

Telling time 1 - past, after, to, and till

Introduction

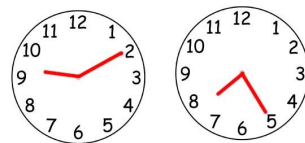
Hi, Lori here welcoming you to another episode of Real English Conversations from BetterAtEnglish.com. Today's conversation is about some of the differences between American and British English usage when it comes to telling time. This conversation also marks the first appearance of my very own mom here on B@E. She give us her perspective on American usage, while my English friend Michael (whom you know from earlier podcasts) returns this episode to cover the British point of view. This episode follows directly from the previous episode, number 44, so if this is your first time listening to our podcasts you should listen to episode 44 first.

The pdf that goes with this episode contains the full transcript, the vocabulary list, the image of clocks that I used to elicit time expressions from my mom and Michael, and some usage notes about time expressions in British and American English. You can download it directly in iTunes, or visit betteratenglish.com and download from there. I think that's enough introduction for today -- let's get on with the conversation!

Conversation Transcript

[Lori: In this informal language experiment, I showed my mom a picture of four clock faces and asked her to read me the times. This was to see what prepositions she would use, particularly if she would avoid the preposition *past* as Yvette's former teachers claimed Americans do.]

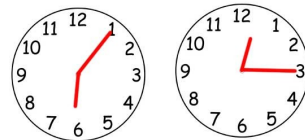
Mom: OK, well starting on the top left I have ten m minutes *after* nine, and then the next one to the right is twenty-five *after* seven, and then on the bottom left is five *past* six and the last one on the bottom right is a quarter *past* twelve.



Lori: OK! Perfect! You scored 100%

Mom: Wow, I got 100%! I do know how to tell time on a regular **analog** clock!

Lori: OK...now this is very interesting because you are a native American speaker, and you haven't had...I doubt you've had much exposure to British English and definitely not ever had to teach English using British English materials or anything like that.



Mom: No, for sure.

Lori: Yeah, the problem is..is that sometimes when non-native speakers are learning English, teachers will tell them **misguided** rules that they maybe read in some **outdated** book somewhere saying things like, "In American English you have to use *after* when you talk about time; you can't use *past*."

Mom: Yeah, I think one time I said *past*..I think I said *five past six*. In fact I purposely said *past* because I was trying to give you some variety of the difference...we can tell time...because Americans will say *past*.

Lori: Yeah! That's what I think as well, that I...maybe naturally I'd be more likely to say *after* but I wouldn't think it was weird or strange if someone said *past*.

Mom: No...no, that's exactly...'cause...I think the first couple of times I said *after* and then I thought, "Oh I'm going to give her a little variety," so I'll say *five past six* because we do say that, but it's...I mean we wouldn't think it's odd.

Lori: OK, that's great, and that's really just the point I wanted to make... that often...

Mom: In fact I think we especially do it with with...on the half hour, we say half *past* twelve.

Lori: Right, right, half *past* twelve, definitely. Yeah, you wouldn't say half *after* twelve.

Mom: **Nuh-uh**, we always say *past* for then. See, we use both.

Lori: And the interesting thing is I used analog clocks on purpose because I was worried that if I just wrote the times in digital time you would have said, for example, seven twenty-five.

Mom: Exactly, 'cause that's what you see on a digital clock.

Lori: So anyway, that was my little experiment!

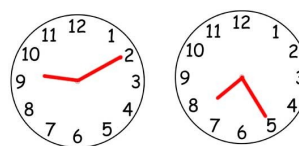
Mom: OK!

[laughter]

[Lori: *After doing the experiment with my mom, I went on and did the same experiment with Michael to get the British perspective.*]

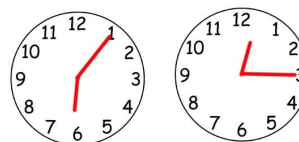
Lori: ...and read the times that you see on the clocks.

Michael: Yeah, it's ten *past* nine... that's from the top left. The top right is twenty-five *past* seven. The bottom left..err..five *past* six, and the bottom right one is quarter *past* twelve.



Lori: OK, cool! You've also scored 100%. You can tell time on an analog clock!

Michael: [laughs] Yay!



Lori: And the reason that I asked you to do this is...I had a discussion with Yvette the other day and she remembered learning when she was studying English, umm -- she's had both...been exposed to people, you know, trying to teach her British English and American English -- and she somehow was told that if you're going to speak British English you have to say *past* just like you just did, like, it's ten *past*...

Michael: It's true as well, it's..in fact, I can tell you that...I mean she's absolutely right. I mean, **never mind** the experimenting, that is how we are taught. And I've never heard anybody say ten *after*, you know, three or something like that until I met an American person.

Lori: OK! OK, but did you still understand it the first time you heard...did it cause any problems?

Michael: Oh it didn't cause any any confusion... you say 10, you know five past, ten past quarter past, twenty past, twenty-five past.

Lori: Uh-huh.

Michael: And when it's around it's around, it's twenty-five to, twenty to, quarter to, ten to, five to...

Lori: Right.

Michael: But I've heard some American people say ten *till*..

Lori: Oh yeah, ten *till* six, yeah quarter *till*, um-hmm.

Michael: You never ever ever ever ever say that in British English, it's always *past* and it's *to* and it's **drummed into** you.

Lori: OK, that's quite interesting.

Michael: There's no variation whatsoever, but people can understand obviously, I mean you'd have to be a bit of a [bleep] **jerk** to...

Lori: Um-hmm.

Michael: Being deliberately **obtuse** if you're going, "Huh? I don't get it." You know, because it's obvious to anyone with **half a brain**, you know, what it means. But it is...it stands out as being unusual 'cause this is... yet we have this little clocks with the, you know, the movable hands.

Lori: Yeah, analog clocks.

Michael: Yeah!

Lori: In fact, I was quite **cunning** when I made the picture to send to you. I made...I used analog clocks on purpose just to **elicit** the preposition *past*, 'cause if I had just written the times, like in digital format, you probably would have said things like...

Michael: Nine ten...yeah. But I don't...I don't say times like that anyway. I always do it the old-fashioned way. even after the **advent** of digital things because my dad would **belt** me if I said it, err, you know, the digital way, I'd... seriously, I'd get in trouble when my parents would yell at me.

Lori: Oh, that's funny why, why...Did they ever say why they didn't like it?

Michael: Yes, they felt it was **dumbing things down**, err, and it meant that you know you wouldn't be learning you wouldn't know how to tell the time properly. Err, because if you just read it out like that...err...and...I mean I think they had a very good point, because if you, you know, if you only knew how to tell the time like that and then you were at, oh I don't know, some big train station somewhere where they had an analog clock and you're going, "Oh, umm, let me work out bla bla bla," you know, it's...it's not so good.

Lori: Yeah, it's definitely, I think, everyone needs to know how to tell time on an analog clock but I wouldn't go so far as to force people to use that every time they were talking about time because I think the digital system is so established now and it really makes perfect sense.

Michael: Yeah, and my, I mean, I can hear you hang on my parents are total [bleeping] **Nazis** when it comes to...

Lori: [laughs in disbelief]

Michael: But anyway... I love them but they're...you know...misguided in the extreme.

Lori: You know I'm going to have to **bleep you out** now.

Michael: [laughs]

Lori: We're not recording for Uncensored English!

Final Words

That's all for this time. Of course, in these spontaneous conversations we can't cover all of the usage issues that apply, and sometimes the examples we come up with on the spot might not be the best from a teaching perspective. So to make up for that I've added some extra usage notes to the pdf file for this episode. I hope you find them useful. Thanks for listening, and bye for now!


[Vocabulary and usage notes on next page]

If you enjoyed this lesson from Better@English, we'd really appreciate your support. There is a lot you can do to help:


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Vocabulary notes

analog	An analog clock uses hands (pointers) to show the time, not a digital readout.
misguided	wrong or unsuitable based on bad judgment or on wrong information or beliefs.
outdated	old-fashioned and not as good, correct or suitable as something modern or up-to-date.
Nuh-uh	American English speakers often use this sound to agree with a negative statement, like in our example above. Listen to the audio and note the intonation. With a completely different intonation it is used to express disbelief.
never mind	In this context, <i>never mind</i> means that something is not important. In our example, Michael is so clear about the rules for <i>past</i> and <i>after</i> that he doesn't need to do experiments.
drummed into	If you <i>drum something into someone</i> , you teach them something by frequently repeating it or reminding them of it.
jerk	A <i>jerk</i> is someone who is unreasonable or stupid. Michael actually used a very vulgar synonym with roughly the same meaning.
obtuse	In this context, being <i>obtuse</i> means that you are purposely trying to be stupid or unable to understand.
half a brain	<i>Anyone with half a brain</i> means <i>anyone who is not completely stupid</i> .
cunning	Clever, able to plan things so that you get what you want.
elicit	To get or produce something, particularly information or a response.
advent	The arrival of an invention or an event.
belt	Informal for <i>to hit</i> or <i>to strike</i> .
dumbing things down	<i>To dumb something down</i> is a synonym for <i>to simplify</i> or <i>to make easier</i> , but it shows disapproval.
Nazis 	In this context, a <i>Nazi</i> is a person who is unreasonably strict or concerned with following rules. Note that because of the Holocaust, using the word <i>Nazi</i> in this way could be considered offensive.
bleep you out	<i>To bleep something out</i> means to replace a vulgar or offensive word with a hi-pitched tone. This is often done on television and radio programs.

Some time expressions in British and American English

TIME	Br. E	Am. E
9:05	five past nine nine oh five	five after/past nine nine oh five
9:10	ten past nine nine ten	ten after/past nine nine ten
9:15	quarter past nine nine fifteen	a quarter after/past nine 9:15
9:25	twenty-five past nine nine twenty-five	twenty-five after/past nine nine twenty-five
9:30	half past nine nine thirty half nine  [NOTE! This form is not generally understood by Americans, and also causes a lot of confusion when speaking English with non-native speakers because the equivalent form in different languages can mean 8:30 or 9:30. So I advise you to avoid this form altogether.]	nine thirty half past nine (not half after!)
9:35	twenty-five (minutes*) to ten nine thirty-five	twenty-five (minutes) to/till ten nine thirty-five
9:40	twenty (minutes) to ten nine forty	twenty (minutes) to/till ten nine forty
9:45	quarter to ten nine forty-five	a quarter to/till/of ten nine forty-five
9:50	ten (minutes) to ten nine fifty	ten minutes to/till ten nine fifty
9:55	five (minutes) to ten	five (minutes) to/till ten nine fifty-five

* using "minutes" is optional.