

British English and American English – a comparative guide

Even when you're writing for other English speakers, you can still find yourself dealing with different customs.

According to George Bernard Shaw (probably), Britain and America are 'two countries divided by a common language'. We may not need translators to converse, but you can save potential embarrassment or confusion by learning from some of our writing differences.

Here's a quick comparative guide to key differences in conventions for use of punctuation, grammar, some vocabulary and spelling that can only help to ease relations.

Punctuation	British English	American English	Additional
Commas before final 'and' in a list (oxford comma)	Generally only used to avoid ambiguity, eg 'the sandwiches were egg, cheese, egg and cress, and ham and tomato.'	Usually employs Oxford comma regardless.	
Full stops (in America, 'periods')	Usually used at the end of abbreviations (abbr., co., Prof.), but not contractions (Mr, Mrs, Dr).	With some exceptions, uses periods at the end of both abbreviations and contractions.	These rules may be adapted according to the organisation's style. The main rule is to be consistent.

Dashes	Uses the en-dash (–) with a space on each side.	Uses the longer em-dash (—) with no space on either side.	
Hyphens	Quite consistently uses hyphens in compound adjectives before a noun, eg writing-skills training, man-eating lion. Will often use hyphens to indicate pronunciation, eg pre-empt.	More likely to create compound words without hyphens, which BrE would hyphenate or separate, eg holdup, printout.	
Colons	No capital letter after the colon.	May have a capital letter after the colon if it introduces a full sentence or question.	
Quotation marks	The most common method is single quotation marks for direct speech, and double for speech within speech. Punctuation is inside the quotation marks only if it is part of the quote.	Uses double quotation marks, and single for quotes with quotes. Has a slightly less logical approach to punctuation around quotes: commas and full stops are always inside the final quotation mark. All other punctuation placed according to whether it forms part of the quote.	Some British publications with an international audience use the American convention, for example, <i>The Economist</i>
Grammar			

Prepositions	At or during the weekend Different from or to An office in Queen's Road Named after She'll write to you	On the weekend Different from or than An office on Queen's Road Named for or after She'll write you [no preposition]	
Past participles	Got Proved Fitted BrE favours -t endings in the past tense, eg burnt, learnt, leapt. Some use of -ed ending (as above).	Gotten Proven or proved Fit AmE more likely to use -ed ending, or sometimes the infinitive, eg quit, sweat, fit (as above).	While 'gotten' is often seen as an unwelcome Americanism, it can actually be traced back to England at around the time of Shakespeare.
Suffixes	Towards Forwards	Toward Forward	
Collective nouns	May be treated as singular or plural, depending on whether it is about an organisation acting as a unit or referring to	More likely to treat as singular, eg the staff is generally satisfied. May depend on context.	

	individual members. Some companies may make the style choice to always refer to themselves in the plural. 'The Government' always uses a plural.		
Spelling – main differences			
-our or -or	Usually uses -our, eg colour, behaviour, flavour, neighbour, armour, honour, savour, rumour, humour.	Usually drops the 'u', especially where the syllable is unstressed eg color, behavior, flavor, neighbor, and so on. Where stress is on the syllable, it keeps it, eg contour, paramour.	

-ce or -se	With nouns that end in -ce, the verb form of the word will often end in -se, eg licence becomes (to) license; practice becomes (to) practise; advice – (to) advise; a device – (to) advise.	Where the pronunciation of both noun and verb are the same, both are spelled the same. So practice is always with a 'c'; license, always an 's'. Some other nouns also take the -se ending, in contrast to the British forms: defense, offense, pretense.	
-re or -er	Many words from French, Latin or Greek still end in -re, eg centre, fibre, metre, litre, lustre, spectre, theatre, calibre, sombre.	The ending -er is almost always used instead. The few exceptions include: acre, lucre, mediocre, massacre, ogre and cadre.	American spelling tends to be simpler and more phonetic. They also drop the silent 'e' or 'ue' from the ends of words, and replace composite vowels from words like anaesthetic, aeon and oestrogen with a single 'e' (see 'miscellaneous', below).

-ise or -ize -yse or -yze	Both 's' and 'z' versions are acceptable, in words such as organise, recognise, analyse and realise. Although the 's' spellings are more common, the 'z' versions are recognised first by the Oxford English Dictionary.	Replaces 's' with 'z' in almost all cases. There are some words that only ever take 's'. They include: advertise, advise, apprise, arise, chastise, circumcise, comprise, compromise, demise, despise, enfranchise, excise, exercise, improvise, incise, surmise, supervise, surprise, revise and merchandise.	-ize endings are more common in scientific writing and by many international organisations (although not the EU).
Miscellaneous – spelling	cheque sceptic tyre artefact axe mould analogue kerb (pavement)	check skeptic tire artifact ax mold analog curb	

	anaesthetic oestrogen plough grey aluminium speciality (but for medicine: specialty)	anesthetic estrogen plow gray aluminum specialty	
Miscellaneous – vocabulary			
to table (a motion)	to put (the motion) forward	to put (the motion) aside, to shelve	
	public school, private school	private school	
	state school	public school	
	full stop	period	
	banknote	bill	

	(bank) clerk	teller	
	current account	checking account	
	Inland Revenue	Internal Revenue	
	stock	inventory	
	turnover	revenues	
	value-added tax (VAT)	sales tax	
	ground floor	first floor	
	housing estate	housing development	
	toilet	bathroom, washroom, restroom	
	lift	elevator	
	solicitor	attorney	

	accelerator	gas (pedal)	
	car bonnet	hood	
	car boot	trunk	
	coach	bus	
	dual carriageway	four-lane/divided highway	
	car exhaust	muffler	
	gearbox	transmission	
	high street	main street	
	ring road	beltway	
	autumn	fall	
	bank holiday	public holiday	

	British Summer Time (BST)	Daylight Saving Time (DST)	
	chemist	pharmacy, drugstore	
	from...to...	through	
	post, post box	mail, mailbox	
	upmarket	upscale	
	queue	line (up)	