https://www.learnenglish.de/culture/britishhumour.html

WHAT IS BRITISH HUMOUR?

In popular culture, British humour is a somewhat general term applied to certain types of comedy and comedic acts from the United Kingdom. Many UK comedy TV shows typical of British humour have become popular all round the world, and, for good or bad, have been a strong avenue for the export and representation of British culture to an international audience.

There are many different kinds of humour, and often culture and tradition plays a big part in how funny you may find something, or not.

A TO Z OF TYPES OF HUMOUR

Black (Dark) humour: taking topics and events that are usually regarded as taboo and treating them in a satirical or humorous manner while retaining their seriousness.

Burlesque: a form of satire. Burlesque ridicules any basic style of speech or writing. (Parody makes fun of specific writings.)

Caricature: exaggeration of a person’s mental, physical, or personality traits, in wisecrack form.

Clown: to act stupidly, often to make other people laugh.

Conundrum: a word puzzle that can’t be solved because the answer is a pun. For example: Why do cows wear bells? Because their horns don’t work.

Epigram: clever, short saying about a general group. Mostly satire about mankind.

Farce: light dramatic work in which highly improbable plot situations, exaggerated characters, and often slapstick elements are used for humorous effect.

Freudian Slip: a funny statement which seems to just pop out, but which actually comes from the person’s subconscious thoughts.

Gag: a short joke or quip.

Hyperbole: extreme exaggeration.

Innuendo: "an indirect remark about somebody or something, usually suggesting something bad or rude". Used a lot in British sitcoms of the 70s like Are you Being Served.

Irony: a leading part of humour. Irony is using words to express something completely different from the literal meaning. Usually, someone says the opposite of what they mean and the listener believes the opposite of what they said.

[Joke](http://english-magazine.org/fun-and-leisure/english-jokes): short story ending with a funny climactic twist.

Limericks: five-line rhyming poems, which intend to be witty or humorous, and are sometimes obscene with humorous intent.

Parody: humorous version of any well-known writing.

Practical Joke: a joke put into action. These kinds of jokes are often played on [April Fool's Day](https://www.learnenglish.de/culture/aprilfool.html) in the UK.

Recovery: a combination of blunder and wit, where a person makes an error, and then saves himself with a fast correction.

Repartee: includes clever replies and retorts. The most common form is the insult.

Sarcasm: using witty language to convey insults or scorn.

Satire: wit that is critical humour. Satire is sarcasm that makes fun of something.

Sitcom: (short for Situational Comedy) a funny television or radio show in which the same characters appear in each programme in a different story.

Situational Humour: this is comedy that comes from your own life. No one in your audience will have heard it and it can get a group used to you. This type of humour is based on a humorous situation that you have experienced. Situational humour is the bread and butter of sitcoms like Friends.

Slapstick: a boisterous form of comedy marked by chases, collisions, and crude practical jokes, like slipping on banana skins. It gets its name from a paddle designed to produce a loud whacking sound, which was formerly used by performers in farces.

Switching: a common form of switching is changing the main parts of the story, such as the setup or the punch line, and creating a new joke.

Understatement: making something that is regular or large seem extremely smaller or less. Intentionally down- sizing a large object.

Wisecrack: any clever remark about a particular person or thing. Wisecracks are quick wordplays about a person.

Wit: a message whose ingenuity or verbal skill or incongruity has the power to evoke laughter.

Wordplay: a humorous play on words with witty verbal exchanges.

Another example of the darker side of British humour (only joking) can be found every year, in the [Christmas cracker](https://www.learnenglish.de/culture/christmas.html#Crackers).

BRITISH COMEDY FILMS

There are numerous British comedy films like The Lavender Hill Mob and The Man in the White Suit, the 1950s work of the Boulting Brothers; Private's Progress, Lucky Jim, and I'm All Right Jack, innumerable popular comedy series including the St Trinian's films, the "Doctor" series, and the long-running Carry On films. Some of the best known British film comedy stars were Will Hay, George Formby, Norman Wisdom, Peter Sellers and the Monty Python team. Other actors associated with British comedy films included Ian Carmichael, Terry-Thomas, Margaret Rutherford, Irene Handl and Leslie Phillips.

More recent successful films include the working class comedies, Brassed Off, The Full Monty, the more middle class Richard Curtis-scripted films Four Weddings and a Funeral, and Notting Hill and youth-oriented, pop-culture films like Shaun of the Dead and Hot Fuzz.

BRITISH TV COMEDY

Although many popular shows of recent years began life on BBC radio, there have been many successful and influential series which were designed purely for TV. Following the success of Hancock's Half Hour, the sitcom became firmly entrenched in the UK's television schedules. Some of the most successful examples include "As Time Goes By", Steptoe and Son, Dad's Army, Keeping Up Appearances, The Likely Lads, Fawlty Towers, The Good Life, Are You Being Served?, Yes Minister, Only Fools and Horses, Absolutely Fabulous, Red Dwarf, The Vicar of Dibley, Father Ted, Blackadder, One Foot in the Grave, Some Mothers Do Ave Em, Porridge, The Thin Blue Line, The Office, Coupling and Game On.

The BBC has generally been dominant in television comedy, but the commercial stations have also had some successes. ITV's most successful sitcoms were generally produced in the 1970s, including Rising Damp, On the Buses, George and Mildred, Man About The House and the now unfashionable Love Thy Neighbour. In recent years the commercial station Channel 4 has been more successful than ITV with situation comedies. Some of the better-known examples are Chelmsford 123, Chance in a Million, Drop the Dead Donkey, Spaced, Father Ted, Black Books, Peep Show, Green Wing,The Inbetweeners and The IT Crowd.

Other formats have also been popular, with sketch shows, stand-up comedy, impressionists and even puppet shows finding success. Although impressionists experienced a lull in popularity in the 1990s, the recent success of Dead Ringers (another BBC radio cross-over) has been notable.

The most notable comedy satires are the ground-breaking 1960s series That Was The Week That Was, ITV's controversial puppet show Spitting Image. British satire has also washed over into quiz shows - popular examples include the news quiz Have I Got News for You and music-based Never Mind The Buzzcocks.

One of the most influential sketch shows was Monty Python's Flying Circus, a comedy from the late 1960s and early seventies that introduced us to such luminaries as John Cleese, Eric Idle, Michael Palin, Graham Chapman, Terry Jones and Terry Gilliam. The Pythons went on to produce several feature films and had a profound influence on British comedy. They themselves had been influenced by The Goons and Spike Milligan's Q series. Python found surprising popularity in the United States in the 1970s, as did the less cerebral humour of Benny Hill and his ITV sketch series The Benny Hill Show.

Other notable sketch-based series include Morecambe and Wise, The Two Ronnies, French and Saunders, Absolutely, Little Britain, The Catherine Tate Show and The Fast Show.

You can't write about British TV comedy without mentioning Mr Bean. Mr. Bean is a British comedy television series of 14 half-hour episodes starring Rowan Atkinson as the title character. Different episodes were written by Rowan Atkinson, Robin Driscoll, Richard Curtis and one by Ben Elton.

Based on a character developed by Rowan Atkinson at university, the series followed the exploits of Mr. Bean, described by Atkinson as "a child in a grown man's body", in solving various problems presented by everyday tasks and often causing mayhem in the process.

During its five year run the series was hugely popular in the UK; in 1992 there were 18.74 million viewers for "The Trouble With Mr. Bean", and the series has received a number of international awards, including the Rose d'Or. The show has been sold in 200 territories worldwide, and has inspired two feature films and an animated cartoon spin-off.

Another ground breaking comedy series, Black Adder is a historical sitcom, it is set in a different historical period over four series. Blackadder and Baldrick are the main characters, and in each series they are accompanied by different characters. In 2000 the fourth series, Blackadder Goes Forth, ranked number 16 in the "100 Greatest British Television Programmes", a list created by the British Film Institute. Also in a 2004 TV poll to find "Britain's Best Sitcom", Blackadder was voted the second best British sitcom of all time, topped by Only Fools and Horses.

The 1990s and 2000s saw the rise of a new breed of British comedians who have made innovative contributions mainly in the form of sitcoms, but Vic Reeves Big Night Out influenced the style of a whole new generation of comics. Programmes such as Green Wing, Peep Show, Black Books, Spaced, Smack the Pony, Big Train, The Office, and Extras have used editing, surreal humour and cultural references to great effect. A loose clique of stars, including Simon Pegg, Dylan Moran, Jessica Stevenson, Mark Heap, Ricky Gervais, Tamsin Greig and Bill Bailey have revolved around these series, with the most obvious acknowledgement of this coming in the scene in the film Shaun of the Dead when the two groups of survivors troop past each other, with cameos galore.

[**MORE ABOUT BRITISH TV**](https://www.learnenglish.de/culture/britishtelevision.html)

BRITISH RADIO COMEDY

Radio comedy in Britain has been almost exclusively the preserve of the BBC, and a number of British radio comedies achieved considerable renown in the second half of the twentieth century.

In the 1940s and 50s variety dominated the schedules, and popular series included ITMA and Much Binding in the Marsh. In the mid 1950s, however, two notable series emerged which would help to shape the future of radio and television comedy in Britain. The Goons (Peter Sellers, Spike Milligan and Harry Secombe) starred in their own anarchic series The Goon Show which ran throughout the 1950s. At the same time, the BBC was also running Hancock's Half Hour starring Tony Hancock, the first of a new generation of comedies based around believable characters and situations. Hancock's Half Hour later transferred to TV and was phenomenally successful throughout the '50s, running concurrently on radio and television until 1960.

Another notable radio show was the double entendre-laden Round the Horne (1965-1968), a sequel to the earlier series Beyond Our Ken, which ran from 1959 to 1964.

Later radio shows made use of the panel game format, including the long-running Just a Minute (from 1967 to date) and I'm Sorry I Haven't a Clue (from 1972), which in turn influenced TV series like Have I Got News for You (from 1990) and They Think It's All Over (from 1995).

BBC Radio has continued to be a breeding ground for new talent and many programmes have transferred successfully to television in recent years, including Whose Line is it Anyway?, Goodness Gracious Me, Knowing Me, Knowing You and Little Britain.

[BBC Radio 7 is a good source of comedy radio.](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio7/)

References: L. Audrieth, Anthony "The Art of Using Humor in Public Speaking" 1998.