

British and American English



It shouldn't come as a surprise to anybody that there are some significant differences between British English and American English. Many of these differences are apparent in terms of spelling and indeed in terms of vocabulary.

Let's take a humble car. Is it an estate car (Br. Eng.) or is it a station wagon (Am. Eng.)? Is the engine under the bonnet or the hood, do we put the shopping in the boot or in the trunk, does it have a windscreen or a windshield, is it a manual or a stick shift? Oh well, at least if it breaks down you'll be able to phone for help on your mobile, or is that your cell? Here are a few more examples:



colour

personalise

realise

tap

trousers

pavement

rubber



color

personalize

realize

faucet

pants

sidewalk

eraser

Many of these vocabulary differences are immediately apparent as soon as we in the UK watch an American TV programme (or TV show) or vice versa.

However, there are also some significant differences in terms of grammar. These might not be so immediately obvious or evident unless, like the writer of this course, you have

an inbuilt grammar radar. While the majority of this course is centred around British English it is, we feel, worthwhile bringing some of the major or more significant differences to your attention.

There may well be some occasions, as once experienced by the Director of Studies of Global English, when American English is preferred over British English in an institution or indeed a country where you are applying for a job. Therefore, in this section of the course, we shall focus on these grammatical differences.

Past simple and present perfect

Before we discuss this frequently heard difference between the usage of these two tenses, given that they are two tenses which our students often find really difficult to grasp, it's worth having a quick recap of the 'usual' difference between the two.

In a nutshell, and we could go into far greater depth here, the past simple is used when there is a completed action in the past at a specific or given time, for example:

I **saw** Vera in town last week. She **looked** really well.

On the contrary, the present perfect (has/have + past participle) is used when time is not specified or important, when the action started in the past and is still relevant or in effect at the time of speaking/writing and **always** when we see *yet*, *already* and *ever*, which themselves suggest an unspecified time up to the point of speaking (and should act as a clue for our students that present perfect should be used) for example:

I've **lost** my keys (and I still can't find them).

Have you ever **been** to Uganda? It's a beautiful country.

Therefore, we would be able to hear the following sentence:

✓ **Have** you **seen** the latest Bond film? The stunts are incredible.

(The time is not important and the film is still current.)

but not this one:

x **Have** you met Princess Diana?

(Time is not specified but there is, sadly, no possible link to now.)

Having said that, British English speakers generally make far greater use of the present perfect than do speakers of American English. They, instead, often use the past simple where British English speakers use the present perfect.

So, where in British English you will hear:

I've **done** that already.

I've **lost** my way, could you tell me how to get to the science museum, please?

In American English, you may hear a speaker say:

I **did** that already.

I **lost** my way, could you tell me how to get to the science museum, please?

In British English, this would simply be deemed 'incorrect' but **both** versions are generally accepted in American English.