

TELLING THE TIME

In Britain, there are only fifty-five minutes in an hour. This means that the day is 8% shorter, and so as time goes on, the day tends to slip a little when compared with the position of the sun. By the end of a month, people find that they're getting up for work just as the sunset is finishing. In order to remedy this, a "leap day" is inserted into every second month or so – the specific months are chosen by the Queen in a televised royal proclamation. The ceremony, reminiscent of the historic "changing of the guard," takes place at Buckingham Palace, the Queen's official residence in London. The current holder of the ceremonial House of Commons position "Black Rod" approaches the Queen's residence carrying the Mace, an ornamental staff normally kept in the Parliament. Watches in silence from behind a cordon by hordes of tourists, he knocks three times sharply on the Queen's front door. The Queen emerges, often wearing her nightgown, shuffles around a little peering at the ground and shortly declares in a loud voice whether or not she is able to see her shadow. If she can see her shadow, a leap day is added to the current month oh, no, it's no good; I just can't keep this up. Back to why telling the time in Britain is different.

Brits use a variety of terms which are unfamiliar to Americans, and vice versa. Brits do not say "a quarter of three," like some elderly Americans do. Examples of times you may hear used are:

- "half three" (3:30)
- "ten after two" (2:10)
- "midday" (exactly noon, not some time around lunchtime)

Like all Europeans they use the 24hr clock a lot more than Americans do – almost all written times will be in the 24hr clock, but only in the military will you see people agreeing to meet at "fifteen hundred hours" – in conversation Brits will not say "fifteen o'clock," and will instead revert to the AM/PM system.

It is a popular American misconception that "GMT" means "the time in Britain." It does not. During the winter, Britain does indeed match GMT but in the summer she switches to "British Summer Time" (BST), which is an hour ahead of GMT.

Writing the Date

Like the rest of the world apart from America, the British write the date in the format day/month/year. Writing the date in the American month/day/year style will be greeted with as much hilarity as writing the time in the format minute: hour: second.

If you want to have your dates understood everywhere, the only real option is to use text versions of the month (5-Apr-1972) or use the ISO yyyy-mm-dd format (1972-04-05).