
BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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Annotation:

In general, most words mean the same thing in British and American English. In this article highlights similarities and differences of British and American English.

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While there are certainly many more varieties of English, American English 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," but there are certainly preferences in use. The three major differences between American and British English are:

- Pronunciation - differences in both vowel and consonants, as well as stress and intonation
- Vocabulary - differences in nouns and verbs, especially phrasal verb usage and the names of specific tools or items
- Spelling - differences are generally found in certain prefix and suffix forms

English is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, and you'll find its more than 1 billion speakers just about everywhere. 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, 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). Of course, this is not always easy or possible. The following guide is meant to point out the principal differences between these two varieties of English.

For example, the words apple and chair refer to the same objects in both versions of English. For the most part, speakers of American English and British English won't have much trouble at all understanding one another when it comes to vocabulary.

But there are two particular groups of English speakers we'll focus on in this article—and they are the ones who live on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, or what the Brits like to call “the pond.” If you've enjoyed some British football, puzzled over a British biscuit, or just watched a little “Peppa Pig” with your kids recently, we probably won't surprise you when we say there are some key and noteworthy differences in how English functions in the United States versus the United Kingdom.

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There are very few grammar differences between American and British English. Certainly, the words we choose might be different at times. However, generally speaking, we follow the same grammar rules. With that said, there are a few differences.

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 you finished your homework yet? OR Did you finish your homework yet?

We can find similar examples when we look at slang words. Sometimes, different slang words are used in American and British English to refer to the same things.

A wad of mucus: booger (American) vs. bogey (British)

A man: dude (American) vs. bloke (British)

Very good: awesome (American) vs. ace (British)

To chat: shoot the breeze (American) vs. chinwag (British)

An infantry soldier: grunt (American) vs. squaddie (British)

A toilet: john (American) vs. loo (British)

An anonymous man: John Doe (American) vs. John Smith (British)

To waste time: lollygag (American) vs. faff about (British)

Finally, both American and British English have words that are used exclusively. For example, American English has words like bayou and cleats for which there is no British equivalent. On the other side, British English uses terms like bunce, niff, and jiggery pokery that don't really have American equivalents.

Before we dive into pronunciation differences, we need to address the elephant in the room. Yes, we know both the United States and the United Kingdom have many, many different accents and dialects that are spoken in their respective country. In particular, most (but not all)

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American accents are rhotic whereas most (but not all) British accents are nonrhotic. This means that most Americans will pronounce the R in certain syllables while most Brits will not, as in the word number (pronounced as “numbuh” by a nonrhotic speaker).

Additionally, even Americans and Brits with the same accent or dialect may pronounce a word differently. Ask some of your friends how they pronounce “New Orleans” and you’ll probably get a quick example of this.

All of that being said, there are many words that, in general, are often pronounced differently by many speakers of British English and American English.

Some of these different pronunciations are less dramatic. Here are some examples of words that have relatively minor pronunciation differences:

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- American: [ad-ver-**ta**hyz-muhnt]
- British: [ad-**vu**r-tis-muhnt]

The largest differences between British and American English lie 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.

American English: Don't be so mean to your sister!

British English: She's so mean she won't even pay for a cup of tea.

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

For a more complete list of the vocabulary differences between British and American English, use this British vs. American English vocabulary tool.

Here are some general differences between British and American spellings:

- Examples of words that end in -or in American English and -our in British English: color/colour, humor/humour, flavor/flavour

Examples of words that end in -ize in American English and -ise in British English: recognize/recognise, patronize/patronise

The best way to make sure that you are being consistent in your spelling is to utilize the spell check tool associated with your word processor and select the type of English (American or British) you'd like to use.

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