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American Style Guide
Duo vertaalburo

Last modified: 19 August, 2016

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Introduction

Some of our clients prefer the use of American English. Ideally, we have these translations carried out by American translators. This is, however, not always possible. This guide is primarily intended for non-American translators who have been asked to translate or edit a text in American English. For this reason it focuses on those points that, if not followed, will immediately make a text stand out to American readers as “foreign,” as well as those points that, while correct in an American context, may strike non-American readers as particularly odd. By necessity this guide is not going to be exhaustive. We expect our English translators, whether they themselves are British, American, or of some other background, to be proactive and educate themselves on the basic differences between British and American English.

There are many lists of vocabulary differences between British and American English available on the internet. The link below, taken from the Oxford Dictionary website, offers one of the most comprehensive. We strongly recommend that you take the time to go over this list, because many of the vocabulary differences can be counterintuitive or unexpected for non-Americans.

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/words/british-and-american-terms>

Other than vocabulary, the most well-known difference between British and American English is the difference in spelling: *color* instead of *colour*, *center* instead of *centre*, *analyze* instead of *analyse*. This is easy enough to check if you are doing your translation directly in Word – simply set the language setting of the document to American English and perform a spellcheck. However, due to the technical limitations of SDL Trados Studio, memories set to one style of English are not usable in projects using a different style of English, so we will almost always send you a project that has been set to British English even if the translation is to be done in American English. This means, unfortunately, that you cannot rely on the spellcheck function.

Other differences between British and American English are more subtle. Contrary to what some writers think, American English is *not* a “dumbed-down” version of British English! Writing short sentences and using simple words will not make a text seem like American English. Nor is American English an “upstart” language that takes on any and all innovations, with British English preserving the “proper” form of the language. In fact, many of the peculiarities in vocabulary, spelling, grammar, and even pronunciation in American English can be traced back to the way English was spoken in the 1600s, when North America was colonized. In Britain the language underwent a number of gradual changes after that period, while the North Americans were more conservative in their use of the language.

For points not addressed by this style guide, please follow our standard style guide for English.

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Grammar/Punctuation

In general, the same grammar rules apply in American English as in British English. Some of the most striking differences follow.

Most verbs that sometimes end in -t in the **past tense** in British English always end in **-ed** in American English: **learned, burned, dreamed, spilled**, etc. However, there are a handful of exceptions, such as “bent,” “spent,” and “lent,” which are spelled with a -t in American English as well. When in doubt, check an American dictionary such as Merriam-Webster’s.

Both **got** and **gotten** are used as past participles in American English, but they have different nuances. The use of **gotten** implies that the object referred to has been acquired in the recent past: “I’ve gotten those books you told me about the other day.” **Got** is used when the object has been obtained in the unknown, distant past – when the emphasis is on *having* rather than *acquiring*: “We’ve got plenty of milk, but we need sugar.”

Except in legal texts, the use of “shall” is not common in American English and often sounds extremely formal. To express **future tense**, **will** is preferable.

Negative statements in American English use the **auxiliary verb “to do”** much more frequently than in British English. Whereas a British speaker might say, “You needn’t come,” an American would be far more likely to say “You do not (or don’t) need to come.” Although “I haven’t got it” would be perfectly understandable, it’s rather formal; “I don’t have it” is more idiomatic.

Most **collective nouns** that can be used with a **plural** verb in British English should always be used with a **singular** verb in American English. If the individuals within the group need to be specified as individuals, adding a word like “members” is usually a good way to get around this. *Example:* My **family has** decided to go to Florida on vacation. Not all the **family members plan** to go to the beach, though.

Example: The **government is** planning some changes. The **government employees are** aware of the changes.

Example: The **team is** doing well. Some **team members are** playing better than others.

Example: The **committee has** been discussing the matter. Not all **committee members have** the same opinion.

Example: The **staff is** on strike. The **staff members are** (or the **employees are**) confident their demands will be met.

This rule also applies to names of companies, governmental bodies, etc.

Exception: The collective noun “police” does take a plural verb: “The **police are** coming!”

In American English, **(in) back of** is a perfectly acceptable synonym for “behind.”

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The constructions **outside of**, **out of**, and **inside of** (“I live outside of Chicago;” “He ran out of the door”) are perfectly acceptable in American English. In these constructions, according to the rules of American grammar the first word is treated as an adverb rather than a preposition, as in the constructions “kneel *down on* the floor” or “doubled *over in* pain.” However, the sentence would still be perfectly comprehensible to American readers if the “of” were omitted except when using “outside of” in the sense of “with the exception of/apart from” (“Outside of a dog, a book is man’s best friend. Inside of a dog, it’s too dark to read.” – Groucho Marx).

Many words that require a hyphen in British English are written as one word in American English: **setup**, **rollout**, **bylaw**. When in doubt, check an American dictionary such as Merriam-Webster’s.

In general, the use of **contractions** such as “isn’t” or “we’re” is more acceptable in American English than in British English. They should still be avoided in formal texts, however.

Different from is used when comparing nouns and phrases, while **different than** is used when comparing clauses. “Different to” is unacceptable in American English.

Example: She is different from her sister.

Example: She is different than she used to be.

Titles and subtitles of books, articles, and chapters capitalize the **first and last words**, as well as **every other word except** for the following: “a,” “an,” “and,” “at,” “but,” “by,” “for,” “in,” “nor,” “of,” “on,” “or,” “so,” “the,” “to,” “up,” and “yet” (unless, of course, they are the first or last word). In lower-level subtitles or section headings only the first word should be capitalized.

Example:

What I Did on My Summer Vacation: An Essay in Futility

Chapter 1. Going to Summer Camp

1.1 Taking swimming lessons

Colons: If the part of a sentence that follows a colon is a full sentence on its own, the first word should be **capitalized** (as has been done in this sentence). If the part of the sentence following the colon is not a full sentence, the first word should **not** be capitalized: lists, short phrases, etc.

In running text, all **numbers** that can be written as **one word** should be written out in full. This includes all numbers up to and including twenty, as well as all multiples of ten up to and including ninety.

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While the **times** 12:00 noon and 12:00 midnight will be understood by American readers, it is more idiomatic (and therefore preferable) to write **12:00 PM** (for noon) and **12:00 AM** (for midnight). Except in a military or hospital context, American English does not use the 24-hour clock.

Dates are written with **commas** after the day of the week (if stated), the day of the month, and the year (if the sentence continues on after the date). And, of course, the month is placed **before** the day. To eliminate the chance for confusion, please write out the month in full. Please note that the day of the month **should not** have “th,” “st,” etc.

Example: On Wednesday, January 14, 2015, we held a meeting.

Quotation marks should always be **double** quotation marks, whether they are used to set off an unusual word or for an actual quote, and punctuation should always go **inside** them, regardless of whether or not the punctuation is actually part of the quote:

Example: “Welcome to my villa,” he said.

Example: He said, “Welcome to my villa.”

Example: It was just a tiny bungalow, but he called it a “villa.”

Example: He got offended when we called it a “tiny bungalow.”

Exception: If you have quotes within quotes, the outermost quote should have double quotation marks and the innermost should have single quotation marks. If there are more layers of quotes, alternate between double and single. Again, any punctuation should go inside the quotation marks, even if it means putting a single quotation mark directly next to a double quotation mark:

Example: He said, “How dare you call my villa a ‘tiny bungalow!’”

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Vocabulary/Usage

Lists of vocabulary differences, while extremely useful, generally don't have the space to explain nuances of meaning and usage. This section addresses some common sources of confusion.

Customer can be used for someone who purchases either goods or services; **client** is generally used only to mean someone who purchases services.

Coworker (note the lack of hyphen) is generally used to describe those who work with you directly (in your office/department/company or on your team), while **colleague** is used to mean those who share your profession:

Example: Several of my coworkers and I went to the trade show, where we met a great many colleagues from other organizations.

In **business letters**, "Yours faithfully," "Faithfully yours," "Yours sincerely," and "Sincerely yours," can be used interchangeably, regardless of the salutation used.

"Scheme" often has a negative or dishonest connotation and should be avoided. Use **plan** or **program** instead (pension plan, government funding program, etc.).

Similarly, to be **in arrears** in American English means to be behind on payments – it always has a negative connotation. To express the neutral British meaning, it is necessary to say **payable at the end of the month** or a similar phrase.

Perishables and contracts have **expiration** (not "expiry") dates.

People and objects travel by **public transportation** (road transportation, air transportation, etc.), not "transport."

It is common to speak of a **five-story building** (or one-story, ten story, etc. – but note that "**story**" is spelled without an "e" in this context) but when discussing individual stories they are frequently called **floors**. Note that **ground floor** and **first floor** are synonyms in American English, and the first floor above street level is called the **second floor**.

To impact something and **to inventory something** are acceptable constructions in US English.

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Note that **specialty** is spelled with only one “i” and has one fewer syllable than in British English.

“Amongst” and “whilst” will be understood in US English, but are likely to come across as overly formal or old-fashioned. **Among** and **while** are standard.

People and businesses are reached or called **at** (not “on”) a particular telephone number.

On the other hand, people do things **on** (not “at”) the weekend.

Americans go to/are in **the hospital**. The definite article is necessary.

As a general rule, **sick** means any kind of minor illness, not just nausea/upset stomach. If someone is **ill**, it generally implies a more serious or long-term illness or disease (but this is not a hard-and-fast rule). People **call in sick to work** (rather than “reporting sick”), although they do **report back for work** when they are better.

The **postal service** delivers letters and **packages** (not “parcels”) that have been sent by **mail** (not “post”). Likewise, letters are **mailed** (not “posted”).

The bit of land at the front or rear of a house is a **yard**. A **garden** is specifically that part of a yard where flowers or vegetables are grown; the part of the yard covered in grass is called the **lawn**.

A plant grown in a pot is a **potted plant**. A “pot plant” is a marijuana plant (spelled with a “j”).

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Cultural Differences

There are certain cultural aspects that show up frequently in translations. Unless the translator has an understanding of the peculiarities of American culture in these areas, using the appropriate terminology consistently will be a challenge.

Use **gender-neutral language** wherever possible. American English places much greater importance on this than British English does. One example of this is the term **labor hours** being preferable to “man hours”. Ways to use gender-neutral language include:

- Rephrasing the sentence so the **subject is plural**. This is ideal, but it can sometimes result in clunky sentences.
 - *Not gender-neutral:* A scientist must be careful about his data.
 - *Gender-neutral:* Scientists must be careful about their data.
- Using **s/he, his/hers, herself/himself, etc.** This works particularly well in contracts and is also often suitable for legal or medical texts. Alternating the order of the masculine and feminine pronouns (i.e., use “his/hers” the first time, “hers/his” the second time, etc.) further improves the gender neutrality of the text.
 - *Not gender-neutral:* It is the responsibility of the purchaser to check his order.
 - *Gender-neutral:* It is the responsibility of the purchaser to check her/his order.
- Using **singular “they.”** Jane Austen, Shakespeare, and even Chaucer all used singular “they,” so it is most certainly not a twentieth-century invention! It is acceptable in both formal and informal texts, although perhaps less suitable for extremely formal texts (such as articles for scientific journals).
 - *Not gender-neutral:* A person wearing a cast on his arm may find it difficult to wash his hands.
 - *Gender-neutral:* A person wearing a cast on their arm may find it difficult to wash their hands.
- Using **second-person pronouns**. This should be used sparingly, as it tends to instantly make a text much more informal. However, it can be useful in texts that already have a kind of familiar tone. Of course, this only works when the sentence in question refers to the intended audience (for instance, a text about university life aimed at students).
 - *Not gender-neutral:* When a student lives in the dorm, he should be respectful of his neighbors.
 - *Gender-neutral:* When you live in the dorm, you should be respectful of your neighbors.

Sports is generally used in the plural whether it is used as an adjective or a noun, and even if only one type of sports is being referred to (“I play volleyball. I’ve got sports **practice** [not “training”] this afternoon.”). Note that when sports is referred to as an activity in general, it takes a singular verb: “Sports is my main interest.” **Athletics** is an umbrella term referring to any sports, games, or activities requiring physical skill (and also generally takes a singular verb), and an **athlete** is anyone who seriously practices sports or other physical activity (“sportsperson” would probably be understood, but is not commonly used). Sports such as hurdling, hammer throwing, the high jump, or the long jump (and even running events such as the marathon) are generally referred to as **track and field** sports. Athletes who play group sports play **on a team** (not “in a club” – a “sports club” in an American context would probably be assumed to be a health club or

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fitness center), which usually plays on a **field** (not a “pitch”) if outdoors, or a **rink** or **court** (depending on the sport) if indoors.

The United States still uses the **imperial system of measurement** for everyday purposes (although the metric system is used in scientific and medical contexts). This means that unless a text is intended for professional scientists, all metric measurements should be converted to acres, inches/feet/miles, ounces/pounds, cups/quarts/gallons, degrees Fahrenheit, etc. There are a number of websites that convert metric to imperial, but be sure that the site you use specifies that it converts to American imperial, as there are some slight differences between American and British imperial measurements.

The standard American term for a non-working day is **public holiday**. Although “bank holiday” is sometimes used in US English, it has a different meaning than in British English and is likely to cause confusion in American readers. Government organizations must close on public holidays, but private businesses are free to choose whether or not they remain open. A bank holiday in an American context simply means any holiday on which a specific bank chooses to close for business, and this can differ from bank to bank.

Likewise, “Boxing Day” is not known in the US, nor is “the second day of Christmas” widely known as a concept outside of the famous carol “The Twelve Days of Christmas.” This day is simply **December 26** (or, in a religious [Christian] context, **the day after Christmas**). Instead of “Easter Monday,” use **the day after Easter**. Easter Monday is not a national public holiday, and only some denominations of Christianity celebrate it.

The holiday season is generally understood to mean late December to early January, although sometimes it includes Thanksgiving (which is in late November). If there is a chance that your readers may include non-Christians (which will probably almost always be the case), **Happy Holidays** is a perfectly acceptable, and often preferable, substitute for **Merry Christmas** (not “Happy Christmas”).

Americans go on **vacation** rather than “on holiday.” The long period during the summer when most schools (and universities) are closed is called **summer vacation**. Schools (and universities) often close for two or three weeks in late December/early January and for one or two weeks in the spring; the specific names for these breaks vary from school to school, but **winter break** and **spring break**, respectively, will always be clearly understood.

School is used as a generic term to mean anything from kindergarten (age 5) to doctoral studies. Likewise, those who attend school are called **students** regardless of age or level – even the term **preschool students** is perfectly understandable and acceptable. “Pupils” is occasionally encountered, but often comes across as old-fashioned.

Most students attend **public schools**, which are entirely state-supported and usually have no admission requirements other than residence in that school’s catchment area. **Private schools** are not supported by the state and are almost always fee-paying schools. They generally do have some kind of admission requirement (such as academic performance, membership in a particular religion, or low income).

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Children between the ages of about 2 and 5 often attend **preschool**, which teaches pre-literacy information such as letters and numbers, colors and shapes, and often basic health skills like washing hands and brushing teeth. Parents of younger toddlers and infants may choose to send them to **day care**, where the emphasis is more on playing.

Elementary school consists of **kindergarten** (age 5) to **fifth grade** (age 10) or **sixth grade** (age 11), depending on the school district. The following level is called **middle school** or **junior high school**, which lasts for two or three years. This is followed by **high school**, which starts in **ninth grade** (age 14) or occasionally **tenth grade** (age 15) and lasts until **twelfth grade** (age 17).

All high school students attend all four years, and everyone follows the same basic curriculum. The school day is divided into seven or eight **periods**, and the schedule does not change from one day to the next (i.e., each class is held at the same time, five days a week). At most high schools, students can choose whether to attend the **college preparatory track** (if they plan to attend a four-year university, often shortened to “college prep”) or the **vocational track** (if they do not), but students in these two tracks attend school in the same building and attend most of the same classes together. Students in the college prep track take an extra science class, an extra art class, an extra language class, etc., in order to fulfill university admission requirements; while the students in the vocational track use this time to take classes like metalworking, woodworking, or auto mechanics. Students in both tracks also have a certain number of **elective periods** each year, which they can fill however they like (i.e., students in the vocational track may choose to take an extra language class, while students in the college prep track may choose to take auto mechanics).

A **college** is not a type of high school – college is the level of school attended after graduating from high school. A two-year college is called a **community college**. Community colleges serve a variety of functions. They offer **Associate’s** (two-year undergraduate) degrees, in academic fields as well as in occupations such as automotive technology and medical assisting. They also offer short-term personal enrichment courses such as foreign languages or cooking classes. And because community colleges are much less expensive than four-year colleges, many students attend community colleges to take their **general education** courses before transferring to a four-year college.

If just the term **college** is used, it is assumed to be a four-year college, also called a **university**. There is an official distinction between the two terms, namely that a college only offers undergraduate degrees (Bachelor’s degrees and possibly Associate’s degrees) and a university also offers Master’s degrees (and possibly doctorates), but in practice “college” and “university” are used synonymously.

At both high school and university, first-year students are called **freshmen**, second-year students are **sophomores**, third-year students are **juniors**, and fourth-year students are **seniors**. Freshmen and sophomores are collectively called **junior varsity** or **JV** students (or occasionally **lowerclassmen**) and juniors and seniors are collectively called **varsity** students (or occasionally **upperclassmen**).

At university, students need to complete a certain number of **general education courses** before they can graduate (a **course** is similar to what is called a “module” in British English – Colonial American History, Beginner’s French, Introduction to Anthropology, etc. – and lasts for one term). These general education (**GE**) courses are intended to give each student a foundation in the liberal arts and sciences, regardless of the subject the student is **majoring in** (not “reading”) or

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whether or not they are also **taking a minor** (secondary subject). GE courses amount to about a third of the total number of courses taken, and most GE courses are taken in the first two years.

American students at all levels receive **grades** (instead of “marks”) for each class, which are listed per term on their **report card** (at high school or lower) or **transcript** (at university). Most schools use **letter grades**: A for outstanding, B for good, C for average, D for unsatisfactory, and F for failing. Grades are often given on the basis of percentages, particularly in classes such as **math** (not “maths”) with clear right or wrong answers. In general, 90-100% = A, 80-89% = B, 70-79% = C, 60-69% = D, and >60% = F. Grades reflect how well the student has mastered the information addressed in that class (not how well the student has mastered the subject as a whole), and students must receive at least a C to have successfully passed the class. At high school and university, grades are generally translated into numbers between 4 (for A) and 0 (for F) and then averaged, so a **4.0 student** has received an “A” in every class.

As a requirement for earning their degree, students at American universities have to write a **thesis** at the **Bachelor’s** or **Master’s** level or a **dissertation** at the **doctorate** level. This is the opposite of how the terms are generally used at British universities, and some foreign universities have their own preferred terms in English which may not follow either system. For clarity’s sake, therefore, the degree level should also always be specified, i.e. Bachelor’s thesis, doctoral dissertation. The professor overseeing the thesis or dissertation is most often called the **thesis/dissertation advisor** rather than “supervisor” or “mentor” – and note that the preferred spelling is “advisor” rather than “adviser”.

American universities generally utilize the **Latin honors** system. Students who graduate in the top 25-30% are given the distinction **cum laude** (“with honor”), those graduating in the top 10-15% are given the distinction **magna cum laude** (“with great honor”), and those in the top 5% graduate **summa cum laude** (“with highest honor”).

An **internship** is a (generally unpaid) job, usually lasting for a set period of a year or less, worked by students or recent graduates as a way to gain work experience in their field and increase their hireability. It may or may not be part of degree requirements. “Work placement” in an American context is uncommon, but would most likely be assumed to mean finding work through an employment agency (i.e., being placed with an employer).