

British spelling versus American spelling

There are hundreds of minor spelling differences between British and American English. You can thank American lexicographer Noah Webster for this. You might recognize Webster's name from the dictionary that carries his name.

Noah Webster, an author, politician, and teacher, started an effort to reform English spelling in the late 1700s. He was frustrated by the inconsistencies in English spelling. Webster wanted to spell words the way they sounded. Spelling reform was also a way for America to show its independence from England.

Here are the main spelling differences between American and British spelling of English words.

-er/re

Words that end in –re in Britain often have those two letters reversed when spelled in American English. Here are some examples:

British English: centre, fibre, litre, theatre

American English: center, fiber, liter, theater

-nse/nce

While the British use the –nce ending, Americans generally prefer –nse.

American English: defense, license, offense, pretense

British English: defence, licence, offence, pretence

-ize/ise

American English uses the –ize spelling at the end of words, and while some people in Britain accept that as a valid spelling, you'll usually see those same words spelled with the –ise ending instead.

British English: apologise, organise, recognise

American English: apologize, organize, recognize

-or/-our

In British English, the preferred spelling of words ending in –our is not maintained in American English; in the United States, the “u” is dropped from the word.

American English: behavior, color, humor, labor, neighbor, flavor

British English: behaviour, colour, humour, labour, neighbour, flavour

Double vowels “ae” and “oe”

American English: leukemia, maneuver, estrogen, pediatric

British English: leukaemia, manoeuvre, oestrogen, paediatric

Words ending in a vowel plus –l

While Americans have dropped the double “l” when adding suffixes to verbs that end in the letter “l” the British still generally use the two-“l” approach to their spelling.

American English: traveling, traveled, traveler, fueled, fueling

British English: travelling, travelled, traveler, fuelled, fuelling

British versus American Vocabulary

Here are some of the **main differences** in **vocabulary** between British and American English.

| British English | American English |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| anti-clockwise | counter-clockwise |
| articulated lorry | trailer truck |

| British English | American English |
|----------------------------|---------------------|
| autumn | autumn, fall |
| barrister | attorney |
| bill (<i>restaurant</i>) | bill, check |
| biscuit | cookie |
| block of flats | apartment building |
| bonnet (<i>clothing</i>) | hat |
| bonnet (<i>car</i>) | hood |
| boot | trunk |
| caravan | trailer |
| car park | parking lot |
| chemist's shop | drugstore, pharmacy |

| British English | American English |
|------------------|---|
| chest of drawers | dresser, chest of drawers, bureau |
| chips | fries, French fries |
| the cinema | the movies |
| clothes peg | clothespin |
| coffin | coffin, casket |
| crisps | potato chips |
| crossroads | intersection; crossroads (<i>rural</i>) |
| cupboard | cupboard (<i>in kitchen</i>); closet (<i>for clothes etc</i>) |
| diversion | detour |
| drawing-pin | thumbtack |
| drink-driving | drunk driving |

| British English | American English |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| driving licence | driver's license |
| dual carriageway | divided highway |
| dummy (<i>for baby</i>) | pacifier |
| dustbin | garbage can, trash can |
| dustman | garbage collector |
| engine | engine, motor |
| estate agent | real estate agent |
| estate car | station wagon |
| film | film, movie |
| flat | apartment, flat, studio |
| flat tyre | flat tire |

| British English | American English |
|------------------------|------------------------------|
| flyover | overpass |
| gearbox (<i>car</i>) | transmission |
| gear-lever | gearshift |
| Girl Guide | Girl Scout |
| ground floor | ground/first floor |
| handbag | handbag, purse, shoulder bag |
| high street | main street |
| holiday | vacation |
| hood (<i>car</i>) | convertible top |
| jam | jam, preserves |
| jug | jug, pitcher |

| British English | American English |
|-----------------|--|
| juggernaut | 18-wheeler |
| lift | elevator |
| lorry | truck, semi, tractor |
| mad | crazy, insane |
| main road | highway |
| maize | corn |
| maths | math |
| motorbike | motorcycle |
| motorway | freeway, expressway |
| motorway | highway, freeway, expressway, interstate highway, interstate |
| nappy | diaper |

| | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------------|
| naughts and crosses | tic-tack-toe |
| pants, underpants | underpants, drawers |
| pavement | sidewalk |
| pet hate | pet peeve |
| petrol | gas, gasoline |
| The Plough | Big Dipper |
| pocket money | allowance |
| post | mail |
| postbox | mailbox |
| postcode | zip code |
| postman | mailman, mail carrier, letter carrier |
| pub | bar |

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| public toilet | rest room, public bathroom |
| railway | railroad |
| return (<i>ticket</i>) | round-trip |
| reverse charge | collect call |
| ring road | beltway, freeway/highway loop |
| road surface | pavement, blacktop |
| roundabout | traffic circle, roundabout |
| rubber | eraser |
| rubbish | garbage, trash |
| rubbish-bin | garbage can, trashcan |
| saloon (<i>car</i>) | sedan |
| shop | shop, store |

| | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------|
| silencer (<i>car</i>) | muffler |
| single (<i>ticket</i>) | one-way |
| solicitor | lawyer, attorney |
| spanner | wrench |
| sweets | candy |
| taxi | taxi, taxi cab |
| tea towel | dish towel |
| telly (<i>informal</i>), TV | television, TV |
| third-party insurance | liability insurance |
| timetable | schedule |
| tin | can |
| toll motorway | toll road, turnpike |

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| torch | flashlight |
| trousers | pants, trousers |
| tube (<i>train</i>) | subway |
| underground (<i>train</i>) | subway |
| vest | undershirt |
| waistcoat | vest |
| wallet | wallet, billfold |
| wellington boots | rubber boots, rain boots |
| whisky | whisky/whiskey |
| windscreen | windshield |
| zip | zipper |