

## Fact Sheet

### Some differences between British and American English

A speaker of Brooklyn English may have some difficulty understanding a speaker from Glasgow due to differences in accent and dialect, but it is very unlikely that the American and the Scot will have problems with each other's writing. This is because the spelling and grammar of *written* English are very much the same throughout the English-speaking world. It is true that there are some differences between British and American spelling and grammar, but unlike lexical differences, these never lead to misunderstanding.

#### Spelling

Here are the main systematic differences between American and British spelling.

Table 1: Differences between British and American spelling

American spelling	British spelling	Examples
<-or>	<-our>	color (us) v colour (uk)
no doubling of verb-final < > before {-ed} and {-ing}	doubling of verb-final < > before {-ed}, {-er} and {-ing}	traveled (us) v travelled (uk) traveler (us) v traveller (uk)
<-log>	<-logue>	catalog (us) v catalogue (uk)
<-ll>	<-l>	fulfill (us) v fulfil (uk)
<-ense>	<-ence>	license (us) v licence (uk)
<-ection>	<-ection> or <-exion>	connection (us) v connexion or connection (uk), but complexion (us AND uk)
simplified spelling <e> instead of <ae> and <oe> in Latin and Greek loanwords	spellings <ae> and <oe> retained in Latin and Greek loanwords	esthetic (us) v aesthetic (uk) medieval (us) v mediaeval (uk); fetus (us) v foetus (uk)
{-ize}	{-ise} or {-ize}	organize (us) v organise or organize (uk)

In addition, there are spelling differences between American and British English that are non-predictable. Tottie (2002, p. 12) lists the following differences in a table.

Table 2: Unpredictable differences between British and American English spelling

American spelling	British spelling
ax, axe	axe
balk	baulk
cozy	cosy
caldron, cauldron	cauldron
check	cheque
dike (embankment)	dyke
jail	gaol, jail
gray, grey	grey
curb (roadside)	kerb
mold, mould	mould
molt	moult
plow, plough	plough
skeptic(al)	sceptic(al)
tire	tyre
woolen	woollen
yogurt	yoghurt

### Vocabulary

The following list of differences between British and American English vocabulary is based on Hargraves (2001).

Table 3: American words and their British equivalents

American word or phrase	British word or phrase
airplane	aeroplane
apartment	flat
biscuit	≈ scone
busy (of a telephone)	engaged
can	tin
candy	sweets
(potato) chips	crisps
cookie	biscuit
corn	sweetcorn, maize
crazy	mad, crazy
crib	cot
crosswalk	zebra crossing
diaper	nappy

American word or phrase	British word or phrase
different than	different from
doctor's office	doctor's surgery
drapes	curtain
elevator	lift
fall, autumn	autumn
faucet	tap
first floor (of a building)	ground floor
freeway	motorway
French fries	chips
garbage (can)	rubbish (bin)
gas	petrol
gotten	got
highway	main road
hood	bonnet
house doctor	GP
in two years	for two years
intersection	crossroads
jello	jelly
jelly	jam
live on a street	live in a street
mad	angry
math	maths
mean	nasty
movie, film	film
on the weekend	in the weekend
pants, trousers	trousers
parking lot	car park
pavement	road surface
pharmacy	chemist('s)
a quarter after/past two (telling the time)	a quarter past two
a quarter before/to	a quarter to
railroad	railway
raise (in pay)	rise
rest room, bathroom	toilet
résumé/resume	curriculum vitae, cv
round trip	return (journey)
sidewalk	pavement
sneakers	trainers
stingy	mean, tight, stingy
subway	underground, Tube (London)
take-out	takeaway
truck	lorry, van

American word or phrase	British word or phrase
trunk (of a car)	boot
two weeks	fortnight, two weeks
windshield (of a car)	windscreen
yard	garden
z /zi:/	z /zed/

## Grammar

There aren't as many differences between American and British grammar as there are in spelling and vocabulary. Here's a short list.

Table 4: Main differences between American and British grammar

	American grammar	British grammar
Subject-verb agreement for collective nouns (e.g. <i>family, government, team</i> )	Preference for singular finite verb (syntactic concord) <i>The team has won.</i>	Singular or plural finite verb (syntactic or semantic concord) <i>The team has/have won.</i>
Resultative perfect	Optional; may be replaced by past simple <i>Did you see the movie already?</i>	Obligatory: <i>Have you seen the film already?</i>
First person futurate <i>shall</i>	Not frequent in American English <i>I will be away until 14 January.</i>	Still used in British English <i>I shall be away until 14 January.</i>
Main verb <i>have</i>	Preferred to <i>have got</i> <i>I have a younger sister.</i>	Less frequent than <i>have got</i> <i>I have got a younger sister.</i>
Deontic <i>have got to</i>	Less frequent than <i>have to</i> <i>We have to catch a train.</i>	Less frequent than <i>have got to</i> <i>We have got to catch a train.</i>
Deontic modal <i>must</i>	Less frequent than <i>have to</i> <i>You have to stop talking right now!</i>	Use depends on source of obligation: <i>You must stop talking right now!</i>
Directive <i>going to</i>	Alternative for the imperative <i>You're going to take the second street on your right.</i>	Considered incorrect: <i>Take the second street on your right.</i>
Irregular verbs turned regular	Frequent <i>burned; dreamed; hanged; learned; spelled; spilled</i>	Less frequent <i>burnt; dreamed/dreamt; hung/hanged; learnt; spelt; spilled/spilt</i>
Loss of adverbial suffix {-ly}	Frequent in informal spoken registers <i>That was real good.</i>	Considered incorrect <i>That was really good.</i>

	American grammar	British grammar
Adjectival <i>likely</i>	Frequent in informal spoken registers He'll likely need surgery.	Considered incorrect He's likely to need surgery.

### References

- Carter, R. & McCarthy, M. (2006). *Cambridge Grammar of English: A Comprehensive Guide. Spoken and Written English Grammar and Usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hargraves, O. (2001). *Mighty Fine Words and Smashing Expressions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Swan, M. (2016 [1980]). *Practical English Usage*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tottie, G. (2002). *An Introduction to American English*. Maldon (MA): Blackwell.