

Two Countries Separated by One Language

Do you speak “English”?

While English is the official language of both the UK and the US, there are actually many differences between American and British English. In fact, over the past 400 years since the initial settlement of the American colonies, the two countries have developed two distinct dialects. Luckily these dialects are still similar enough to be generally understandable, and in recent years, television, film and the Internet have provided both countries with greater exposure to each other’s use of the English language. However, it is still possible for a few misunderstandings to occur due to differences in the dialects.

For example, try deciphering this British English:

The sky looked a bit dodgy so I grabbed my wellies and, with a couple of quid in my pocket, ran down the apples and pears to the chemist. When I got back I was knackered so I got a couple of hours kip and asked my housemate Mike to knock me up at 3:00pm. He said he couldn’t ‘cause he’d been out on the razz the night before, was feeling rough and wanted a lie-in. So at 3:00pm I got up, left my flat, started the car and drove down a dual carriageway to the offy to buy some lager. Mike had also asked me to go to the newsagents to get some tights for his bird. On the way I had to stop in a lay by because the boot was open. A copper spotted me, but he was a nice bloke, so I offered him one of my crisps.

To create even more confusion, there are multiple dialects even within the UK. For such a small country, it is quite remarkable the number of different regional accents and local expressions. Additionally there are differences in language and the use of slang across generational and socio-economic lines. In the above example, “apples and pears” is Cockney rhyming slang meaning stairs. This is a manner of speech specific to a small part of London and generally not spoken anywhere else in the UK!

We recommend you read through the mini British to American English dictionary below to familiarize yourself with some British words. Of course, you will probably come across many others during your time in London, but this will get you started. The main thing is to expect the unexpected and be ready to laugh over any misunderstandings!

British English – American English

Accident and Emergency (A&E) – The ER at the hospital

Aerial – Antenna

American Football – Football

Anorak – Raincoat

Aubergine – Eggplant

Autumn – Fall

Advert – Commercial

Banger – Sausage

Bank Holiday – National or Public Holiday

Barrister – Lawyer who presents in the courtroom
Bill (at a restaurant) – The check
Bin – Trash Can
Bin Liner – Garbage Bag
Biro – Pen
Biscuit – Cookie
Beeper – Beeper
Bloke – Guy/man
Bonnet (Car) – Hood
Boot (Car) – Trunk
Bother (a bit of) – A Fight
Braces – Suspenders
Brilliant – ‘Cool’
Bum bag – Fanny pack
Call Box – Pay Phone
Cash Point – ATM
Casualty – ER
Cellar – Basement
Cheers – Thank You
Chemist – Drugstore
Cheerio – Good-bye
Chips – French Fries
Curriculum vitae (CV) – Resume
Coach – Bus (in the UK the word coach is specifically used for a bus which travels long distances; the word bus is used in the UK for local buses only)
Coriander – Cilantro
Cotton – Thread
Courgette – Zucchini
Crème fresh – Sour Cream
Crisps – Potato chips
Current Account – Checking Account
DIY (Do It Yourself) – Home improvements without a contractor
Dodgy – Questionable
Drawing Pin – Tack
Dressing Gown – Robe
Dustbin – Trash Can
Earth (as in electrics) – Ground
Engaged (as in telephone) – Busy
Estate Agent – Realtor
Fancy dress party – Costume party
Fag – Cigarette
First Floor – Second Floor
Fishfingers – Fishsticks
Fizzy drink – Soda
Flannel – Washcloth
Football – Soccer

Fortnight – Two-Week Period
Freephone – Toll-Free Number
Full stop – Period (as in punctuation)
Gladrags – Best Clothes
Gilet – Vest
Grass Up – To Inform On
Guv – Boss
Ground floor – First floor
Handbag – Purse
Headmaster/Mistress – School Principal
High Street/Holidays – Vacation
Hob – Stove
Hoover – Vacuum
Ice Lolly – Popsicle
Inverted commas – Quotation marks
Jacket potato – Baked potato
Jelly – Jell-O
Jumper – Sweater
Kitchen Roll – Paper towels
Knickers – Underpants
Knock Up – Wake someone up
Ladder (as in pantyhose) – Run
Letter Box – Mail Box
Loo Roll – Toilet Paper
Lift – Elevator
Loo – Toilet/Bathroom
Lorry – Large truck
Maths – Math
Mobile – Cell phone
National Insurance Number – Social Security #
Nick – Steal
Nick The – Prison/Jail
OAP (Old Age Pensioner) – Senior Citizen
Old Bill – Police
Pants – Men’s Underpants
Pavement – Sidewalk
Pensioner – Senior Citizen
Petrol – Gas (for your car)
Pillock – Idiot/Moron
Plaster – Band-Aid
Plonker – Idiot/Moron
Post – Mail
Post Code – Zip Code
Prat – Idiot/Moron
Primary School – Elementary
Pritt stick – Glue stick

Public School – Private School
Queue up – Line up
Return (As in bus or train ticket) – Round-Trip
Reverse Charges – Collect Call
Ring someone (as in telephone) – Call someone
Rubber – Eraser
Row (pronounced like how) – Argument
Rubbish – Garbage/Trash
Selotape – Scotch Tape
Single (as in bus or train ticket) – One way
Solicitor – Lawyer
Subway – Walkway under a street
Surname – Last name
Swede – Rutabaga
Sweet – Dessert
Boiled sweets – Hard candy
Swimming Costume – Bathing Suit
Starters – Appetizers
Takeaway – Takeout
Tap – Faucet
Telly – TV
Term (as in school) – Semester
Think – Not very bright
Tights – Pantyhose
Tip – Garbage Dump
Tippex – White Out
Trainers – Sneakers
Transit – Delivery Van
Treacle – Molasses
Trousers – Pants
Tube – Subway
Underscore – Underline
Vest – Sleeveless shirt
Wellies – Rainboots
Whinge (pronounced like hinge) – Whine
Yank – An American
Zebra crossing – Crosswalk
Zed – Z (as in the letter of the alphabet)