

7

British and American English

British and American English can be differentiated in three ways:

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

It is necessary to choose between British or American English and then apply the conventions of the version you choose consistently. If you muddle up British and American standards, it implies that you do not understand that they are different.

7.1

DIFFERENCES IN LANGUAGE-USE CONVENTIONS

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

- 1 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, 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.
- 2 **o** 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**.
- 3 **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'.
- 4 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**.
- 5 **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:

advertise	advise
arise	comprise
compromise	demise
despise	devise
disguise	enfranchise
excise	exercise
franchise	improvise
incise	merchandise
premise	revise
supervise	surmise
surprise	televise

- 6 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 which end in a double **II** lose one **I** when a suffix is added: **skill** becomes **skillfully**, **will** becomes **wilfully**. In American English, the double **II** is retained: **skill** becomes **skillfully**, **will** becomes **willfully**.

- 7 -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**.
- 8 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**.
- 9 -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**.
- 10 -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**.
- 11 -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. In American English the situation is more complicated. Both forms are used in **advice/advise** and **device/devise, license** is used for both noun and verb, and **practice** for both noun and verb. It also uses **-se** for other nouns, which in British English are spelt **-ce**, including **defense, offense, pretense**.

- 12** 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'.
- 13** **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'.
- 14** **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'.
- 15** **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.

7.2

VOCABULARY

Here are some key vocabulary or spelling differences.

7.2.1 Ordinary words and phrases

British	American
aerial (TV)	antenna
aluminium	aluminum
anti-clockwise	counterclockwise
at weekends	on weekends
aubergine	eggplant
autumn	fall
banknote	bill
bill	check
biscuit	cookie

braces	suspenders
building society	savings and loan association
calibre	caliber
camp bed	cot
car bonnet	hood
car park	parking lot
car windscreen	windshield
caravan	trailer
cheque (bank)	check
chips	french fries (or, recently, 'freedom fries')
cinema	movie theater
clerk (bank)	teller
clever	smart
cling film	plastic wrap
cooker	stove
cosy	cozy
courgette	zucchini
crisps	potato chips
crossroads/junction	intersection
dialled	dialed
dived	dove
draught	draft
dressng gown	bathrobe/housecoat/robe
dual carriageway	four-lane highway
estate agent	realtor/real estate agent
film	movie
flat	apartment
flyover	overpass
frying pan	skillet
fuelled	fueled
full stop (punctuation)	period
give way	yield

British	American
grey	gray
ground floor	first floor
high street	main street
holiday	vacation
increase (of money)	hike
lent	loaned
lift	elevator
lorry	truck
maize/sweetcorn	corn
manoeuvre	maneuver
meet	meet with
metre	meter
motorway	highway, freeway, expressway, throughway
mum	mom
muslin	cheesecloth
nappy	diaper
oblige	obligate
ordinary	regular, normal
pants	underpants
pavement	sidewalk
petrol	gasoline, gas
plough	plow
post	mail
power point	electrical outlet
programme	program
property (land)	real estate
quarters (three-quarters)	fourths (three-fourths)
queue	line, line-up
rationalisation (personnel)	downsizing

riding (horses)	horseback riding
ring road	beltway
rivalled	rivaled
rowing boat	rowboat
sceptical	skeptical
sizeable	sizable
skilful	skillful
solicitor	attorney, lawyer
sombre	somber
stand (for election)	run
starter	appetizer
storey (of building)	story, floor
stupid	dumb
sweet shop	candy store
tap	faucet
tartan	plaid
terraced house	row house
till	checkout
towards	toward
transport	transportation
trainers	sneakers
travelled	traveled
trousers	pants or slacks
tyre	tire
underground (or tube train)	subway
upmarket	upscale
vest	undershirt
waistcoat	vest
work out (problem)	figure out
Yours faithfully	Respectfully yours/Yours truly
Yours sincerely (letter)	Sincerely yours

7.2.2 Business and legal terminology

Note that some of these terms are not exactly equivalent or may be used interchangeably in some cases. For example, 'competition law' is often understood as a wider concept than 'antitrust law', and a large number of US terms (e.g. 'par value') are in relatively common use in British legal English.

British	American
called to the bar	admitted to the bar
competition law	antitrust law
articles of association	bylaws
balance sheet	statement of financial position
bills	notes
bonus or scrip issue	stock dividend or stock split
company	corporation
creditors	payables
debtors	receivables
depreciation	amortization
employment law	labor law
exceptional items	unusual items
flotation	initial public offering (IPO)
indemnify	hold harmless and indemnify
land and buildings	real estate
maintenance	alimony
nominal value	par value
ordinary shares	common stock
preference shares	preferred stock
profit and loss account	income statement
provisions	allowances
receivership	chapter 11 bankruptcy
share premium	additional paid-in capital

shareholders' funds	stockholders' equity
stocks	inventories
theft	larceny
turnover	revenues
undistributable reserves	restricted surplus

DIFFERENCES RELATED TO CULTURAL VALUES

7.3

There are a number of differences between British and American English, 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 that 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**).
- American English has a tendency to lengthen unnecessarily existing words in an effort to make them sound more important (thus **transport** becomes **transportation**).