

American English

22 What's the difference?

The main difference between British and American English is in pronunciation. An American accent sounds different from a British one. There are also some differences in vocabulary. For example, in Britain you walk on the *pavement*, but in the US it's the *sidewalk*; in Britain you put *petrol* in your car, but in the US it's called *gas*, and so on. Many of the American words are familiar to British people and do not cause any difficulties.

The grammar of British English and American English is very similar. There are a few differences but not very many, and most of them are minor points. Usually it is a question of one pattern being preferred over another, rather than something being correct in one variety and incorrect in the other. In some areas British English is moving closer to American usage.

There are also a few spelling differences such as GB *colour* and US *color*.

23 Differences with verbs

A Linking verb + noun phrase

In British English there can be a noun phrase after a linking verb such as *look* or *seem*.

It looks a nice evening.

She seemed a competent pilot.

The following patterns are also possible.

It looks like a nice evening.

It looks to be a nice evening.

She seemed like a competent pilot.

Americans do not use a noun phrase as complement after *look* or *seem*. They use *look like*, *seem like*, or *seem to be*.

It looks like a nice evening.

She seemed like a competent pilot.

She seemed to be a competent pilot.

But Americans can use a noun phrase after *be* or *become*.

She became a competent pilot.

B Do with the imperative

The British can use the emphatic *do* with an imperative, although it is rather old-fashioned.

(Do) have a piece of cake.

The British can use *Don't let's...* as well as *Let's not ...*.

Let's not / Don't let's invite them.

This usage is less common in the US.

Have a piece of cake.

Americans avoid *Don't let's...*

Let's not invite them.

C Question tags

The British use question tags quite often (> Finder 20). They use them not only when they expect agreement, but also to persuade or argue.

*Mary likes tea, doesn't she?
You'll just have to try harder,
won't you?*

Americans use question tags much less often than the British. They use them when they expect agreement.

Mary likes tea, doesn't she?

They do not use them as often to persuade or argue.

Americans often use the tags *right?* and *OK?*

*You're going to meet me, right?
We'll take the car, OK?*

D Do for an action

The British can use *do* to refer to an action. > Finder 24C

*He practises the piano, but not as often as he might (do).
You should reply if you haven't (done) already.*

This use of *do* is not found in American English.

*He practices the piano, but not as often as he might.
You should reply if you haven't already.*

But *do so* is used in both varieties.

You should reply if you haven't done so already.

E Present perfect and past simple

The British often prefer the present perfect for recent actions, especially with *just* and *yet*.

*Bob **has washed** the car, look.*

*I've **just met** an old friend.*

***Have you corrected** your work yet?*

Americans can use either the present perfect or the past simple in these sentences.

*Bob (**has**) **washed** the car, look.*

*I ('ve) **just met** an old friend.*

***Have you corrected** / **Did you correct** your work yet?*

F Will and shall

The British use *will* or *shall* in the first person.

*We **will/shall** contact you in the near future.*

Shall is a little formal.

The British generally use *shall* in offers.

***Shall/Should** I meet you at the entrance?*

The British can also use *Shall we...?* in suggestions.

***Shall** we go for a walk?*

*Let's stay together, **shall** we?*

Americans do not often use *shall* for the future.

*We **will** contact you in the near future.*

Americans prefer *should*.

***Should** I meet you at the entrance?*

Americans do not often use *shall* in suggestions.

How about a walk?

Would you like to go for a walk?

Let's stay together, OK?

G Have and have got

In present-tense statements the British use either *have got* or *have*. > Finder 66

*I've **got** / I **have** some money.*

In present-tense negatives and questions the British prefer *have got*.

*We **haven't got** / We **don't have** much time.*

***Has** Carol **got** / **Does** Carol **have** a computer?*

Americans prefer *have to have got*, but both are possible.

*I **have/I've got** some money.*

In present-tense negatives and questions Americans usually use *have* without *got*.

*We **don't have** much time.*

***Does** Carol **have** a computer?*

H Got and gotten

In British English the past participle of *get* is *got*.

Your driving has got better.
(= Your driving has become better.)

The pain's got a lot worse.
(= The pain has become a lot worse.)

In American English the past participle of *get* is *gotten*.

Your driving has gotten better.
(= Your driving has become better.)

The pain's gotten a lot worse.
(= The pain has become a lot worse.)

Have gotten to means 'have managed to'.

I've gotten to see the show at last.

I Have to and have got to

In present-tense statements the British can use either *have to* or *have got to*. > Finder 72

I have to go. / I've got to go.

In negatives and questions *have to* is more common.

Do you have to go? / Have you got to go?

He doesn't have to go. / He hasn't got to go.

Americans use *have to* without *got*.

I have to go.

Gotta (= *got to*) is used in informal speech.

I gotta go.

Americans also use *have to* in negatives and questions.

Do you have to go?

He doesn't have to go.

J Have them do it and get them to do it

In British English a sentence like *I'll have someone fax you the information* is rather formal. It is less formal to say *I'll get someone to fax you the information*. > Finder 94B

A sentence like *I'll have someone fax you the information* is more usual in the US.

K Need and dare

The British can use *need* (> Finder 73) and *dare* (> Finder 83) both as ordinary verbs and as modal verbs.

He doesn't need to see / He needn't see the inspector.

Do we dare to ask? / Dare we ask?

Americans normally use *need* only as an ordinary verb.

He doesn't need to see the inspector.

Dare is used mainly in fixed phrases.

You wouldn't dare!

L Can't and must not

The British use *can't* to say that something is impossible.

There's no reply. They can't be home.

Americans normally use *must not* to say that something is impossible.

There's no reply. They must not be home.

M Patterns with hate

In British English we can use an object + to-infinitive after *hate*. > Finder 105E

I'd hate everyone to be disappointed.

Americans sometimes use *for* after *hate*.

I'd hate (for) everyone to be disappointed.

N Go + verb

In British English we can use *go and* before another verb.

I'll go and get the tickets.

Americans often leave out *and* after *go*.

I'll go (and) get the tickets.

O The subjunctive

In Britain the subjunctive is rather formal. > Finder 231 Other forms are possible, such as the present simple or *should*.

My parents prefer that my brother lives/should live at home.

Americans use the subjunctive more often than the British do.

My parents prefer that my brother live at home.

P Irregular verbs

Some verbs can have either a regular *-ed* ending or an irregular *-t* ending in the past tense, e.g. *I burned it* or *I burnt it*. They are *burn*, *dream*, *lean*, *leap*, *learn*, *smell*, *spell*, *spill*, and *spoil*.

In general, both forms are possible in British English.

They burnt/burned the old sofa.
I dreamt /dremt//dreamed
/dri:md/ about you.

The irregular forms are less usual in America.

They burned the old sofa.
I dreamed /dri:md/ about you.
But *burnt* is used as a modifier: *a piece of burnt toast.*

There are also differences in the forms of *dive* and *fit*.

In British English *dive* is a regular verb.
Craig dived into the water.

In British English *fit* is regular.
The suit fitted him very well.

In American English the past tense of *dive* is *dived* or *dove* /dəʊv/.

Craig dived/dove into the water.

In American English *fit* is irregular when it means 'be the right size'.

The suit fit him very well.

But it is regular when it means 'put something in the right place'.

I fitted everything into a small space.

24 Differences with nouns and noun phrases

A Group nouns

The British usually use a singular verb after a group noun, but the verb can be plural. > Finder 149

The audience was/were enjoying the show.
Brazil plays/play Germany in the final.

Americans normally use a singular verb after a group noun.

The audience was enjoying the show.
Brazil plays Germany in the final.

B *The*

The British use *the* with a musical instrument.

*I can play **the** piano.*

The British say *in hospital*. > Finder 160D

*My sister is still **in hospital**.*

In Britain some bridges have *the*, but not all of them. We say *over **the** Severn Bridge* but *over Lambeth Bridge*.

Americans can leave out *the*.

*I can play **the** piano/play piano.*

Americans say *in the hospital*.

*My sister is still **in the** hospital.*

In the US, bridges have *the*:
***the** Brooklyn Bridge.*

C *This* and *that* on the phone

When the British ask who the other person is they usually use *that*. > Finder 165D

*Is **that** Becky?*

*Who is **that/this**?*

Americans use *this* rather than *that*.

*Is **this** Becky?*

*Who is **this**?*

D The pronoun *one*

In formal British English *one* can mean 'people in general'. > Finder 176A

***One** must consider **one's** legal position.*

You and *your* would be less formal.

Americans do not often use *one* meaning 'people in general', and they do not use *one's* or *oneself*.

***You** must consider **your** legal position.*

E *And* in numbers

The British use *and* between *hundred* and the rest of the number.

*five hundred **and** twenty*

Americans can leave out *and* from a number.

*five hundred **and** twenty* OR
five hundred twenty

F Dates

There are a number of different ways of writing and saying the date. > 6
The British often write *20 October* and say *the twentieth of October*.

Americans usually write *October 20* and say *October twentieth*.

When writing the date in figures, Americans put the month first, e.g. 6/28/05 (June 28 2005)

25 Differences with adjectives and adverbs

A Adjective instead of adverb

The British use *really* to modify an adjective.

We had a really nice time.

Real is much less usual in British English.

The British do not normally use *sure* as an adverb.

It certainly makes a difference.

But it can be used in a short reply expressing agreement.

Have you got a moment? ~ Yes, sure.

Americans can say *really* or *real*.

We had a really/real nice time.

In informal American English *sure* can be used as an adverb.

It sure makes a difference.

B Quite, pretty, and rather

These adverbs of degree are all used in British English. > Finder 196A

The film was quite/pretty/rather funny.

Americans use *pretty* more than *quite* or *rather*.

The movie was pretty funny.

Americans use *quite* mainly in the negative.

I'm not quite sure about that.

C Just and right

The British use *just* meaning 'exactly' in these phrases of time and place.

I'm busy just now.

The bus stops just there outside the bank.

Right now and *right there* are also possible.

The Americans use *right*.

I'm busy right now.

The bus stops right there outside the bank.

D Somewhere and someplace

In British English we can use the compound adverbs *everywhere*, *somewhere*, *anywhere*, and *nowhere*.

I hoped we could go out somewhere.

In informal American English, *everyplace*, *someplace*, *anyplace*, and *noplace* are also used.

I hoped we could go out someplace/somewhere.

E Too in contradictions

The British use a short statement to contradict what someone says.

*You never take out the rubbish.
~ I do./Yes, I do.*

Americans can also use a short statement with *too* in contradictions.

*You never take out the garbage.
~ I do too.*

The stress is on *do*. Compare this reply.

I work in a bank. ~ I do, too.
Here the stress is on *too*.

26 Differences with prepositions

A Out (of), outside (of), etc

The British use *out of* as a preposition.

I was looking out of the window.
Out the window is also possible in informal speech.

Americans prefer *out* without *of* in this context.

I was looking out the window.
But *out of* is also used.

The British normally use *outside* without *of*.

They were waiting outside the school.
Outside of is possible but less usual.

Americans use either *outside* or *outside of*.

They were waiting outside the school/outside of the school.

The British normally use *off* and *alongside* without *of*. *Off of* is regarded as non-standard.

You may also hear *off of* and *alongside of* in American English.

B (A)round, toward(s), and in back of

The British use either *round* or *around* as a preposition.

*We walked **round/around** the park.*

The British usually say *towards* with a final *-s*.

*Someone was coming **towards** us.*

The British can say *behind* or *at the back of*.

*There's a car park **behind** the building/**at the back of** the building.*

Americans normally use *around*.

*We walked **around** the park.*

Americans normally say *toward* without the *-s*.

*Someone was coming **toward** us.*

Americans can also say *in back of*.

*There's a parking lot **behind** the building/**in back of** the building.*

C Through expressing time

To say when something starts and finishes, the British can use *from ... to/till/until*.

*We'll stay in London **from** January **to/till/until** April.*

*Open Monday **to** Saturday.*

In the first example, it is not clear whether we will stay for the whole of April or for only a part. If we mean the whole of April, we can express it like this.

*We'll stay in London **till/until** the **end of** April.*

Americans also use *from ... to/until*, but more often they use *from ... through*.

*We'll stay in New York **from** January **through** April.*

*Open Monday **through** Saturday.*

In the first example, *through April* means that the time includes the whole of April.

We can also use *through* without *from*.

*We'll stay in New York **through** April.*

The spelling *thru* is sometimes used in informal American English.

*Open Monday **thru** Saturday.*

D On before days of the week

The British normally use *on* in a phrase like this.

*I'll be back **on** Thursday.*

But it is possible to leave out *on* in informal speech.

Americans often leave out *on* before a day of the week.

*I'll be back **Thursday**.*

E Some uses of prepositions

Here are some phrases typical of British English.

in Oxford Street
stay *at* home
a player *in* the team
at the weekend
ten minutes *past* eleven
twenty minutes *to* eight
write *to* me
meet someone
visit them
different *from/to* the others

These are the typically American expressions.

on Fifth Avenue
stay home
a player *on* the team
on/over the weekend
ten minutes *past/after* eleven
twenty minutes *to/till* eight
write me
meet someone / meet *with* someone
visit them / visit *with* them
different *from/than* the others

27 Differences with conjunctions

A *In case*

The British use *in case* meaning 'because something might happen'. > Finder 251C

Go quietly in case anyone hears you.

Americans tend to avoid using *in case* in this way.

Go quietly so no one will hear you.

In American English, *in case* often means 'if'.

If you need/In case you need any help, let me know.

B *Immediately*

The British can use *immediately* as a conjunction.

As soon as I saw him/Immediately I saw him, I recognized him.

Americans do not use *immediately* as a conjunction.

As soon as I saw him, I recognized him.

28 American spelling

Here are some of the main differences between British and American spelling.

Some words end in *-our* in Britain but *-or* in America:

neighbour/neighbor.

Some words end in *-tre* in Britain but *-ter* in America: *centre/center.*

Some verbs can end either with *-ize* or *-ise* in Britain: *realize/realise.*

They end with *-ize* in America: *realize.*

In Britain there is doubling of *l* in an unstressed syllable: *signalled.* > 291C

In some American words there is no doubling: *signaled.*

Here are some words with different spellings.

GB	US
<i>analyse</i>	<i>analyze</i>
<i>apologize/apologise</i>	<i>apologize</i>
<i>axe</i>	<i>ax/axe</i>
<i>behaviour</i>	<i>behavior</i>
<i>cancelled</i>	<i>canceled</i>
<i>catalogue</i>	<i>catalog/catalogue</i>
<i>centre</i>	<i>center</i>
<i>cheque</i> (money)	<i>check</i>
<i>colour</i>	<i>color</i>
<i>councillor</i>	<i>councilor/councillor</i>
<i>counsellor</i>	<i>counselor</i>
<i>defence</i>	<i>defense</i>
<i>dialogue</i>	<i>dialog/dialogue</i>
<i>dialled</i>	<i>dialed</i>
<i>disc</i> > Note a	<i>disk</i>
<i>favour</i>	<i>favor</i>
<i>fulfil</i>	<i>fulfill</i>
<i>grey</i>	<i>gray/grey</i>
<i>harbour</i>	<i>harbor</i>
<i>honour</i>	<i>honor</i>
<i>humour</i>	<i>humor</i>
<i>jeweller</i>	<i>jeweler</i>
<i>jewellery</i>	<i>jewelry</i>
<i>kerb</i> (edge of pavement)	<i>curb</i>
<i>labelled</i>	<i>labeled</i>
<i>labour</i>	<i>labor</i>
<i>licence</i> (noun) > Note b	<i>license</i>
<i>litre</i>	<i>liter</i>
<i>marvelled</i>	<i>marveled</i>
<i>marvellous</i>	<i>marvelous</i>
<i>metre</i> (=100 cm)	<i>meter</i>
<i>neighbour</i>	<i>neighbor</i>

GB	US
<i>offence</i>	<i>offense</i>
<i>organize/organise</i>	<i>organize</i>
<i>paralysed</i>	<i>paralyzed</i>
<i>plough</i>	<i>plow</i>
<i>practise</i> (verb) > Note c	<i>practice</i>
<i>programme</i> > Note a	<i>program</i>
<i>pyjamas</i>	<i>pajamas</i>
<i>realize/realise</i>	<i>realize</i>
<i>signalled</i>	<i>signaled</i>
<i>skilful</i>	<i>skillful</i>
<i>storey</i> (of a building)	<i>story</i>
<i>theatre</i>	<i>theater/theatre</i>
<i>travelled</i>	<i>traveled</i>
<i>tyre</i>	<i>tire</i> (on a wheel)
<i>whisky</i>	<i>whiskey</i>
<i>woollen</i>	<i>woolen</i>
<i>worshipped</i>	<i>worshipped/worshipped</i>

NOTE

- The British write *disk* and *program* when they mean a computer disk or a computer program.
- The noun is *licence* in Britain and *license* in the US. The verb is *license* in both varieties (although *licence* as a verb is possible in Britain).
- The verb is *practise* in Britain and *practice* in the US. The noun is *practice* in both varieties.