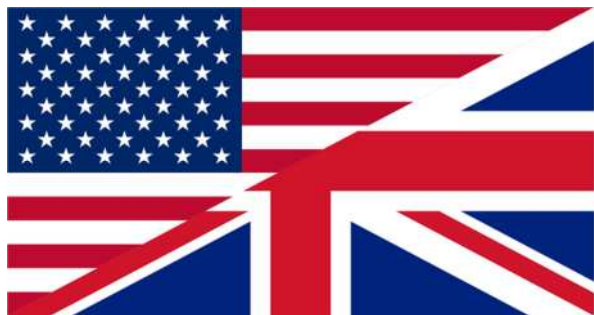


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I know that there are differences in vocabulary between British and American English but are there grammatical differences, too?

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Yes, is the short answer and the differences mostly affect verbs. Here's a brief run-down of the major differences only. There are, of course, lots of idiomatic differences and many lexical ones. It is, however, worth noting that it is almost impossible for British and American speakers to misunderstand each other because of the differences in dialect.

### Past tenses and participles

As a general rule, American English prefers the regular forms of past tenses. So, for example, we will get the British English pasts tenses of *lean* as *leant*, *learn* as *learnt*, *smell* as *smelt* and so on but the US form is much more likely to be regular (*learned*, *leaned*, *smelled* etc.). The general rule is that if there is an alternative in the language (e.g., *dreamed* or *dreamt*, *spelt* or *spelled*), then American usage will normally select the regular form. This usually occurs with verbs which follow the pattern of exchanging the *-ed* ending for the *-t* ending.

There are exceptions to this rule. The past of *dive* is *dived* in British English but you are more likely to encounter *dove* in the United States. The past of *plead* in British English is *pleaded* but *pled* in American English is the commoner form.

Past participles are even more likely to show this pattern of differences, especially in those cases where the past form is regular but the past participle irregular. So, for example, we get the British English *I have sawn the wood* as *I have sawed the wood* and the verb *mow* follows a similar pattern.

See also [the guide to verb forms](#).

### The Present Perfect

The present perfect is much more widely used in British than in American English. It is not the case, however, that American usage always avoids the tense. There's [a guide to this tense on ELT Concourse](#). The differences affect two uses of the tense:

1. In British English, recent events signalled by the adverbs *just* and *already* and question and negative forms with *yet* will normally take the present perfect. So we get, e.g.
  - a. *I have just received a letter*
  - b. *I have already written*
  - c. *Have you written yet?*

In American English the preferred choice would be

- a. *I just received a letter*
  - b. *I already wrote*
  - c. *Did you write yet?*
2. In British English, the present perfect is also universally used to signal that an event has present relevance. E.g.

- a. *I have finished the work* (so we can leave now)
- b. *They have fixed the line* (so you can make a call now)

In American English the preference would be

- a. *I finished the work*
- b. *They fixed the line*

### Concord

British English is pretty lax in many respects, allowing words like *team* and *jury* to be both singular and plural (*The jury is/are divided, The team has/have arrived* etc.). In fact, British English often prefers the plural form with a word like *government*.

American usage is stricter – a singular noun will take a singular verb form. See also [the guide to concord](#).

### have vs. take

In British English you *have a bath*, and *have a snooze* etc. but American English will usually prefer *take* in these cases. That may seem more a lexical than a grammatical difference but it's here because such verbs are often called delexicalised and that's a grammatical concept to many.

### Clausal substitution

American English will not use *do* for clausal substitution. So we don't hear *I may do* as the response to *Are you coming to the match?* The US way is simply to use the bare modal *I may, I will, I couldn't* etc.

### one

In British English, it is considered wrong to replace *one* with *he* or *she* as in *One cannot see clearly unless he stands on a box*. That's OK in American English.

### Modals

There are a number of significant differences but the general rule in American English is to use the lexical form of the verb where there is a choice. American English will prefer *don't need to needn't, didn't dare to dared not, didn't used to used not* etc.

The other difference here is that *shall* is very rare in American English but commonly used in questions and suggestions in British English so we get the American *Should we ask?* rather than the British *Shall we ask?* (See [the guide to semi-modals](#), too.)

### Transitivity

American English habitually forms transitive verbs which in British English are usually intransitive. E.g., American English is happy with *protest the idea, agree the proposal or appeal the decision* where British usage would normally insert a preposition (*against* or *to*). There is some evidence of this trend becoming more common in British English, especially in certain fields such as business-speak, so transitive uses of normally intransitive verbs, such as *grow the business* are common on both sides of the Atlantic. (In both varieties, *grow* in the sense of *cultivate* is a transitive use of the verb.)

The verb *write* in British English requires an indirect object with *to* (*Write to me when you get there*) but takes a direct object in American English (*Write me when you get there*).

### have got

The meaning of *have got* for possession is common to both varieties although very informal American English sometimes prefers just *got* (e.g., *I got a small apartment*). The *have got* form is more common in British English with the US usage more often being simply *have*. The tag and

question forms in American English are usually formed with *do* so we get the British *You've got my address, haven't you?* and the American, *You have my address, don't you?*

### got

The past tense of *got* is *got* in both varieties but the past participle is *gotten* in American English. (This is actually the Middle English usage.) The use of *gotten* is becoming quite common in Britain.

### Conditionals

It is still usually considered colloquial in American English to use *would* in both parts of the so-called second conditional (*If you would give it to him he would be happy*) but the form, in some meanings also occurs in British English (*If it would make you happy, I would tell you*). Overall, however, British English generally avoids using *would* in both parts of the sentence. So, while it is acceptable in colloquial American English to say, e.g., *If I would tell you, you would still not understand it*, in British English (and more formal American), the construction would more likely be *If I told you, you would still not understand it*.

### Prepositions

Use varies. Here are some common differences:

American usage	British usage
<i>It opens Thursday / <b>on</b> the weekend</i>	<i>It opens <b>on</b> Thursday / <b>at</b> the weekend</i>
<i>She studied Maths <b>in</b> university school etc.</i>	<i>She studied Maths <b>at</b> university school etc.</i>
<i>It's different <b>than</b> that in America</i>	<i>It's different <b>from</b> / <b>to</b> that in Britain</i>
<i>She plays <b>on</b> the basketball team</i>	<i>She plays <b>in</b> the basketball team</i>

### Articles

There are some minor differences (one or two of which are more imagined than real). American English can omit the article in some verb-noun collocations (*play piano, learn trumpet* etc.).

### Word formation

American English usually uses the bare verb when compounding with verb + noun (*racecar, sailboat*) but British English usually prefers the *-ing* form (*racing car, sailing boat*).

American English is more adept at forming words by conversion (i.e., by changing the word class without altering the morphology). Typical examples are the verb *access* (as in *access the website*) formed by conversion from the noun *access*, and expressions such as *walk the walk, talk the talk* etc. American use also contains more examples of back-forming verbs from nouns than British English does. An example is the American use of *destruct* as a verb as in, e.g., *It self-destructed* (a back-formation from the noun *destruction*) whereas British English would normally avoid the use and prefer, e.g., *It destroyed itself*.

### Influences

Although many in Britain take pleasure in loathing what they see as the Americanisation of British English, it is by no means clear that this is a one-way street. In addition, of course, many British dialects use language forms which to some sound like American usage (e.g., *pants* for *trousers*) and many American uses are, in fact, simply retentions of older British English usages (such as *gotten*).

If you are looking for a dictionary of British and American lexical usage, there is one at <http://www.bg-map.com/us-uk.html>.