

British versus American English

APSU Writing Center Handout

There are many differences between British and American punctuation, spelling, and grammar.

The main difference 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.

Neither version is more correct than the other, which version you should use depends on who your primary audience is. Here are some of the most common differences between British and American academic English.

Spelling Patterns

Words that are spelled the same in both British and American English include: successful, resourceful, meaningful, refill, harmful, hour, surprise, prize, advise, advertise, etc.

Dates

British English writes dates in day/month/year format (DD/MM/YY).

22/3/23 means March, 3, 2023.

American English writes dates in month/day/year format (MM/DD/YY).

3/22/23 means March, 3, 2023.

Titles

British English does not place periods after titles (Mr, Mrs, Ms).

American English places periods after titles (Mr., Mrs., Ms.).

Time

British English dictates a period between the hours and minutes (10.30, 9.23)

American English dictates a colon between the hours and minutes (10:30, 9:23)

Punctuation Marks

British English

Single quotation marks ('s') but alternate with double for quotations within quotations. (He said, 'This model has been called "the best".')

Punctuation appears **outside** quotation marks. (Did he say, 'the best there is?')

Exception: when the punctuation is part of the original quotation rather than the speaker's sentence. (He asked, 'the best there is?')

American English

Double quotation marks ("x"), but alternate with single for quotations within quotations. (She said, "This model has been called 'the best.'")

Punctuation appears **within** quotation marks. (They said he is "the best there is.")

Exception: emphasizing the writer's sentences rather than the speaker's quotation. (They told them we are "the best there is"!)

American Gray vs. British Grey

Gray and grey are two different spellings of the same word, used to refer to the color between white and black.

It can be used as a noun to refer to the color, an adjective to describe something as being that color, and as a verb to refer to the act of becoming that color.

Never changing forms of the words:

"Earl Grey" tea (is always spelled with the "e" as it is a proper noun.

"Gray" (measure of energy)

"greyhound" dog breed or bus service

Vocabulary and Slang Words

Most words mean the same thing in British and American English. However, there are often two different words that can be used to refer to the same thing depending on if you are using American or British English.

- **Example:** British English uses the word football to refer to the sport that Americans know as soccer.

American to British Terms

apartment, flat, studio = flat

cotton candy = candy floss

trunk = boot

flashlight = torch

fries = chips

potato chips = crisps

trailer = caravan

mail = post

diaper = nappy

oatmeal = porridge

garbage = rubbish

green thumb = green fingers

parking lot = car park

pants = trousers

candy = sweets

elevator = lift

vacation = holiday

windshield = windscreen

gas, gasoline = petrol

eggplant = aubergine

sweater = jumper

References

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