

BRITISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

English at a Glance

English is the most widely spoken language in the world, with approximately 1.5 billion total speakers. It's the dominant global lingua franca, used in international business, tourism, technology, and more. Interestingly, only about 26% of English speakers are native speakers, highlighting its widespread adoption as a second language.

Historically, English originated in medieval England, evolving from Germanic dialects. Today, it's a global language, widely used across continents.

The two Standard Varieties of English

The two main standard varieties of English are:

British English (BrE): Used in the UK, Ireland, and some Commonwealth countries.

American English (AmE): Used in the United States and its territories.

These varieties have differences in spelling, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar.

The Question—Which Standard Variety of English is more Influential?

Both British English (BrE) and American English (AmE) are super influential in their own ways.

American English (AmE) is arguably more globally widespread due to:

- US cultural exports (movies, music, tech)
- Business and tech dominance

British English (BrE) influences:

- Commonwealth countries
- Traditional English language standards

In Nigeria, you'll often see a mix of both due to colonial history (BrE) and global tech/media influence (AmE). It is therefore important to know their differences and stick to one especially while writing formal essays.

Differences Between British and American English

Let's look at differences in Spelling, Vocabulary, Pronunciation, and Grammar.

• Differences in Spelling

The main difference here is that British English keeps the spelling of words it has absorbed from other languages, mainly French and German. Whilst American English spellings are based mostly on how the word sounds when it is spoken.

British English words ending in 'our' usually end in 'or' in American English:

BRITISH	US
colour	color
flavour	flavor
humour	humor
labour	labor
neighbour	neighbor

Verbs in British English that can be spelled with either 'ize' or 'ise' at the end are always spelled with 'ize' at the end in American English:

BRITISH	US
apologize or apologise	Apologize
organize or organise	Organize
recognize or recognise	Recognize

Verbs in British English that end in 'yse' are always spelled 'yze' in American English:

BRITISH	US
analyse	analyze
breathalyse	breathalyze
paralyse	paralyze

In British spelling 'L' is doubled in verbs ending in a vowel plus 'L'. In American English, the 'L' is

not doubled:

BRITISH	US
travel	travel
travelled	traveled
travelling	traveling
traveller	traveler

British English words that are spelled with the double vowels ae or oe tend to be just spelled with an e in American English: Although there are exceptions to the rule. For example archaeology is spelt in the same way as British English but archeology would be acceptable in America but is incorrect in the UK.

BRITISH	US
leukaemia	leukemia
manoeuvre	maneuver
oestrogen	estrogen
paediatric	pediatric

Some nouns that end with 'ence' in British English are spelled 'ense in American English:

BRITISH	US
defence	defense
licence	license
offence	offense
pretence	pretense

Some nouns that end with 'ogue' in British English end with either 'og' or 'ogue in American English:

BRITISH	US
---------	----

analogue	analog or analogue
catalogue	catalog or catalogue
dialogue	dialog or dialogue

• Differences in Vocabulary

Here are some of the main differences in vocabulary between British and American English. This page is intended as a guide only. Bear in mind that there can be differences in the choice of specific terms depending on dialect and region within both the USA and the UK.

British English	American English
anti-clockwise	counter-clockwise
articulated lorry	trailer truck
autumn	autumn, fall
barrister	attorney
bill (restaurant)	bill, check
biscuit	cookie
block of flats	apartment building
bonnet (car)	hood
bonnet (clothing)	hat
boot	trunk
bottom	backside
car park	parking lot
caravan	trailer
chemist's shop	drugstore, pharmacy
chest of drawers	dresser, chest of drawers, bureau
chips	fries, French fries

cinema	the movies
clothes peg	clothespin
coffin	coffin, casket
crisps	potato chips
crossroads	intersection; crossroads (rural)
cupboard	cupboard (in kitchen); closet (for clothes etc)
diversion	detour
drawing-pin	thumbtack
drink-driving	drunk driving
driving licence	driver's license
dual carriageway	divided highway
dummy (for baby)	pacifier
dustbin	garbage can, trash can
dustman	garbage collector
engine	engine, motor
estate agent	real estate agent
estate car	station wagon
film	film, movie
flat	apartment, flat, studio
flat tyre	flat tire
flyover	overpass
gear-lever	gearshift
gearbox (car)	transmission
Girl Guide	Girl Scout
ground floor	ground/first floor

handbag	handbag, purse, shoulder bag
high street	main street
holiday	vacation
hood (car)	convertible top
jam	jam, preserves
jug	jug, pitcher
juggernaut	18-wheeler
lift	elevator
loo (informal)	bathroom
lorry	truck, semi, tractor
mad	crazy, insane
main road	highway
maize	corn
maths	math
motorbike	motorcycle
motorway	freeway, expressway
motorway	highway, freeway, expressway, interstate highway, interstate
nappy	diaper
naughts and crosses	tic-tack-toe
pants, underpants	underpants, drawers
pavement	sidewalk
pet hate	pet peeve
petrol	gas, gasoline
Plough	Big Dipper
pocket money	allowance

post mail
postbox mailbox
postcode zip code
postman mailman, mail carrier, letter carrier
pram carriage baby carriage
pub bar
public toilet rest room, public bathroom
railway railroad
return (ticket) round-trip
reverse charge collect call
ring road beltway, freeway/highway loop
road surface pavement, blacktop
roundabout traffic circle, roundabout
rubber eraser
rubbish garbage, trash
rubbish-bin garbage can, trashcan
saloon (car) sedan
shop shop, store
silencer (car) muffler
single (ticket) one-way
solicitor lawyer, attorney
spanner wrench
sweets candy
taxi taxi, taxi cab
tea towel dish towel

telly (informal), TV television, TV

third-party insurance liability insurance

timetable schedule

tin can

toll motorway toll road, turnpike

torch flashlight

trousers pants, trousers

tube (train) subway

underground (train) subway

vest undershirt

waistcoat vest

wallet wallet, billfold

wellington boots rubber boots, rain boots

whisky whisky/whiskey

windscreen windshield

zip zipper

• Differences in Pronunciation

Now, let's get into the nitty-gritty: what makes British and American English sound so different? Let's look at a few key features of the Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American English (GAE) accents – these are the two 'standard' accents for each variety.

Vowel Sounds

Vowel sounds are one of the biggest differences between British and American English. One key difference to note is that some vowels are longer in General American English compared to Received Pronunciation. You'll also notice that some vowels change to 'r-colored sounds' like /ə/ and /ɜ/. This means that a /r/ sound is pronounced at the same time as the vowel. Recognising patterns like these can help you get used to each accent more easily.

Let's take a look at some more differences between British and American accent vowels:

/ɑː/ vs. /æ/

British (RP): Words like bath, dance, and class are pronounced with the long */ɑː/* vowel.

American (GAE): These words are all pronounced with a short and open */æ/* sound.

/ɒ/ vs. /ɑ/

British (RP): Words like lot, hot, and dog use the short rounded */ɒ/* vowel.

American (GAE): These words typically use the unrounded vowel */ɑ/*, which is a little more open.

/ɔː/ vs. /ɑ/

British (RP): Words like cot/*ɒ/* and caught/*ɔː/* are pronounced with two different vowels.

American (GAE): Many words like these are pronounced with the same */ɑ/* vowel. This is called the 'cot – caught merger'.

/əʊ/ vs. /oʊ/

British (RP): Words like go, know, and low are pronounced with */əʊ/*. Start by relaxing the mouth and tongue, then slowly round your lips into an */ʊ/* sound.

American (GAE): These words have a slightly more open */oʊ/* sound. Start with a more rounded mouth placement, like the British 'o' sound in 'hot'. Then slowly round your lips into an */ʊ/* sound.

Since General American English is a rhotic accent, the 'r' sound is usually pronounced very clearly, particularly at the end of words. This has an influence on the vowel sounds, making them sound slightly different. Here are some key examples:

/ɜː/ vs. /ɝ/

British (RP): Words like nurse, bird, and world use the non-rhotic vowel */ɜː/*. The 'r' is also silent, so the words are pronounced as */nɜːs/*, */bɜːd/*, and */wɜːld/*.

American (GAE): These words use a rhotic */ɝ/* sound. This is similar to the British */ɜː/* but with the mouth positioned into a /r/ while producing the vowel. This makes the words sound more like */nɜːs/*, */bɜːd/*, and */wɜːld/*.

/eə/ vs. /er/

British (RP): Words like where, care, and hair use the diphthong */eə/* at the end and the final letter 'r' is silent.

American (GAE): These words are pronounced with a rhotic */er/*. The vowel is a shorter */e/* sound and the /r/ is clearly pronounced, making these words sound like */wer/*, */ker/*, and */her/*.

/ə/ vs. /ɚ/

British (RP): Words ending in er, or, ar, or re are usually pronounced with a schwa. So words like teacher, doctor, calendar, and centre are pronounced as /'ti:tʃə/, /'dɒk.tə/, /'kæl.ɪn.də/, /'sen.tə/. Note that the final 'r' is silent.

American (GAE): Words ending in 'r' have a clear 'r-colored schwa' at the end (this is a combination of the relaxed schwa sound /ə/ and /r/), like /'ti:tʃə/, /'dɑ:k.tə/, /'kæl.ən.də/, and /'sen.tə/.

• Differences in Grammar

The Use of Collective Nouns

The fact is that in American English, such nouns are usually used with singular verbs, and in British English, it is possible to use collective nouns in both plural and singular, depending on what is meant: a group of people as a whole, or a group of individuals.

For example:

The team is playing today. – American English

Tom's family is/are coming to visit. – British English

Differences in Forming the Past Tense

When it comes to past tense verbs, they can be written in two ways in British English.

For example: learned – learnt, burned – burnt, dreamed – dreamt, etc. True, they don't say smelt or leapt, only smelled and leaped.

In American English, it is common to use the –ed ending almost all the time. Exceptions can be the words dream (dreamt) and smell (smelt), but the –ed ending is often used with these words as well (dreamed, smelled).

Use of the Past Participle

In American English, the past participle of the word get, for example, can be used in two different ways: got/gotten. While British English allows the use of gotten, the rules of grammar dictate got.

For example:

I've gotten a headache. – American English (talking about past events in general)

I've had a headache. – British English

When Speaking About Dates

There is also a small difference in this area, which we may have never thought about.

British say: My birthday is the 9th of September.

Americans say: My birthday is September 9th.

In other words, Americans usually don't use the article in this case, while British use the form article + of.

Speaking About Events in the Past Tense

When speaking about events in the past, British use the past perfect tense, while Americans simplify everything and use past simple + already/just/yet.

For example:

I just saw her. vs. I have just seen her.

He already finished doing his homework. vs. He has already finished his homework.

Did she leave yet? vs. Has she left yet?

Use of the word Got

In American English (when speaking informally), the verb to get is used to express:

Necessity (present simple)

Possession

For example:

I got to go. = I gotta go.

I got a new car.

In British English, the word got is also used to express necessity or possession, but only in the present perfect verb form.

For example:

I've got to go.

I've got a new car.

The Formation of Complex (Compound) Nouns in American and British English

This is the last thing I'd like to discuss today.

It's very simple. In America, people use the following construction to form complex nouns: verb + noun.

For example: jump rope, dive board.

In the United Kingdom, there is another form: gerund (verb + ing) + noun.

For example: skipping rope, diving board.

Compiled By:

Bina Ologbo

+2347069000506

binaologbo5@gmail.com