



. . . It's All English



by
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with invaluable assistance from
Emma Bawden

“There even are places where English completely disappears —
In America, they haven’t spoken it for years!”
—Professor Henry Higgins
in *My Fair Lady*

A Prefatory Note: The author of this article is an American and, as it is intended for a U.S. based writer’s group’s website, it is of course written from an American point of view. However, should any Brits stumble across it, I hope that you will find it useful as well — and that you’ll take advantage of the contact information below to inform me of any oversights, changes, or additions you would like to recommend.

English isn’t the same everywhere. Watch a few minutes of the BBC and you’ll get a hint of it; pick up Train-spotting and you may well be overwhelmed by it. And if you’re writing dialogue involving British characters, you’ll probably want to keep it in mind. A few “Britishisms” sprinkled here and there will lend an air of authenticity to your characters’ chats; conversely, a significantly out-of-place word or phrase can shake knowledgeable readers right out of the fictive cocoon you’ve spun up around them.

What follows is a short list of some notable differences between American English and British English. Where a bit of specificity or clarification seems in order, I’ve included short notes under the heading Explanation.

Caveats: This list is far from exhaustive, and it should also be remembered that in both the U.S. and the U.K. regional expressions and usages are common. Anyone interested in creating great specificity in dialect is advised to study up on the region in question and, if at all possible, to talk to or at least correspond with someone from that area.

U.S.

alfalfa sprout
answering machine
apartment
band-aid
bangs
bill
braid
briefs / boxers
bathroom
call
candy sweet(s)
cane
cell(ular) phone

corn
cute
diaper
drug
eggplant
elevator
flashlight
highway / freeway
garbage / trash
(trashcan)
garters
homey

hood

Indian food
line
liquor store

mall

movie

nail polish
nylons
pants
panties
period
pigtails

round-trip
Santa Claus

U.K.

bean sprout
answer phone
flat
plaster
fringe
note
plait
pants
loo / toilet
ring / phone

walking stick
mobile phone

sweet corn
sweet / pretty
nappy
store/pharmacy
aubergine
lift
torch
motorway
rubbish
(rubbish bin)
suspenders
homely

bonnet

curry
queue
off-licence

shopping centre

film

nail varnish
tights
trousers
knickers
full stop
bunches

return
Father Christmas

Explanation

hair cut straight across the forehead
“a dollar bill” / “a one-pound note”

men’s underwear

used as a verb

Americans use both expressions
The British pronunciation emphasizes the long “i”
sound.

chemist

ladies’ underwear to hold up stockings
means “pleasant” like a nice home — but in Ameri
ca, “homely” means “ugly”
the metal cover over the engine of a car; both words
also refer to a type of hat of head covering

as a verb, “line up here” or “queue here”
a place to buy alcoholic drinks in bottles and cans;
in the U.S., licence is spelled “license”
(offy) British slang for “off-licence”
Americans use both; in the U.S., “centre” is spelled
“center”
Americans use “film” as well, though less often
than “movie”

Americans use “tights” to mean a dancer’s costume
British use “pants” to mean men’s underwear
women’s underwear
punctuation (.) at the end of a sentence
two “bunches” of hair worn on either side of a girl’s
head

also sometimes Saint Nicholas (in both countries)

shopping	cart	shopping trolley
sidewalk	pavement	
sneakers	trainers	casual shoes / gym shoes
soccer	football	U.S., football is more like rugby
(field)	(pitch)	
(game)	(match)	
(shoes)	(boots)	
store	shop	Americans tend to use “shop” to mean a very small store
street performer	busker musicians, clowns, etc.;	Americans use both
stroller	pram	for babies to ride in
subway	underground / tube	
suspenders	braces	used instead of a belt to hold the pants up; in America, “braces” are used to straighten teeth
sweater / sweat shirt	jumper	
swimsuit	swimming costume	
truck	lorry	
trunk	boot	the back compartment of a car
T.V.	telly	slang terms for “television”
two weeks	a fortnight	
V.C.R. video	[v]ideo [c]assette [r]ecorder	
white-out	correction fluid	white liquid for correcting mistakes on paper (Liquid Paper) (Tip-Ex) popular, common brand names
wrench	spanner	a tool for loosening and tightening things
zero	nought	
zucchini	courgette	

Along with distinctions in vocabulary, there are also some differences in grammar and usage. For example:

U.S.	U.K.	Explanation:
be in the hospital	be in hospital	
Merry Christmas!	Happy Christmas!	British use both expressions
on the weekend	at the weekend	
take a bath	have a bath	British use both expressions
take a vacation	go on holiday	
take a walk	have a walk	
July twentieth	the twentieth of July / twentieth July	
1st floor, 2nd floor etc.	ground floor, 1st floor, etc.	

There are, of course, a good many spelling differences as well, “color” as opposed to “colour”, “program” against “programme”, “curb” or “kerb”, and thousands of others.

Remember, too, that British punctuation sometimes differs from American, most notably in terms of quotation marks. Where Americans use double quotation marks — “ — to frame dialogue, and single quotation marks

— ‘ — to denote any quotations within quotations, the British style is precisely the opposite. For example,

American: “Can you call me back?” Bob asked. “I’m watching the ‘Game Day’ on TV!”

British: ‘Can you ring me back?’ Bob asked. ‘I’m watching “Match of the Day” on the telly.’

Because of such concerns, even if you choose to use British vocabulary and dialect, you will likely want to stick to familiar spellings and punctuation standards, to prevent the style from becoming inconsistent.

Resource: A particularly good source for comparisons between British and American English is the Oxford Compact English Dictionary from Oxford University Press. Along with listing which terms are chiefly or almost exclusively British and which are uniquely American / North American, it also lists alternate spellings and notes slang, as well as examining word origins.

A Final Note: The Author wishes to thank Emma Bawden and Cat MacDonald for their input on this article. Simply put, what you’ve just read couldn’t have been written without them. We’ve all done our best to list as many differences as we could recall, track down, or stumble across. However, anyone reading this who wishes to offer additions to the list may contact me at Cearb@aol.com.



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