet*. For example, American speakers may use *either* of the forms shown in these sentences:

*I can't walk. I've hurt my leg. / I hurt my leg.
Have you seen her? / Did you see her?
Have you eaten lunch yet? / Did you eat lunch yet?
The flight has just arrived. / The flight just arrived.
I've already read that book. / I already read that book.*

In British English, the second of each of the examples above would be considered incorrect.

Verb forms

Regular and irregular forms

With verbs like *burn*, *learn*, and *smell*, where the past tense and past participle can be either regular (*burned*, *learned*, *smelled* etc) or irregular (*burnt*, *learnt*, *smelt* etc), British speakers tend to use the irregular forms, whereas American speakers almost always use the regular forms.

Verbs ending in 'l'

Verbs that end in 'l' where the final syllable is not stressed (for example, *travel* or *pedal*), double their final 'l' in British English but not in American English:

American English	British English
traveled	travelled
pedaling	pedalling

Got and gotten

British speakers do not use *gotten* as the past participle of *get*, but in American English *gotten* is very common, especially when it means 'obtain', 'achieve', 'become', or 'go':

*She had gotten good grades in all her tests.
The situation has gotten more dangerous.
Three men had gotten into a big black car.*

Most American speakers who use *gotten* also use *got*. However, *gotten* is not used when *get* means 'own' or 'must':

<i>He's got a car.</i>	(=He owns a car.)
<i>He's gotten a car.</i>	(=He has bought a car.)
<i>She's got to meet the President.</i>	(=She must meet the President.)
<i>She's gotten to meet the President.</i>	(=She has succeeded in meeting the President.)

Spelling

Most differences in spelling between American and British English involve sets of words that contain particular sequences of letters. Once you have learnt the main sets, these spelling differences are easy to predict:

- **-ter and -tre:** many words that end in **-ter** in American English are written with **-tre** in British English. For example:

American English	British English
center	centre
liter	litre

- **-or and -our:** words ending in **-or** in American English are generally written with **-our** in British English. For example:

American English	British English
color	colour
neighbor	neighbour

- **-ense and -ence:** many words that end in **-ense** in American English are written with **-ence** in British English. For example:

American English	British English
defense	defence
offense	offence

- **-ize and -ise:** verbs ending in **-ize** in American English can be written with **-ise** or **-ize** in British English. The same is true for their noun derivatives:

American English	British English
civilize	civilise, civilize
organize	organise, organize
civilization	civilisation, civilization
organization	organisation, organization

As well as these *systematic* spelling differences between American and British English, some differences simply apply only to individual words, for example:

American English	British English
gray	grey
program (e.g. on television)	programme
story (= level of a building)	storey
tire	tyre

Vocabulary

Same word for different things

Some words and phrases are used by both American

and British speakers, but they mean different things in each variety of English. For example, American speakers use *subway* to mean 'an underground railroad in a city', but British speakers use *subway* to mean 'a tunnel that people can walk through to go under a street'.

This dictionary provides 20 special Usage Notes that describe differences between these American and British 'false friends':

Asian	pavement
bathroom	professor
class	programme
college	public school
doctor	quite
football	school
gas	student
holiday	subway
lawyer	theatre
mean	time

Different names for the same object

Some very common objects have completely different names in American and British English. Some of the biggest differences are in words used for everyday things such as foods, household equipment, items of clothing, types of motor vehicle, and parts of a car. Here are just a few examples:

American English	British English
French fries	chips
potato chips	crisps
stove	cooker
cell phone	mobile phone
bathrobe	dressing gown
gas	petrol
sneakers	trainers
trunk (of a car)	boot
hood (of a car)	bonnet

Words and phrases used in only one variety of English

Finally there are some words and phrases that are used mainly in one variety, and not in the other, for the simple reason that the items that they describe exist only in the country where that variety is spoken. Compare these two dictionary entries: the first refers to an American custom that most British speakers would not know about, while the second (sense 2) refers to an award that exists only at the British universities of Oxford and Cambridge:

yellow ribbon noun [C] a thin band of yellow material that people in the US tie around a tree as a way of remembering someone who has gone away, and as a sign of hope that they will return

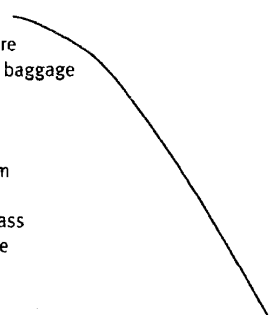
blue² /blu:/ noun ★★

1 [C/U] the colour of the sky on a clear sunny day: *The boy was dressed all in blue.* ♦ *The room had been decorated using bright blues and yellows.*

2 **blue** or **Blue** [C] a person who has played for Oxford University or Cambridge University in a sport: *He was a cricket Blue at Oxford.*

VOCABULARY**British and American English****A**

Match the words and phrases which have the same meaning. For each pair, decide which is British English and which is American English.

- | | |
|--------------------|------------------|
| 1 subway | a) line |
| 2 city centre | b) lift |
| 3 carry-on baggage | c) public toilet |
| 4 one way | d) schedule |
| 5 return | e) economy class |
| 6 freeway | f) single |
| 7 rest room | g) first floor |
| 8 elevator | h) bill |
| 9 coach class | i) booking |
| 10 timetable | j) round trip |
| 11 car park | k) downtown |
| 12 queue | l) motorway |
| 13 check | m) underground |
| 14 reservation | n) hand luggage |
| 15 ground floor | o) parking lot |
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B

Work in pairs. Use the American English words or phrases from Exercise A to complete this text.

My last overseas business trip was a nightmare from start to finish. First of all, there was a delay on the way to the airport, as there was an accident on the freeway¹. When I got there, I found the lower level of the airport² was flooded. Next, my³ was too big and heavy, so I had to check it in. When we arrived, the⁴ was closed, and there were no cabs at all. After a long time trying to figure out the⁵ and waiting in⁶ for 40 minutes, we finally got a bus⁷ and found the hotel. Then there was a problem with our room⁸ and, would you believe it, the⁹ wasn't working, and our rooms were on the fifth floor.