



BLOOMSBURY INTERNATIONAL

**America and
Britain are two
countries divided by
a common language.**



America and Britain are two countries divided by a common language.

(Bernard Shaw)

Students often ask me whether native British English speakers can understand American English equally well as English spoken in the UK. For the British, the issue is not normally comprehending American English via television, films, music and social media but being able to employ American alternatives in social conversation. It should be admitted that more and more British people are adopting Americanisms thanks to the globalisation of English but there are still certain words and phrases which are normally only used by Americans and vice versa: only ever employed by the British.

The most obvious contrast between British and American English is the different accent. This is most apparent in Hollywood movies where British actors often now play American roles as much as American actors used to play British characters. But both nationalities can struggle to put on the foreign accent of the parts they are playing convincingly – for example, Benedict Cumberbatch as Dr Strange or Kevin Costner as Robin Hood.

For students the main issue is the potential confusion over spelling: there are several words which have American alternative spelling and nowadays when we are writing on Microsoft Word the computer script settings have already been configured to American spelling as this is the most popular form of English used around the world. This means that if you make a spelling mistake it will be autocorrected to American, not British spelling. Although you can reset your computer script to conform to British spelling many people don't realise that American English is not the only way to write English correctly and are not aware they can adopt this format when they study here. Thankfully, Facebook does give its users the option to choose between US & UK English.

American English tends to be preferred to British English as the medium to be studied at school in many countries around the world especially in the Far East and South America but European Union students, such as France, Italy, Spain etc still learn British English in their country . Who knows if this will still be true after Brexit?

Here are some examples of American alternatives to British spelling:

traveling (US) / travelling (GB)

check (US)/cheque(GB)

color (US)/colour (GB)

organization (US)/organisation (GB)

There are also some words which are normally only used by Americans, not by the British:

metro (US): tube (GB)

subway (US): underground (GB)

college (US): university (GB)

jail (US): prison (GB)

There are a few grammatical differences between American & British English as well:

speak with (US)/ speak to (GB)

gotten (US)/ got (GB)

appeal (US)/ appeal against (GB)

It should be remembered that the United States was originally a colony of the British Empire and that American English spelling & pronunciation was influenced by Spanish speech as quite a few major states like Texas and California were governed by Mexico (which is nowadays considered to be a Latin American nation). English is not the mother tongue of the United States as it is in Britain; it was adopted as the common language (in Latin lingua franca) by settlers who came from Germany, Holland, Scandinavia, Spain and France as well as from Great Britain.

The question remains: which should you use: American English or British English? Tell us what you think.