

Some differences between US and UK English

Note that I started keeping these notes some twenty to thirty years ago, and much of the usage may be a little outdated.

2. Punctuation

There seem to be five areas in which there are general differences in the way that people in the United Kingdom and the United States use punctuation marks. These are the **comma**, **full stop** (or **period**), **hyphen**, **dash** and **quotation mark** (or **inverted commas**). I shall deal with each in turn and end with a few comments on **word-breaking**.

Comma

When the word ‘and’ occurs before the last member of a list, American English puts a comma before the ‘and’; British English generally doesn’t. Compare:

. . *apples, pears, bananas, and potatoes.* (US)

. . *apples, pears, bananas and potatoes.* (UK)

That said, the top version of the two above, sometimes referred to as the Oxford comma, is used by some style guides in the UK. It can also disambiguate. Compare:

Alice arrived with her parents, the Red Queen and the White Knight (three people came)

Alice arrived with her parents, the Red Queen, and the White Knight (five people came)

Other uses of the comma are the same in both varieties of the language.

Full stop or period

The difference here is conceptual. American usage tends to use a period to identify nearly all abbreviations, whereas in British English the current tendency with regard to abbreviations is to use as few full stops as possible.

Hyphen

The Oxford University Press style manual remarks that “If you take hyphens seriously you will surely go mad”. Most native speakers of any nationality will surely agree.

Compounding of words is far more practiced in US English, and Americans spell far more compound words in a ‘joined-up’ way which in the UK would be either hyphenated or kept as two words.

In cases where a prefix causes a double vowel, in words like *cooperation* or *reentry*, the British are far more likely to use a hyphen and write *co-operation* and *re-entry*.

Hyphenated adjectives (e. g. *in-depth*) are becoming increasingly common in American English. These are also becoming used in Britain although are not so well accepted.

But if you are never sure about when to use a hyphen, or you can’t decide whether it should be ‘one word or two’, then welcome to the club. Do what we all do; consult a dictionary, but bear in mind that even these don’t always agree with each other.

Dash

The difference is in the size of the dash. An ‘en-rule’ (–) is used in British and an ‘em-rule’ (—) in American publications. (‘En’ and ‘em’ refer to the size of the spaces occupied by the characters **n** and **m** respectively). British publications leave a one character space either side of the dash while the Americans tend not to.

Quotation marks (or inverted commas)

In most British publications (with the noticeable exception of *The Economist*), the convention has been to use single quotation marks for what is said, and if a quote is made within the quote to use double quotation marks. The Americans tend to do the reverse, and there are signs that this is becoming more popular in Britain. Look at the examples:

"Did you see this article, 'The importance of eating'?" he asked. (US)

'Have you seen this article, "The importance of eating"?' he asked. (UK)

Much more likely to cause controversy is the question of the relative positions of quotation marks and other punctuation. The British system might be termed 'logical', placing punctuation marks according to sense. The American system might be said to sacrifice sense for simplicity.

Let me explain. In American English all commas and full stops come before the final quotation mark. If there is a 'quote within a quote', this will be before the first final quotation mark. Other punctuation is then made as normal. This will be best seen by an example:

I was reading an article called "The importance of 'eating.'" (US).

I was reading an article called 'The importance of "eating" '. (UK).

The origins of the American system, which annoys many British writers, are in typesetting. In the old system, when type was set up by hand, this way reduced the amount of white space which could detract from the aesthetic appeal of the layout. Today's computerised printshops are able to avoid this by automatic or customised kerning (the predetermined space between text characters), but the old habit persists.

Word-breaking

One problem faced by people using word processors nowadays is the question of word-breaking. One alternative is to let your computer hyphenate your text for you, which usually works but this will work only in the language for which the hyphenator was designed. However, sometimes it is necessary to break words manually, and the following guidelines might be useful for future reference.

1. If a word already has a hyphen, break it there if possible but do not give it another hyphen. Break words with suffixes and prefixes at the point of the affixation.
2. According to several style guides, British usage says that in general words should be broken according to their derivation (*aristo-cracy*) while American usage holds that we should be guided by the pronunciation (*aristoc-racy*). This distinction may not be held (or even known) by all members of both speech communities.
3. Never break a one syllable word or one that has less than five letters, and never carry fewer than three letters over to the next line.
4. Avoid ambiguity if the split causes a word with a separate meaning. If you split *woman* as *wo-man*, there is a danger of the eye catching the element 'man' and being confused. 'Deice' is confusing; de-ice is not. Avoid strange sounds, such as splitting the word *hoist* into *ho-ist*.
5. Never break Proper Nouns or figures, especially when there is a \$, £, € or ¥ symbol before a figure. All word processors come with non-breaking spaces to avoid this problem.
6. When breakable words contain double consonants, split between the two, e. g. *shop-ping*, *prob-lem*.

Another problem faces many living in countries where English is not the first language but the keyboard uses the same [Roman] alphabet. Taking Spanish as an example, this language has clear rules concerning word-breaking, and they conflict with those for English. If you use imported software, be careful that the spell checks and hyphenators supplied with the word-processing software are suitable for the work you are performing. Spanish software (and very many others) *is* available - the problem is often remembering to check your system settings.

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