

British English vs American English

“England and America are two countries divided by a common language.”
– George Bernard Shaw

Despite their common origin, there are significant differences between British English and American English: in pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. In the 17th century, the English language was introduced to what is modern-day America by British settlers. English is not a phonetic language. At that time, a large percentage of the population was illiterate and spelling was not remotely standardized. This began to change with the 1755 publication of Samuel Johnson’s *A Dictionary of the English Language*, a compilation of some 40,000 words and their definitions. The divergence of American English in the early 19th century can largely be attributed to the 1828 publication of Noah Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, which compiled some 70,000 words and their definitions.

Pronunciation

In terms of speech, the differences between American and British English actually took place after the first settlers arrived in America. These groups of people spoke using what was called *rhotic* speech, where the ‘r’ sounds of words are pronounced distinctly. Meanwhile, the higher classes in the UK wanted to distinguish the way they spoke from the common masses by softening their pronunciation of the ‘r’ sounds. Since the elite even back then were considered the standard for being fashionable, other people began to copy their speech, until it eventually became the common way of speaking in the south of England.

Spelling

The spelling of words that sound the same can sometimes be different. The main difference in how words are written is that British English has tended to keep the spelling of words it has absorbed from other languages, such as French and German, while American English has adapted the spelling to reflect the way that the words actually sound when they're spoken. Noah Webster was a proponent of English spelling reform for both philological and nationalistic reasons.

“It is often assumed that characteristically American spellings were invented by Noah Webster. He was very influential in popularizing certain spellings in America, but he did not originate them. Rather [...] he chose already existing options such as *center*, *color* and *check* on such grounds as simplicity, analogy or etymology.”
– John Algeo, *A Companion to the American Revolution* (2008)

British English	American English
-oe-/-ae- (e.g. anaemia, diarrhoea, encyclopaedia)	-e- (e.g. anemia, diarrhea, encyclopedia)
-t (e.g. burnt, dreamt, leapt)	-ed (e.g. burned, dreamed, leaped)
-ence (e.g. defence, offence, licence)	-ense (defense, offense, license)
-ell- (e.g. cancelled, jeweller, marvellous)	-el- (e.g. canceled, jeweler, marvelous)
-ise (e.g. appetiser, familiarise, organise)	-ize (e.g. appetizer, familiarize, organize)
-l- (e.g. enrol, fulfil, skilful)	-ll- (e.g. enroll, fulfill, skillfull)
-ogue (e.g. analogue, monologue, catalogue)	-og (e.g. analog, monolog, catalog) *Note that American English also recognizes words spelled with -ogue
-ou (e.g. colour, behaviour, mould)	-o (e.g. color, behavior, mold)
-re (e.g. metre, fibre, centre)	-er (e.g. meter, fiber, center)
-y- (e.g. tyre)	-i- (e.g. tire)

Vocabulary

The Americans and the British also have some words that differ from each other. The table below lists some of the everyday objects and expressions that have different names, depending on what form of English you are using.

British English	American English
action replay	instant replay
aeroplane	airplane
agony aunt	advice columnist
aluminium	aluminum
anticlockwise	counter-clockwise
aubergine	eggplant
autumn	fall or autumn
baking tray	cookie sheet
bank holiday	legal holiday or federal holiday
beetroot	beet(s)
bin, dustbin, or rubbish bin	garbage can, trash can, or wastebasket
biscuit	cookie or cracker
scone	biscuit
bonnet (front of the car)	hood
boot (back of the car)	trunk
chips	French fries
crisps	chips or potato chips
chemist	drugstore or pharmacy
cinema	movie theatre
coach	bus
film	movie
fizzy drink	soda, pop, or soda pop
flat	apartment
football	soccer
holiday	vacation
jumper	sweater or sweatshirt
kerb	curb
kitchen roll	paper towels
lift	elevator
loo or WC (water closet)	bathroom or restroom
loo roll	toilet paper
lorry	truck
mobile or mobile phone	cell or cell phone
pants	underpants, underwear, or panties
pavement	sidewalk
plaster	Band-Aid
petrol	gasoline or gas
post	mail
postbox	mailbox
queue	line
rubber	eraser
condom	rubber
sweets or sweetshop	candy or candy store
to ring	to call (on the telephone)
trainers	sneakers or tennis shoes
trousers	pants
university or uni	college

Grammar

Aside from spelling and vocabulary, there are certain grammar differences between British and American English. For instance, in American English, collective nouns are considered singular (e.g., *The band is playing.*). In contrast, collective nouns can be either singular or plural in British English, although the plural form is most often used (e.g., *The band are playing.*).

The British are also more likely to use formal speech, such as 'shall', whereas Americans prefer the more informal 'will' or 'should'.

Americans, however, continue to use 'gotten' as the past participle of 'get', which the British have long since dropped in favor of 'got'.

'Needn't', which is commonly used in British English, is rarely, if at all used in American English. In its place 'don't need to' is used.

In British English, 'at' is the preposition in relation to time and place. However, in American English, 'on' is used instead of the former and 'in' for the latter.