

ENGLISH, BUT WHICH ENGLISH?  
BRITISH ENGLISH V.S. AMERICAN ENGLISH

by Nick Clowes

<http://naukabezgranic.pl/podcasty/english-language/>

There is an old saying that America and Britain are “two nations divided by a common language.” No one knows exactly who said this, but it reflects the way many Brits feel about American English. But are American and British English really so different?

### Vocabulary

The most noticeable difference between American and British English is vocabulary. There are hundreds of everyday words that are different. For example, Brits call the front of a car the bonnet, while Americans call it the hood.

Americans go on vacation, while Brits go on holidays, or hols.

New Yorkers live in apartments, Londoners live in flats.

There are far more examples than we can talk about here. Fortunately, most Americans and Brits can usually guess the meaning through the context of a sentence.

### Collective Nouns

There are a few grammatical differences between the two varieties of English. Let’s start with collective nouns. We use collective nouns to refer to a group of individuals.

In American English, collective nouns are singular. For example, staff refers to a group of employees; band refers to a group of musicians; team refers to a group of athletes. Americans would say, “The band is good.”

But in British English, collective nouns can be singular or plural. You might hear someone from Britain say, “The team are playing tonight” or “The team is playing tonight.”

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## Tag Questions

A tag question is a grammatical form that turns a statement into a question. For example, "The whole situation is unfortunate, isn't it?" or, "You don't like him, do you?"

The tag includes a pronoun and its matching form of the verb be, have or do. Tag questions encourage people to respond and agree with the speaker. Americans use tag questions, too, but less often than Brits.

## 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.

You can see Webster's legacy in the American spelling of words like color (from colour), honor (from honour), and labor (from labour). Webster dropped the letter u from these words to make the spelling match the pronunciation.

Other Webster ideas failed, like a proposal to spell women as wimmen. Since Webster's death in 1843, attempts to change spelling rules in American English have gone nowhere.

## Not so different after all

British and American English have far more similarities than differences. We think the difference between American and British English is often exaggerated. If you can understand one style, you should be able to understand the other style.

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With the exception of some regional dialects, most Brits and Americans can understand each other without too much difficulty. They watch each other's TV shows, sing each other's songs, and read each other's books.

They even make fun of each other's accents.

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