

# Americanisms

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If you use Americanisms just to show you know them, people may find you a **tad** tiresome, so be discriminating. Many American words and expressions have passed into the language; others have vigour, particularly if used sparingly. Some are short and to the point (so prefer **lay off** to **make redundant**). But many are unnecessarily long (so use **and** not **additionally**, **car** not **automobile**, **company** not **corporation**, **court** not **courtroom** or **courthouse**, **transport** not **transportation**, **district** not **neighbourhood**, **oblige** not **obligate**, **rocket** not **skyrocket**, **stocks** not **inventories** unless there is the risk of confusion with stocks and shares). **Spat** and **scam**, two words beloved by some journalists, have the merit of brevity, but so do **row** and **fraud**; **squabble** and **swindle** might sometimes be used instead. The **military**, used as a noun, is nearly always better put as **the army**. **Normalcy** and **specialty** have good English alternatives, **normality** and **speciality** (see Spellings). **Gubernatorial** is an ugly word that can almost always be avoided.

Other Americanisms are euphemistic or obscure (so avoid **affirmative action**, **rookies**, **end runs**, **stand-offs**, **point men**, **ball games** and almost all other American sporting terms). A **faith-based organisation** is probably a **religious group** (unless it is the **Flying Saucer Society**, the **Flat Earth Foundation** or **Elvis is Alive—Recent Sightings in St James's Chapter**). Do not write **meet with** or **outside of**: outside America, nowadays, you just meet people. Do not **figure out** if you can **work out**. To **deliver on** a promise means to **keep** it. An **outage** is a **power cut** or a **blackout**. A **parking lot** is a **car park**. Use **senior** rather than **ranking**, **rumpus** rather than **ruckus**, **rumbustious** rather than **rambunctious**, and **snigger** rather than **snicker**.

Put adverbs where you would put them in normal speech, which is usually after the verb (not before it, which usually is where Americans put them). Choose tenses according to British usage, too. In particular, do not fight shy—as Americans often do—of the perfect tense, especially where no date or time is given. Thus **Mr Bush has woken up to the danger** is preferable to **Mr Bush woke up to the danger**, unless you can add **last week** or **when the waters were at his ankles**.

Do not write **Your salary just got smaller** or **I shrunk the kids**. In British English it is **Your salary has just got smaller** and **I've shrunk the kids**.

Some American expressions that were once common in English English (and some still used in Scottish English) now sound old-fashioned to most British ears. So prefer **got** to **gotten**, **doctors** to **physicians**, **lawyers** to **attorneys**, **often** to **oftentimes**, **ousting** to **ouster**, **over** or **too** to **overly**. Wear clothes or clothing rather than **apparel** or **garments**. Do not **task** people, or **meet with** them. And do not use **likely** to mean **probably**.

In an American context you may **run** for office (but please **stand** in countries with parliamentary systems) and your car may sometimes run on **gasoline** instead of **petrol**. But if you use **corn** in the American sense you should explain that this is **maize** to most people (unless it is an **old chestnut**). Trains run from **railway stations**, not **train stations**. The people in them, and on buses, are **passengers**, not **riders**. Cars are **hired**, not **rented**. **City centres** are not **central cities**. For most people football is a **game**—you do not have to call it a **sport**—that Americans call **soccer**. London is the **country's** capital, not the **nation's**. If you wish to build a **nation**, you will **bind its peoples together**; if you wish to build a **state**, you will forge its **institutions**. **Ex-servicemen** are not necessarily **veterans**. In Britain, though cattle and pigs may be **raised**, children are (or should be) **brought up**. That will involve having them **at** school, not **in** it. When they fall ill, they may be **in hospital** (not **in the hospital**, still less **hospitalised**).

Make a **deep** study or even a study **in depth**, but not an **in-depth study**. **On-site inspections** are allowed, but not **in-flight entertainment**, **on-train teams** or **in-ear headphones**. Throw **stones**, not **rocks**, unless they are of **slate**, which can also mean **abuse** (as a verb) but does not, in Britain, mean **predict**, **schedule** or **nominate**. **Regular** is not a synonym for **ordinary** or **normal**: Mussolini brought in the **regular** train, All-Bran the **regular** man; it is quite **normal** to be without either. **Hikes** are **walks**, not **increases**. Vegetables, not teenagers, should be **fresh**. Only the speechless are **dumb**, the well-dressed (and a few devices) **smart** and the insane **mad**. **Scenarios** are best kept for the theatre, **postures** for the gym, **parameters** for the parabola.

**Grow** a beard or a tomato but not a company (or indeed a salesman: the *Financial Times* reported on August 8th 2003 that BMW was “to grow its own car salesmen”). By all means **call for** a record profit if you wish to exhort the workers, but not if you merely predict one.

And do not **post** it if it has been achieved. If it has not, look for someone new to **head**, not **head up**, the company.

You may **program** a computer but in all other contexts the word is **programme**.

Try not to verb nouns or to adjective them. So do not **access** files, **haemorrhage** red ink (haemorrhage is a noun), let one event **impact** another, **author** books (still less **co-author** them), **critique** style guides, **pressure** colleagues (**press** will do), **progress** reports, **source** inputs, **trial** programmes or **loan** money. Avoid **parenting** and, even more assiduously, **parenting skills**. **Gunned down** means **shot**. And though it is sometimes necessary to use nouns as adjectives, there is no need to call an **attempted coup** a **coup attempt**, a **suspected terrorist** a **terrorist suspect** or the **Californian legislature** the **California legislature**. Vilest of all is the habit of throwing together several nouns into one ghastly adjectival reticule: **Texas millionaire real-estate developer and failed thrift entrepreneur Hiram Turnipseed...**

Similarly, do not noun adjectives such as **centennial** (prefer **centenary**), **inaugural** (prefer **inauguration**) and **advisory** (prefer **warning**), or verbs such as **meet** (**meeting**) and **spend** (**spending**).

Avoid coining verbs and adjectives unnecessarily. Instead of **downplaying** criticism, you can **play it down** (or perhaps **minimise** it). **Upcoming** and **ongoing** are better put as **forthcoming** and **continuing**. Why **outfit** your children when you can **fit them out**?

Avoid, in particular, the language of American advertisers. Do not **ski Vail**, or **Val d'Isère**. Do not go out in search of a **dining destination**, a **driving experience** or even a **writing experience**.

Do not feel obliged to follow American fashion in overusing such words as **constituency** (try **supporters**), **perception** (try **belief** or **view**) and **rhetoric** (of which there is too little, not too much—try **language** or **speeches** or **exaggeration** if that is what you mean). And if you must use American expressions, use them correctly (a **rain-check** does not imply checking on the shower activity).