

Differences between British and American English

Introduction

British and American English can be differentiated in three ways:

- ✦ Differences in language use conventions: meaning and spelling of words, grammar and punctuation differences.
- ✦ Vocabulary: There are a number of important differences, particularly in business terminology.
- ✦ Differences in the ways of using English dictated by the different cultural values of the two countries.

Our clients choose between British or American English, and we then apply the conventions of the version consistently.

Differences in language use conventions

Here are some of the key differences in language use conventions.

- ✦ Dates. In British English, the standard way of writing dates is to put the day of the month as a figure, then the month (either as a figure or spelled out) and then the year. For example, 19 September 1973 or 19.09.73. The standard way of writing dates in American English is to put the month first (either as a figure or spelled out), then the day of the month, and then the year. For example, September 19th 1973 or 9/19/73. Commas are also frequently inserted after the day of the month in the USA. For example, September 19, 1973.
- ✦ and *ou*. In British English, the standard way of writing words that might include either the letter *o* or the letters *ou* is to use the *ou* form. For example, *colour, humour, honour, behaviour*. The standard way of writing such words in American English is to use only *o*. For example, *color, humor, honor, behavior*.
- ✦ *Through*. In American English, the word *through* (or *thru*) can be used to mean *until*. For example, 'September 19th thru October 1st', would be in British English '19 September until 1 October'.
- ✦ Hyphens. Hyphens are often used in British English to connect prefixes with the main word. For example, *pre-emption, pre-trial, co-operation*. They are less common in American English. For example, *preemption, pretrial, cooperation*.
- ✦ *z* or *s*? In British English, *s* is generally used in such words as *recognise, authorise*. The letter *z* is used in American English in such words as *recognize* or *authorize*. However, it is not wrong to use *z* in such words when using British English as standard.

- ✦ Note, however, that some words must always end in *-ise* whether you are using British or American English standards. These include:

i. advertise	advise
ii. arise	comprise
iii. compromise	demise
iv. despise	devise
v. disguise	enfranchise
vi. excise	exercise
vii. franchise	improvise
viii. incise	merchandise
ix. premise	revise
x. supervise	surmise
xi. surprise	televis

- ✦ *I or II?* In American English, a single *I* is used in such words as *traveled* or *counseled*. In British English, *II* is used (e.g. *travelled, counselled*).
- ✦ Note, however, that in British English, some words that end in a double *II* lose one *I* when a suffix is added: *skill* becomes *skilfully*, *will* becomes *wilfully*. In American English, the double *II* is retained: *skill* becomes *skillfully*, *will* becomes *willfully*.
- ✦ *-re or -er?* In American English, the *-er* ending is used in words like *theater, center, meter, and fiber*. In British English, these words are spelt *theatre, centre, metre, and fibre*.
- ✦ *oe and ae*. Some scientific terms retain the use of the classical composite vowels *oe* and *ae* in British English. These include *diarrhoea, anaesthetic, gynaecology, and homoeopathy*. In American English, a single *e* replaces the composite vowel: *diarrhea, anesthetic, gynecology, homeopathy*.
- ✦ *-e or -ue?* In British English, the final silent *-e* or *-ue* is retained in such words as *analogue, axe* and *catalogue*. In American English, it is omitted: *analog, ax, and catalog*.
- ✦ *-eable or -able?* The silent *e*, produced when forming some adjectives with a suffix is generally used in British English in such words as *likeable, unshakeable, and ageing*. In American English, it is generally left out: *likable, unshakable, and aging*. The *e* is however sometimes used in American English where it affects the sound of the preceding consonant: *traceable or manageable*.
- ✦ *-ce or -se?* In British English the verb that relates to a noun ending in *-ce* is sometimes given the ending *-se*. For example, *advice* (noun) / *advise* (verb), *device*/*devise*, *licence*/*license*, *practice*/*practise*. American English

uses *-se* for both the noun and verb forms of these words. It also uses *-se* for other nouns which in British English are spelt *-ce*, including *defense*, *offense*, *pretense*.

- **Prepositions.** In American English, it is acceptable to omit prepositions in certain situations. In British English, this habit is less common. For example, an American lawyer might find a certain clause in a contract to be 'likely enforceable'. A British colleague would be more likely to say that it was 'likely to be enforceable'. An American civil rights activist might 'protest discrimination', while his British colleagues would 'protest against discrimination'.
- **Have and got.** In American English it is quite acceptable to use the word *got* without *have* in sentences like 'I got two tickets for the show tonight'. In British English, it is more usual to say 'I've got two tickets for the show tonight'.
- **Gotten.** *Gotten* is a proper word in American English, but is only used as an Americanism in British English, except in certain phrases such as 'ill-gotten gains'.
- **While or whilst?** Both *while* and *whilst* are used in British English. In American English, *while* is the right word to use, and *whilst* is regarded as a pretentious affectation.
- **The past tense and past participle of the verbs learn, spoil, spell (only in the word-related sense), burn, dream, smell, spill, leap, and others,** can be either irregular (learnt, spoilt, etc.) or regular (learned, spoiled, etc.). In British English, both irregular and regular forms are used, but the irregular forms tend to be used more often. In AmE, only the regular form is used.
- **Directional suffix -ward(s):** British forwards, towards, rightwards, etc.; American forward, toward, rightward.
- **Full stops/Periods in abbreviations:** In American English, we write "Mr.", "Mrs.", "St.", "Dr." etc., while in British it is usually "Mr", "Mrs", "St", "Dr", etc.
- **Quotation marks:** In British English, single quotation marks are used, and in American English, double quotation marks are used. In British English, double quotation marks are used within the single quotation marks, whereas in American English, single quotation marks are used inside double quotation marks.
- **Period and comma:** In British English, the period and comma are placed outside quotation marks. However, if the punctuation mark is a part of the quote itself, then the quotation mark is placed after the period or comma. In American English, the period and comma are always placed inside quotation marks.
- **In British English, i.e. and e.g. are used, whereas in American English, i.e., and e.g., are used.**
- **Serial commas are used in American English but not in British 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?

Vocabulary

Here are some key vocabulary differences.

British	American
aerial (tv)	antenna
aluminium	aluminum
anti-clockwise	counterclockwise
at weekends	on weekends
cheque (bank)	check
film	movie
grey	gray
holiday	vacation
manoeuvre	maneuver
metre	meter
plough	plow
post	mail
programme	program

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sceptical	skeptical
storey (of building)	story, floor
towards	toward
transport	transportation
tyre	tire
yours faithfully	respectfully yours / yours truly
yours sincerely (letter)	sincerely yours

Difference related to cultural values

British and American English have a number of differences which relate to the different cultural values of the two countries. For example, British English contains a number of frequently used metaphors relating to football ('scoring an own goal') and cricket ('a sticky wicket'), while American English uses metaphors relating to baseball ('in the ball park').

The two versions of the language also have certain tendencies which are worth bearing in mind. These are not absolute, since individual writers have their own styles which may incorporate aspects of both British and American tendencies. However, in general:

- ✦ British English tends to react more slowly to new words and phrases than American English. American English enthusiastically adopts new usages, some of which later pass into general use (e.g. corporate citizen, social performance), and some die out after a short period in fashion (e.g. synergy).
- ✦ British English has a slight tendency to vagueness and ponderous diction. American English (at its best) tends to be more direct and vivid.
- ✦ American English tends to be more slangy than British English.
- ✦ Both American and British English are keen on euphemisms. In British English, these are often used for humorous purposes (e.g. to be economical with the truth) or to smooth over something unpleasant. In American English they may be used for prudish reasons (thus lavatory or WC becomes restroom or bathroom), to make something mundane sound important (thus ratcatcher becomes rodent operative), or to cover up the truth of something unpleasant (thus civilian deaths in war become collateral damage).

Frequently Asked Questions

Q. The client has formatted the document in British English, and the journal too is a British one, but the instructions say use American English? What should I do?

A. In such a case, do not change the English throughout the manuscript. Keep British English, and write a remark.

Q. It is a British journal, but it uses the “Oxford Comma”; what does that mean?

A. An Oxford Comma is simply a serial comma used in BrE:

<http://www.askoxford.com/asktheexperts/faq/aboutother/oxfordcomma>

Q. This Elsevier journal is completely confusing. It says use UK Grammar, with US spellings. Is that right?

A. Yes. The thumb rule is that the Journal Guidelines always overrule the English instructions given by the client. Also, please write a Remark about this to bring this to the author’s notice as a journal instruction.

Further Reading

⇒ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_and_British_English_differences

⇒ <http://english2american.com/>