

As with any other country, we Brits are **subject** to our fair share of cultural stereotypes.

That's not to say that we deny responsibility; many of the stereotypes about the British are of our own making, and it gets worse if you get into region-specific stereotypes, like the range of things said about the Scottish and Welsh. Still, it's certainly the case that visitors can come to Britain with somewhat inaccurate expectations of **what they'll find here**. In this article, we're going to **debunk** some of the myths and help you get to know us a little better.

### 1. We're all best mates with Prince William

Mention to someone from another country that you're from Britain, and one of the responses you may encounter is "Do you know Prince William?" And in that question, you might just as well substitute the heir to the British throne with any other member of the **Royal Family**. Judging by the volume of Royal **memorabilia** sold to tourists each year, it would seem that our Royals are one of the things that non-Brits most love about us. Even those of us who live in Britain are fascinated by them, particularly since William and Kate have **come to the fore** as the monarchy's 21st century ambassadors.

While it's very **gratifying** that our monarchy generates so much interest from overseas, Britain is a country with a population of 63.23 million people. Funnily enough, we're not all personally acquainted with the Royals, even though many of us will happily dig out our **anecdote** about "the day we saw the Queen" or about our brief encounter with one of the more minor members of the Royal Family. But, while we may be **on first name terms** with them, they're sadly not on first name terms with us.

### 2. We all live in a gloriously idealised London

In the imaginations of many outside the UK, our capital city is the place in which all British people reside – doubtless in residences with views of the Houses of Parliament or Buckingham Palace. **At a push**, non-Brits may have heard of other major cities such as Oxford or Edinburgh, and maybe Birmingham, but that's often as far as non-Brit knowledge extends. This isn't helped by the fact that so many major films are set in London: *Notting Hill*, *Love Actually*, *Bridget Jones*, to name but a few. And all these films present idealised versions of London that have those who've never been imagining that it's idyllically snowy in the winter and sunny in the summer, that transport is by the iconic red **double decker** buses and black cabs (the latter at least is partly true), and that all London living is based in the very heart of the city, surrounded by its most famous landmarks. In movies, those who don't live in London live in picture-perfect villages surrounded by unspoilt countryside, in **quaint** little cottages with log burners, and roses growing around the door.

The reality, of course, sadly doesn't quite **live up to** this romantic ideal. Those who live in London live mostly in its **sprawling** (and often depressing) suburbs, with astronomical house prices making living in central London an impossible dream for everyone but the world's richest. More often than not, London is grey, polluted and rainy, and getting from A to B is a **gargantuan** task that involves negotiating the **grimy**, crowded London Underground, known **affectionately** as "The Tube". Don't get us wrong – London is fantastic. But it's not how it's portrayed on the big screen.

What's more, most Brits don't live in London. They live in cities, towns and villages dotted around the country, just like people do in any other country. Though there is much to admire about the majority of British settlements, and many have long and interesting histories that are still in evidence in their buildings and monuments, they're probably not how most non-Brits imagine them. These days our **high streets** look very similar from one town to the next, because they're all dominated by chains of the same shops and supermarkets, and modern **housing estates** all look the same because they're mostly built by the same **property developers**. Some people do enjoy the idealised, Hollywood version of Britain – but it's generally the people who have lots of money. That's not to say, however, that Britain for everyday people lacks charm; far from it.

### 3. We all talk like a Cockney or an aristocrat

"Tally ho old sport! I say, isn't this some **ghastly** weather we're having, what?"

"Alright me old geysers?"

These are the two categories of British accent that constitute most non-Brits' impressions of how we talk here in Britain. Hollywood has done little to **dispel** this idea of British speech, as this is how we're depicted in most movies as well.

In reality, numerous regional dialects add colour to the way in which English is spoken in Britain, from the thick Glaswegian accent to the gentle **West Country lilt**. With each of our many accents comes our own set of internal British stereotypes, but we don't have time to look at these now. **Suffice** it to say that if you come to Britain expecting us to talk like the Queen or **Dick Van Dyke**, you're in for a disappointment!

#### 4. All we ever talk about is the weather

There's certainly a big element of truth in this one, but you only have to look at the average British weather forecast to understand why. If you lived in, say, California, you'd get bored of talking about the weather after a while, because the sun is always shining and you have a pretty good idea of what to expect, **weather-wise**, from one week to the next. Over here, on the other hand, our weather changes constantly. Look at today for example. When I woke up this morning the sun was shining and it was the perfect crisp winter's day. It's now 11.20am and it has clouded over and it's raining heavily. What's more, January was so wet that much of the country is suffering from **horrendous** flooding. It's only February and we've already experienced record levels of rain, mini tornadoes, record-breaking wind speeds and the biggest, most destructive waves the coast has ever seen. There's never a dull moment when it comes to the British weather, and that's why we like to talk about it so much.

But talking about the weather fulfils another purpose: it's a guaranteed topic for small talk, a safeguard we use to avoid those awkward silences that we **self-conscious** Brits hate. That self-consciousness and **awkwardness** is another stereotype, of course; even if there are plenty of Brits like that, there are also plenty of **gregarious** types who **defy** that image. And all that said, we don't just talk about the weather. We talk about what we're up to at the weekend, what happened on TV last night and what we think of the latest gossip. And plenty more besides that, too.

#### 5. We have a stiff upper lip

The idea of the "**stiff upper lip**" comes from the fact that a trembling upper lip betrays a lack of control over one's emotions, and maintaining a stiff upper lip – not showing any emotion – is something that many people think **characterises the Brits**. This misconception stems from the Victorian period, when showing your emotions was indeed considered a big no-no. This has left us with a reputation for being reserved, and reluctant to show how we feel, but this labelling of us as unemotional is a little unfair. These days it's considered healthy to show grief if you feel it; just look at the public outpouring of emotion at the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. A number of newspaper articles in recent years have argued that the British stiff upper lip is no more, and you only have to observe the number of tears **shed** on reality TV shows like *The X Factor* to see why this outdated stereotype now fails to hold true.

#### 6. Our food is awful and we can't produce our own wine

Some countries – dare we say it, France, for example – look down their noses at British food and **deride** us for our lack of taste. Admittedly, the **proliferation** in Britain of eating places of overseas origin – French, Italian, Indian, Thai, Chinese, Mexican, to name but a few – does rather suggest that we feel our own food is lacking something; after all, in Italy, you only really see Italian restaurants.

We admit that fish and chips and "**bangers and mash**" aren't exactly the height of culinary sophistication, and the less said about Glasgow's deep fried Mars Bars, the better. But what about our fabulous cakes and Afternoon Teas? Our hearty steamed **puddings**? **Cornish pasties**? And our huge variety of delicious sausages and cheeses? A good strong cheddar is every bit as good as a French cheese; and the French may claim that they have a different cheese for every day of the year, but according to the English Cheese Board, we have over 700 different varieties. And we don't care what anyone says, we love our **Sunday roasts** and they're the feast of kings.

Our wine industry is a bit of a joke compared to that of many countries, and that's why we import so much. After all, what grape would grow in our **horrid** rainy climate? Well, quite a few actually. It may surprise you to learn that we have a number of **vineyards** and we even produce our own sparkling wine – the British answer to Champagne. Not that anyone in the UK ever really drinks it, but we feel that that's **beside the point**.

#### 7. We're a nation of queuers

Now here is a British stereotype that definitely is true, and we're very glad about it. We Brits are renowned for forming an orderly queue whenever the need arises. We're not ones for pushing and **shoving**; we let fairness rule the day and patiently wait our turn. Few things offend us more than people who jump the queue, and we'll make sure that any violators of the queuing order feel the full force of our disapproving glare.

#### 8. We complain a lot – but we also say sorry a lot

It's true: we do complain a lot. We love grumbling to each other about everything from our neighbours to politicians, from energy bills to noisy parties and from the weather being too cold to the weather being too hot. But we're normally too polite actually to complain to the source of the **grievance**. In a restaurant, for example, we might privately complain to our dining companion about the standard of the food, but when the waiter comes round to ask us if everything is alright with our meals, most of us will politely tell them how good it is.

It's also true that we say sorry a lot. In the restaurant scenario we've just outlined, if we did **pluck up the courage** to say something about our substandard meal, we'd probably start and end our complaint with the word "sorry", as if it was somehow our fault that the food wasn't **up to scratch**, and that we are the ones who must do the apologising. It makes no sense, but that's just how we're wired.

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**subject 2.** ['sʌbdʒekt] 1) зависимый, подвластный, подневольный, подчинённый 2) подверженный (чему-л.)  
**debunk** [di:'bʌŋk] разоблачать, развенчивать  
**memorabilia** [ˌmemə'reɪblɪə] 1) памятные вещи, реликвии, сувениры 2) памятные события  
**to come to the fore** выступать, выдвигаться вперёд  
**gratifying** ['grætɪfaɪɪŋ] приятный, доставляющий удовольствие  
**anecdote** ['æniˌkɒdəʊt] анекдот, забавная история  
**on first-name terms** having a friendly and informal relationship  
**at a push** в случае крайней нужды, в крайнем случае  
**double-decker** [ˌdʌbl'dekə] двухэтажный автобус  
**quaint** [kweɪnt] / 1) привлекательный своей оригинальностью или старомодностью, причудливый, затейливый quaint articles of furniture — старинная причудливая мебель 2) странный, чудной, необычный, своеобразный  
**live up to** оправдывать (надежды)  
**sprawling** ['sprɔ:ɪŋ] расплзающийся; развалившийся, растянувшийся; ползучий  
**gargantuan** [gɑ:'gæntjuən] колоссальный, огромный (по имени гиганта и обжоры Гаргантюа - персонажа Ф. Рабле)  
**grimy** ['grɪmɪ] запачканный, покрытый сажой, углем; чумазный; грязный  
**affectionately** [ə'fekʃ(ə)nətɪ] нежно, с любовью  
**high street** главная, центральная улица  
**housing estate** жилой массив, жилой микрорайон  
**property developer** застройщик  
**Cockney** ['kɒkni] 1) кокни (уроженец восточной части Лондона) Cockney humour — как юмор, характерный для кокни 2) кокни (лондонское просторечие)  
**ghastly** ['gɑ:stli] / 1. 1) а) наводящий ужас, жуткий, страшный ghastly crime — особо жестокое преступление Syn: terrible, frightful б) ужасный; неприятный, отвратительный (о внешности, внешнем облике)  
**dispel** [dɪ'spel] разгонять; рассеивать  
**the West Country** юго-западная часть Англии (включает графства Корнуолл, Девон и Сомерсет)  
**lilt** [lɪlt] 1) мелодия, напев, песенка (особенно весёлая) 2) ритм (песни, стиха)  
**suffice** [sə'faɪs] быть достаточным, хватать; удовлетворять  
**Van Dyke, Dick** (1925–), US actor and comedian  
**weather-wise** ['weðəwaɪz] 1) умеющий предсказывать погоду, знающий приметы погоды 2) знающий, куда ветер дует  
**horrendous** [hɒ'rendəs] 1) страшный, ужасный, вселяющий ужас Syn: terrible, horrible, horrific 2) жуткий, страшный, кошмарный, неприятный  
**self-conscious** [ˌself'kɒn(t)ʃəs] / 1) застенчивый, стеснительный, легко смущающийся  
**awkwardness** ['ɔ:kwədənəs] неловкость, неуклюжесть, неповоротливость  
**gregarious** [grɪ'geəriəs] 1) а) живущий стаями, стадами, обществами б) живущий колониями (о растениях) в) стадный; стайный gregarious feeling — стадное чувство gregarious instinct — стадность 2) коммуникабельный, контактный, общительный  
**defy** [dɪ'faɪ] / 1) вызывать, бросать вызов Syn: challenge 2., dare 1. 2) не обращать внимания, не придавать значения; манкировать, игнорировать to defy public opinion — игнорировать общественное мнение Syn: disregard 1. 3) противостоять, сопротивляться; не поддаваться, представлять трудности  
**stiff upper lip** [ˌstɪf,ʌpə'lɪp] "плотно сжатые губы"; ≈ английский характер (символ выдержки и упорства, умения не пасовать перед трудностями)  
**shed** [ʃed] shed 1) проливать, лить (слёзы, кровь) So much blood has been shed in this war. — В этой войне было пролито столько крови. Look, you're shedding tears on my best coat! — Господи, ты мне залила слезами моё лучшее пальто!  
**deride** [dɪ'raɪd] высмеивать, осмеивать  
**proliferation** [prəˌlɪf(ə)'reɪʃ(ə)n] 1) а) распространение (знаний и т. п.) The British and French were at first the leading peoples in this great proliferation of knowledge. — Поначалу англичане и французы играли ведущую роль в этом великом распространении знаний. б) быстрое увеличение (в количестве)  
**bangers and mash** [ˌbæŋəzən'mæʃ] сосиски с картофельным пюре (блюдо, популярное у английских рабочих)  
**pudding** ['puːdɪŋ] а) пудинг, запеканка б) десерт, сладкое блюдо  
**Cornish pasty** [ˌkɔ:ni'pæsti] корнуэльский пирожок (горячий, жареный; с начинкой из мяса, почек, картофеля и капусты) первоначально выпекался в графстве Корнуолл [Cornwall]  
**Sunday roast** воскресное жаркое (из говядины или баранины, традиционное воскресное блюдо; готовится в духовке, подаётся на стол с картошкой и овощами)  
**horrid** ['hɒrɪd] 1) страшный, ужасный, внушающий ужас  
**vineyard** ['vaɪnjəd], [-jɑ:d] виноградник  
**beside the point** некстати, не по существу to be beside the point — быть неважным, несвязанным  
**shove** [ʃʌv] пихать; толкать  
**grievance** ['grɪ:vəns] обида; недовольство  
**pluck up courage** - (or screw up or take) courage - make an effort to do something that frightens one  
**up to scratch** на должной высоте; в прекрасной форме

# 7 Rules of the English Language that Most Native Speakers Don't Know

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Learning English can feel a struggle at times, and it can feel as though you'll never be able to speak the language as easily and fluently as a native speaker.

But look at it another way: in starting from scratch, you have a major advantage over the majority of English speakers, and that is that you get to learn the rules governing how the language *should* be spoken. Native speakers have mostly picked up English as they've grown up, with little conscious knowledge of the rules, and unaware that their grammar – subconsciously absorbed by listening to those around them – leaves much to be desired. There's less focus on learning grammar in primary school these days, and successive generations of English speakers grow up surrounded by poor grammar. That means that there's a lot of misunderstanding and ignorance of rules that those learning English as a Foreign Language will have mastered as part of their course. This is behind the observation that those who speak English as a second language are actually better at speaking it than a lot of native speakers. With this consoling thought in mind, let's look at a selection of English language rules that most native English speakers don't know.

## “That” versus “which”

Many native English speakers think “that” and “which” can be used interchangeably, or even think “which” should be used because it sounds marginally more formal. This is not the case, and the rule is: **“that” defines; “which” informs, or adds extra information.** Take the following, for example:

“This is the cake that I made. This cake, which Tom made, looks better.”

In the first sentence, “that” is used to define the cake as being one made by me. The second sentence refers to a second cake that looks better than mine, with a bit of extra information added – “which Tom made”. The sentence would work equally well without these words. If you were to change the second sentence to say “The cake that Tom made looks better”, you'd be changing the emphasis of the sentence so that the fact that it was made by Tom is more important. It's worth noting that sentences using “that” still make sense grammatically when you remove the “that”, but if you remove “which”, they don't: “This is the cake I made. This cake, Tom made, looks better.”

“That” and “which” can also be used to make another subtle distinction. Look at the following two sentences:

“I'm going to water the tomatoes that I grew indoors.”

“I'm going to water the tomatoes, which I grew indoors.”

The distinction here is that in the first sentence, I'm referring to *some* of my tomatoes – the ones I grew indoors; there may be others that I grew outdoors. In the second sentence, I'm referring to *all* the tomatoes, which were all grown indoors.

Using the wrong one can lead to your saying something you don't mean. For example, if you were to ask, “should dogs, which run free in parks, be kept on leads?” you'd be implying that all dogs run free in parks and therefore that all dogs should be kept on leads at all times; the correct wording, “should dogs that run free in parks be kept on leads?”, specifies that you're only talking about the dogs who are allowed to run free in parks.

If you're not sure whether to use “which” or “that”, remember that a clause containing “which” is contained in commas (unless it's used to express different options, as in “I'm not sure which to choose”).

## 2. Ordering your sentences

Unlike “that” and “which”, some rules of English grammar are used correctly by English speakers, but purely by instinct rather than through any concrete knowledge of the rules behind their usage. A good example of this is the way in which we order our sentences when using multiple adjectives. English speakers “just know” which order to put them in, and know that the wrong order sounds odd. But they don't consciously know the rule behind this, which is that adjectives should be ordered thus:

### Opinion-size-age-shape-colour-origin-material-purpose-noun.

So, as Mark Forsyth comments in his book *The Elements of Eloquence*, “you can have a lovely little old rectangular green French silver whittling knife. But if you mess with that word order in the slightest you'll sound like a maniac.” You wouldn't normally use this many adjectives in one sentence; this is just an example. But it's a good rule to know if you're ever unsure of what order to put your adjectives in. Let's suppose I wanted to describe a dog:

“An adorable little brown Spaniel.”

Referring to the rule: “Adorable” is an opinion, so that goes first. His “little” size goes next. His colour, “brown”, goes next, and finally, the noun, “Spaniel”. Now look at how wrong the sentence sounds when we mix up that order:

“A brown little adorable Spaniel.”

It's hard to put your finger on why it sounds wrong: it just does! And that's because you've messed with a rule that most people don't even know exists.

## 3. “Like” versus “such as”

A common mistake among English speakers is to use “such as” and “like” interchangeably, or more commonly to use “like” when “such as” should be used. This is another instance in which there is a rule that most native speakers aren't aware of. It is: **“like” excludes; “such as” includes.** Use “such as” when you're giving examples of something, and “like” when you want to express similarity. Let's look at a couple of examples:

“Celebrities like George Clooney and Angelina Jolie are used to being photographed.”

“Celebrities, such as George Clooney and Angelina Jolie, are used to being photographed.”

In the first sentence, we're talking about *any* celebrity on a par with Clooney and Jolie; not necessarily these two specific actors – just ones like them. In the second sentence, we're naming them as specific examples of actors who are used to being photographed.

To give you another example, if you were to say, “Programmes like *Eastenders* aren’t worth watching”, you wouldn’t necessarily be talking specifically about this programme – just ones like it, say *Coronation Street* or *Emmerdale*. Changing it to “Programmes such as *Eastenders*” includes *Eastenders* at the same time as implying that you have a similar opinion about other such shows. It’s a subtle distinction, so it’s little wonder that few people understand this rule.

#### 4. “As” versus “since”

A common slip-up among native speakers is to use “as” and “since” interchangeably, and to use “since” instead of “because”, as in, “I’m not going to the party, since he is going.” This is incorrect. The rule is: **“as” is causal; “since” is temporal**. Think of “since” as being linked to time. A correct example of the use of “since” is:

“It’s been years since I’ve ridden a horse.”

“As” can be used in place of “because”. For example:

“I’m not going to the party, as he is going.”

“I’m not going to the party because he is going.”

This is a particularly important rule to remember when you’re writing essays; don’t be tempted to replace “because” with “since” just because you want to vary your wording a bit more.

#### 5. “-ed” versus “-nt” endings

Many native speakers are unsure whether a word should end in “-ed” or “-nt”: should it be “learned” or “learnt”, for example? The rule is that **“-ed” is the past tense form; “-nt” is the adjectival form**. For instance, “she learned the music” is correct because we’re talking about an action – the learning – taking place in the past. An example of the adjectival use of the verb “to learn” would be “learnt behaviour” (as opposed to innate or instinctive behaviour). Another example of this rule is “burned” versus “burnt”: “she burned the dinner” versus “the dinner is burnt”.

#### 6. When to use capital letters

Everyone knows that you use a capital letter at the beginning of a sentence, but there are various other occasions when the first letter of a word should be capitalised, and many Brits don’t know what these are. The trend these days is towards capitalising fewer words, but the most important rule is to be consistent. These rules should help you.

Proper nouns

Names of people and places, and official brand names, should be capitalised: John Smith, London, the Citizens Advice Bureau, Oxford University, Marmite. Adjectives derived from proper nouns should be capitalised, such as “American”, “English” and so on. Brand names may be lowercase if that is how the company refers to themselves (such as “adidas”); you should also employ any random capital letters in brand names, such as “iPad”.

You should capitalise job titles when they’re referring to a specific person by their job title, but not when referring to the job in other contexts: “President Barack Obama”, but “the president’s car”; “Colonel Mustard”, but “the colonel said...”. There are exceptions: you’d probably refer to “the Pope” with a capital P regardless of the context, for example. The main thing is that you’re consistent throughout a piece of writing. The names of seasons are not capitalised (spring, summer, autumn, winter).

In titles and headings

The most obvious example of these is an essay title, but it could also be newspaper headlines, blog post titles, book titles and so on. This one’s a matter of preference; provided that the first letter of the sentence is capitalised, along with any proper nouns, it’s up to you whether you use capital letters for the title. A long title would probably look better without capitals, as they can look clunky. Shorter titles could use capitals if you want; but there are rules over which words should be capitalised and which shouldn’t. Articles such as “a”, “an” and “the” should be lowercase, as should co-ordinating conjunctions such as “and” and “but”, and prepositions and other very short words, such as “for”, “of”, “to”, “by”, “off” and so on. Both of the following examples are correct in the context of an essay; which you choose is up to you:

“A Journey Across the Sea to a Land of Opportunity: English Settlers in America in the 16th Century”

“A journey across the sea to a land of opportunity: English settlers in America in the 16th century”

#### Abbreviations and acronyms

The other obvious use of capital letters is in abbreviations and acronyms: NASA, IKEA, the MOD (Ministry of Defence). Opinion differs on whether acronyms pronounced as words should be all capital letters or just have the first letter capitalised; a good rule of thumb is to look at how the organisation refers to itself (NASA, for instance, refers to itself thus). Note that not all abbreviations have capital letters; speeds and measurements, for instance, are written in lowercase, such as “15mph” not “15MPH”, or “30cm” not “30CM”.

#### 7. Formatting dates

Most native English speakers know that when you’re referring to a date in history, you write “BC” (Before Christ) or “AD” (Anno Domini) to signify that it occurred before or after the year 0 (the year in which Christ was born). But not many people know that “BC” goes after the date, while “AD” goes before it: “AD 500”, “500 BC”.

Confusion over how to format dates also extends to how to write individual dates in UK English. Is it the 15th of October? 15 October? 15th October? October the 15th? Spoken out loud, you’d probably say “the 15th of October”. If you’re mentioning a date when writing, however, it’s best to put “15th October” or “15 October” for simplicity and a degree of formality. Which you use is a matter of personal preference, but again, ensure that you’re consistent. “The 15th of October” is very formal, and would normally be used in official documents or communications, such as legal contracts or wedding invitations.

There were many more little-known English rules that we could have included here, but we’ve run out of space for now. If you have a favourite English grammar rule, why not share it in the comments below?

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As anyone who's ever studied Latin will know, written translation into a language is often one of the most difficult and daunting exercises possible: it requires both a deep understanding of the language's grammatical structure, and a sense of comfort and ease with its vocabulary.

But if you haven't got those, don't worry: just read our guide to written translation and become an instant bilingual superstar.

## Get ready

1. Read through your piece carefully before you start

Before you start translating anything, make sure you read through the piece a couple of times and understand first, exactly what the writer is trying to say, and second, exactly how they're trying to say it. Look at it almost as though you were writing a literary commentary on it: pay attention to every single word and phrase: to the purpose of your text, its register (style and pitch), and the sort of stylistic tricks the writer uses. Don't be afraid to scrawl all over your piece: make notes on anything that pops out at you as noteworthy, and highlight anything you think might be difficult to translate. Finally, if you're able to, research any idiomatic phrases or even just ideas in the passage that you don't fully understand.

2. Get your tools ready

A good bilingual dictionary is an essential tool for any translation. Even if you feel you know a direct translation of an important word, look it up and consider all the options, and think about which best matches the sense and style of the original.

Interestingly, the English language contains far more words than any of the Romance languages (for example French, Italian or Spanish) or the Germanic languages (like German or Dutch). The reason for this is to do with England's Medieval history. Originally, English was a Germanic language, close to German and Dutch, and for that reason it shares much of its basic grammatical structure with those languages. But after it was conquered by the French in 1066, Norman French became the language of the rulers, and hugely influenced the native language. Similarly, many words from Latin, the language of the Church and scholarship, filtered into vernacular English. So modern English is shaped by those three influences, and frequently, will contain synonymous words that are identifiably from each. For example, English has a multitude of ways of expressing the emotion of anger; out of these, 'anger' and 'wrath' can be traced back to Old Norse and Germanic stems, but 'ire' and 'rage' are from the Latin words *ira* and *rabies*. All this influences your job as a translator because it makes it harder simply to equate words between languages: there will often be many different options to choose from in English, and it's your task to make sure you pick the best. If you learn any new words in the process, write them down and store them in your vocabulary for later.

Similarly, before translating make sure you've got all the grammatical materials you need to ensure technical accuracy, making sure you get things like verb forms and endings, or syntax, spot on. Obviously, a good understanding of grammatical rules is essential for translation, but you can bolster your own knowledge with written tables, lists, and books. Eliminate little mistakes by checking everything carefully: in a really polished and good piece of work, spelling or grammar errors stand out a mile and mar the whole piece, so make sure you correct these so that your translation reads like a dream!

## Choose your words carefully

3. Translate the *meaning*, not the *words*

Some of the most comical translation mishaps occur when people offer literal renditions of the *words* in a sentence rather than its *meaning* – even when those words don't make sense in the language they're translating into. For example, if a Spanish native speaker said to you: 'To another dog with that bone!' you could be forgiven for thinking they had gone completely (barking) mad. Of course, all they'd really be doing is translating the Spanish phrase 'A otro perro con ese hueso' – a figurative way of saying 'you're pulling my leg' – literally: but the sense of the phrase is lost in translation (if you'll excuse the second terrible pun in a row). Here are some other phrases from around the world (Spanish has hundreds of them) that produce simultaneously mystifying and hilarious results when translated into English:

*Avoir le cafard*

Literally, to 'have the cockroach' in French – this phrase means to be down in the dumps.

*Es ist mir wurst*

'That's sausage to me' – a German phrase meaning that the speaker doesn't care.

*Yo te conozco bacalao, aunque vengas disfrazado.*

'I know you, codfish, even though you wear a disguise'. Another madly figurative Spanish phrase, meaning something along the lines of 'I know your game!'

*C'est la fin des haricots*

'That's the end of the beans' – or in English, 'that's curtains for us'.

*Un burro frota a otro burro*

'A donkey rubs another donkey', meaning that people of similar character get along well together.

*Éramos pocos y parió la abuela.*

'There were only a few of us, and then grandma gave birth'. No, a miracle hasn't happened – this means 'I had a few problems, and then this came along', similar to the English 'it never rains but it pours.'

And of course, there are non-idiomatic examples too. The literal translation of the Spanish word *obtener* is ‘to obtain’ – but often, ‘to get’ is just as good and will sound less stuffy.

All this might at first seem to be at odds with my fourth translation tip:

#### 4. ... But maintain stylistic techniques

Stylistic techniques aren’t just for decoration; they’re an important way that writers create meaning. So where possible, reproduce the surface of the language of any passage you translate. When reading a piece before translation, read through it and think about the effects the author uses: note down any sayings, colloquialisms, highly-stylised sentences, verbal rhymes or rhythms. Of course, the frequency and use of these techniques will vary according to the type of text you’re working with: a poem in verse, for example, might be more elaborate than a formal letter. See if you can find subtle ways to render these effects in English: the most elegant translations imitate style without sacrificing the naturalness of their version. To return to my example above, you might translate the Spanish phrase ‘A otro perro con ese hueso’ as ‘You’re pulling my leg’, maintaining both the sense of the phrase and its distinct identity as a saying. And on a different, but again related, note:

#### 5. Be faithful to the register of the original

It sounds obvious but this is an area where students often slip up. If you’re translating a text that sounds formal and clipped, mimic its tone and register: use appropriate words and a similar style. If you’re translating something looser and more colloquial, equally, find words that capture the feel of the original.

#### 6. Know your audience

A final consideration when choosing your words is the audience your work is aimed at. Of course, if you’re translating a piece for a language class, your audience will contain precisely one person: your teacher. But it’s nonetheless a useful exercise to think about who the original document is intended for, and moderate your language accordingly: if it’s a poster aimed at teenagers, you’re likely to choose different English words than in translating a newspaper article for adults.

#### 7. Don’t get too bogged down in details

In setting your written translations to do, your teacher is assuming a certain level of fluency in English: they’ve decided that you understand (and to a certain extent know by heart) the grammatical basics of the language, and you’re able to recall the rules and some vocabulary quickly. Of course, it’s important to show that you do indeed possess those skills by getting your vocabulary and grammar right as detailed above, but remember that the exercise has been set to test you and your knowledge, rather than what’s in your textbook – and have the confidence to follow your intuition. Don’t over-complicate the exercise by becoming so obsessed with detail that everything takes too long and becomes confusing; make sure the end result looks natural and easy rather than laboured.

### **Practical considerations**

#### 8. Take your time

With the pressure of a whole page, or even pages, of words to translate into a new language, it can be tempting to race through and try to get as much on paper as quickly as possible. It’s a slightly different exercise, but I often make the mistake of starting translations from Latin like this: covering entire pages in rough scrawl, and missing out entire phrases or words that look too tricky to bother with. Try to resist this impulse: having less-than-perfect work on the page will create a sense of anxiety that there’s still loads to be done, and later on, when you’re dying to clock off for the day and think about anything but words, you’re likely to forget the little nuances you noticed earlier, and put sentences into your final draft that were only meant to be placeholders. Instead, take a deep breath, go slowly, and try to think about every single word in a slow, methodical, and even creative way. It’s better to have four really solid sentences written than three pages that need to be redone.

#### 9. Reread, and make it flow

After you’ve produced your first draft, take a break – the longer, the better. If you’ve got enough time to leave the piece, and return to it the next day, then that’s ideal. When you come back to your translation, read it through looking for little slips in spelling and grammar, but also with an eye to style. Is it elegant, and does it flow? Are the register and tone consistent throughout? Does it capture both the meaning and the spirit of the original? If you can, get a native speaker to read it for you and point out what needs work. Look out for anything awkwardly phrased or messy, or anything you gave up on in despair the day before: now that you’ve got a complete draft, and the pressure of finishing the whole piece is off, it’s the time to work on the little details.

#### 10. ... And read it one more time

Have another break, and then read your work one more time after you’ve fiddled with it, just to check you haven’t made any silly errors in changing things.

#### 11. Learn from your mistakes

Nobody is great at written translation the first time they attempt it: it’s one of the hardest parts of language learning, requiring that you’re comfortable enough with the grammar of the language you’re translating into, and that you have a wide enough vocabulary to get the basics down on the page. What’s more, it’s a completely new and slightly false exercise, requiring a different set of skills than listening to or reading a language, and far more precision and sophistication than speaking. So don’t be disheartened if you don’t get it right the first time: practice really does make perfect, and each time you attempt a written translation, even if the exercise drives you mad, you’ll learn many new words and reinforce your understanding of English grammar, as well as little things like spelling.

If you labour for hours over your translation, and you’re still not happy with the result, *make sure* you make that work count anyway: learn the meaning and spelling of any new words that you’ve found in a dictionary or online, and learn and practise the grammatical rules you found tricky this time around.

# Common Grammatical Mistakes in English – And How to Avoid Them

13 February, 2014

If you're currently in the process of learning English, and you're struggling to get to grips with our grammar, don't take it to heart.

A huge number of native English speakers make frequent English slip-ups that bring on the wrath of the UK's army of grammar pedants, and it's mainly because they weren't taught properly at school. But for you, help is at hand. So that you can learn the rules from the word go, we've put together this guide to some of the most common mistakes people make when writing in English. Learn them all, and you'll get your knowledge of English off to a better start than most Brits! Even if you're a native speaker, you may find some useful advice here to make your use of English the best it can be.

## 1. Misplaced apostrophes

Apostrophes aren't difficult to use once you know how, but putting them in the wrong place is one of the most common grammar mistakes in the English language. Many people use an apostrophe to form the plural of a word, particularly if the word in question ends in a vowel, which might make the word look strange with an S added to make it plural.

### The rules:

- Apostrophes indicate possession – something belonging to something or someone else.
- To indicate something belonging to one person, the apostrophe goes before the 's'. For instance, "The girl's horse."
- To indicate something belonging to more than one person, put the apostrophe after the 's'. For example, "The girls' horse."
- Apostrophes are also used to indicate a contracted word. For example, "don't" uses an apostrophe to indicate that the word is missing the "o" from "do not".
- Apostrophes are never used to make a word plural, even when a word is in number form, as in a date.

### How **not** to do it:

- The horse's are in the field
- Pen's for sale
- In the 1980's
- Janes horse is over there
- The girls dresses are ready for them to collect

### How to do it properly:

- The horses are in the field
- Pens for sale
- In the 1980s
- We didn't want to do it
- Jane's horse is over there
- The girls' dresses are ready for them to collect

## 2. Fewer/less

The fact that many people don't know the difference between "fewer" and "less" is reflected in the number of supermarket checkout aisles designated for "10 items or less". The mistake most people make is using "less" when they actually mean "fewer", rather than the other way round.

### The rules:

- "Fewer" refers to items you can count individually.
- "Less" refers to a commodity, such as sand or water, that you can't count individually.

### How **not** to do it:

- There are less cakes now
- Ten items or less

### How to do it properly:

- There are fewer cakes now
- Ten items or fewer
- Less sand
- Fewer grains of sand

## 3. Amount/number

These two work in the same way as "less" and "fewer", referring respectively to commodities and individual items.

### The rules:

- "Amount" refers to a commodity, which can't be counted (for instance water).
- "Number" refers to individual things that can be counted (for example birds).

### How **not** to do it:

- A greater amount of people are eating more healthily

### How to do it properly:

- A greater number of people are eating more healthily
- The rain dumped a larger amount of water on the country than is average for the month



#### 4. To/two/too

It's time to revisit another common grammar mistake that we also covered in our homophones post, as no article on grammar gripes would be complete without it. It's easy to see why people get this one wrong, but there's no reason why you should.

##### The rules:

- "To" is used in the infinitive form of a verb – "to talk".
- "To" is also used to mean "towards".
- "Too" means "also" or "as well".
- "Two" refers to the number 2.

##### How **not** to do it:

- I'm to hot
- It's time two go
- I'm going too town
- He bought to cakes

##### How to do it properly:

- I'm too hot
- It's time to go
- I'm going to town
- He bought two cakes

#### 5. Me/myself/I

The matter of how to refer to oneself causes all manner of conundrums, particularly when referring to another person in the same sentence. Here's how to remember whether to use "me", "myself" or "I".

##### The rules:

- When referring to yourself and someone else, put their name first in the sentence.
- Choose "me" or "I" by removing their name and seeing which sounds right.
- For example, with the sentence "John and I are off to the circus", you wouldn't say "me is off to the circus" if it was just you; you'd say "I am off to the circus". Therefore when talking about going with someone else, you say "John and I".
- You only use "myself" if you've already used "I", making you the subject of the sentence.

##### How **not** to do it:

- Me and John are off to the circus
- Myself and John are going into town
- Give it to John and I to look after

##### How to do it properly:

- John and I are off to the circus
- John and I are going into town
- Give it to John and me to look after
- I'll deal with it myself
- I thought to myself

#### 6. Who/whom

Another conundrum arising from confusion over how to refer to people. There are lots in the English language!

##### The rules:

- "Who" refers to the subject of a sentence; "whom" refers to the object.
- "Who" and "whom" work in the same way as "he" or "him". You can work out which you should use by asking yourself the following:
  - "Who did this? He did" – so "who" is correct. "Whom should I invite? Invite him" – so "whom" is correct.
  - "That" is often used incorrectly in place of "who" or "whom". When referring to a person, you should not use the word "that".

##### How **not** to do it:

- Who shall I invite?
- Whom is responsible?
- He was the only person that wanted to come

##### How to do it properly:

- Whom shall I invite?
- Who is responsible?
- He was the only person who wanted to come

#### 7. Affect/effect

It's an easy enough mistake to make given how similar these two words look and sound, but there's a simple explanation to help you remember the difference.

##### The rules:

- Affect is a verb – "to affect" – meaning to influence or have an impact on something.
- Effect is the noun – "a positive effect" – referring to the result of being affected by something.
- There is also a verb "to effect", meaning to bring something about – "to effect a change". However, this is not very commonly used, so we've left it out of the examples below to avoid confusion.

##### How **not** to do it:

- He waited for the medicine to have an affect
- They were directly effected by the flooding

##### How to do it properly:

- He waited for the medicine to have an effect
- They were directly affected by the flooding