

5 Formal and informal words 2

A Monosyllabic informal words

Colloquial and informal versions of words are often short and monosyllabic (consist of one syllable).



The cops have arrived. [police]
The house has two loos. [toilets]
It cost me ten quid. [pounds]
I'll help you peel the spuds. [potatoes]
My bike's been stolen. [bicycle]
I always go by tube. [word used for the London Underground]
His dad spent ten years in the nick. [prison]
I'll get a cab from the station. [taxi]

B Clippings

Shortening a word tends to make it less formal, though these forms are acceptable in a wide range of contexts.

I'll meet you in the lab(oratory).
What's on telly tonight? [television]
Have you seen that mag(azine)?
We should put an ad(vertisement) / an advert(isement) in the (news)paper.
Can I use your mobile (phone)? I need to (tele)phone my brother.
There's milk in the fridge. [refrigerator]
Her sister's a vet(erinary surgeon).
Would you like to be a celeb(riety)? [famous person]

C Slang

Slang is extremely colloquial language. Slang helps to make speech vivid, colourful and interesting but it can easily be used inappropriately. Slang is mainly used in speech but it is also often found in the popular press and in literature. Slang changes very quickly, so some words go out of fashion, but you may meet them in novels and films. Some slang expressions may cause offence to some people. Here are some examples you may hear or read.

Expressions for money: bread dosh readies

Expressions for food and drinks: nosh grub cuppa [cup of tea]

People obsessed with computers or other equipment: nerd anorak

Jobs: quack (doctor) the old bill / the bill (the police) squaddie (soldier of a low rank)

Language help

If you are interested in slang, you can find more examples in films or in the tabloid press but it is probably safest to keep it in your passive rather than your active vocabulary.

Exercises

95.1 Make this conversation more *informal* by changing some of the words. Refer to the opposite page if necessary.

JIM: Annie, can you lend me ten ~~pounds~~? *quid*
ANNIE: What for?
JIM: I've got to go and see my parents, and my bicycle's not working, so I'll have to get a taxi.
ANNIE: Can't you telephone them and say you can't come?
JIM: Well, I could, but my mobile phone's not working, and I want to go because they always have lots of food, and the refrigerator at our flat is empty, as usual.
ANNIE: Can't you go by underground? Anyway, you're in luck, I've got some money, so here you are.

95.2 Replace the underlined words with more formal equivalents.

- 1 The train was full of squaddies going home for the weekend. *soldiers*.....
- 2 I've got a bad stomach ache – I think I'll make an appointment with the quack.
- 3 He spent two years in the nick for stealing cars.
- 4 The cops arrived shortly after the accident.
- 5 There'll be plenty of nosh at the party so we don't need to eat beforehand.
- 6 He's quite a celeb in the world of poetry.
- 7 I'm dying for a cuppa. I haven't had one since breakfast.
- 8 I'd love to get a motorbike but I just don't have the readies.

95.3 Replace the informal words in these sentences with more formal words.

- 1 (formal email) I should like to enquire about the cost of ads on your website. *advertisements*
- 2 (exam essay) The Internet and telly are probably the biggest influences on young people today.
- 3 (recipe in a cookery book) Next, slice the spuds and place them on top of the meat.
- 4 (exam essay) Papers face stiff competition these days from TV and internet news.
- 5 (formal university publicity) The Faculty offers courses in vet science. Lab facilities are available 24 hours a day.

95.4 Another way of making colloquial words is by using short forms ending in *-y* or *-ie*. Can you work out the meanings of the following underlined words?

- 1 Let's have brekkie before we leave tomorrow. *breakfast*.....
- 2 It's a nice day. Let's have a barbie and eat in the garden.
.....
- 3 D'you want a biccy with your coffee?
- 4 Jenny turned up at the party with her new hubby.
.....
- 5 Oh, let me see your holiday piccies! ... Is that you in the big straw hat?



He's a brickie.

95.5 *Over to you*

Which English words do you know that are very informal or are slang? Where did you read or hear them? If possible, compare with a friend or classmate.

A As ... as

As ... as similes are easy to understand. If you see the phrase **as dead as a doornail**, you don't need to know what a doornail is, simply that the whole phrase means 'totally dead'. But remember fixed similes are usually informal/colloquial and often humorous. Those marked * are negative and could offend. Use all these expressions with care and keep them generally as part of your receptive vocabulary.

Creating a picture in your mind can often help you remember the simile:



as blind as a bat*



as thin as a rake*



as strong as an ox



as quiet as a mouse

Some can be remembered as pairs of opposites.

as **heavy** as lead /led/ ≠ as **light** as a feather as drunk as a **lord*** ≠ as sober as a **judge**

as **black** as **night** ≠ as **white** as **snow** (particularly used in fairy tales)

Some can be remembered by sound patterns.

as **good** as **gold** (this is used about children's behaviour)

as **cool** as a **cucumber** as **busy** as a **bee**

Some other useful as ... as phrases.

The bed was **as hard as iron** and I couldn't sleep.

I'll give this plant some water. The soil's **dry as a bone**.

He's **as mad as a hatter***. He crossed the Atlantic in a bathtub.

She told the teacher, **as bold as brass**, that his lessons were boring.

You'll have to speak slowly and clearly – he's **as deaf as a post***.

Don't worry. Using the computer's **as easy as falling off a log**.

She knew the answer **as quick as a flash**.

The Princess's skin was **as white as snow**. [beautifully white]

When he saw it, his face went **as white as a sheet**. [pale with fear/horror]

The fish was bad and I was **as sick as a dog**. [vomiting]

She ran off with my money – I felt **as sick as a parrot**. [bad feeling of disappointment/frustration]



When I told him, his face went **as red as a beetroot**.

Language help

You can usually make a simile using **as ... as can be**, e.g. *I need a drink, I'm **as thirsty as can be**.*

B Like

My plan **worked like a dream** and the problem was soon solved. [worked very smoothly and well]

Be careful the boss doesn't see you – she **has eyes like a hawk**. [sees everything]

No wonder he's fat. He **eats like a horse** and **drinks like a fish***.

Did you sleep well? Yes, thanks, **like a log**.

Sorry, I forgot to ring him again. I've got a **mind/head like a sieve**! [be very forgetful]

The boss is **like a bear with a sore head** today. [in a very bad temper]

She goes around **like a bull in a china shop***. [behaving in a very clumsy, insensitive way]

Criticising the government in his presence is **like a red rag to a bull**. [certain to make him very angry]

Exercises

96.1 Complete the *as ... as* similes.

- Rosie is as mad as a hatter – you wouldn't believe the crazy things she does.
- You're not eating enough – you're as thin as a
- He never says a thing – he's as quiet as a
- You'll have to shout – she's as deaf as a
- I'm afraid I can't read this small print – I'm as blind as a without my glasses.

96.2 Different similes contain the same word. Fill the gap with the appropriate words.

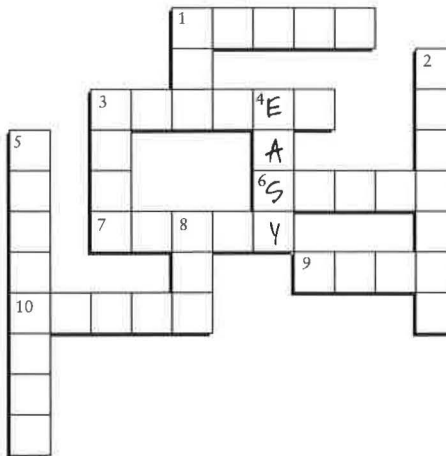
- I feel great now. I slept like a log.
- No! It's as easy as off a log.
- After eating that bad cheese I was as sick as a
- I knew she had deceived me. I felt as sick as a
- The old man's hair was as white as
- Her face suddenly went as white as a

96.3 Match the simile beginnings on the left with the endings on the right. There are two that are not on the opposite page. Try and guess them.

- | | | |
|-----------|-------------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 quick | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | a daisy |
| 2 red | <input type="checkbox"/> | b ox |
| as 3 flat | <input type="checkbox"/> | as a(n) c flash |
| 4 fresh | <input type="checkbox"/> | d beetroot |
| 5 strong | <input type="checkbox"/> | e pancake |

96.4 Simile word puzzle. Fill in the answers, as in the example.

- | Across | Down |
|----------|---------------------|
| 1 bold | 1 blind |
| 3 mad | 2 light |
| 6 white | 3 iron |
| 7 fresh | 4 falling off a log |
| 9 dry | 5 cool |
| 10 quiet | 8 cold |



96.5 What can you say about ...

- a person who sees everything and never misses a thing? He/She's got eyes like a hawk.
- a plan or course of action that works very well?
- someone who eats and drinks a great deal?
- someone with a very bad memory?
- someone who has been very active and busy all day?

7 Proverbs

A Advice and warnings

proverb	paraphrase
Don't count your chickens before they hatch.	Don't anticipate the future too much.
Don't put all your eggs in one basket.	Don't invest all your efforts or attention in just one thing.
Never judge a book by its cover.	Don't judge people/things by their outward appearance.
Never look a gift-horse in the mouth.	Never refuse good fortune when it is there in front of you.
Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves.	Take care of small sums of money and they will become large sums.
We'll cross that bridge when we come to it.	We'll deal with that problem when it actually happens.

B Key elements

Proverbs can be grouped by key elements, for example, animals and birds.

When the cat's away, the mice will play. [people will take advantage of someone else's absence to behave more freely]

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. [you can try to persuade someone, but you can't force them]

One swallow doesn't make a summer. [one positive sign does not mean that all will be well; a swallow is a bird that returns to Britain in late spring]

C Visualising

As with learning all vocabulary, visualising an element of it often helps.



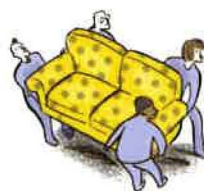
There's no smoke without fire. / Where there's smoke, there's fire. [rumours are usually based on some degree of truth]



People who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones. [don't criticise others' faults if you suffer from them yourself]



Too many cooks spoil the broth /brʊθ/. [too many people interfering is a bad way of doing things; broth = a kind of soup]



Many hands make light work. [a lot of people helping makes a job easier]

Language help

Speakers tend to use proverbs to comment on a situation, often at the end of a true story someone has told, or in response to some event.

Exercises

97.1 Find proverbs on the opposite page that you could use in these situations.

- 1 Someone says they have just been offered a free two-week holiday, but are hesitating whether to take up the offer. *Never look a gift-horse in the mouth.*
- 2 Someone thanks you and your friends for helping to load heavy boxes into a van.
- 3 Someone says they can't be bothered applying to different universities and will just apply to one.
- 4 Three different people have made different arrangements for the same meeting, and so everyone comes at different times and the result is total confusion.
- 5 Someone is worried about a journey you are making with them and keeps saying things like 'What'll happen if the plane is delayed?', 'What'll we do if our luggage gets lost?'

97.2 Answer these questions about the proverbs on the opposite page. Give an explanation for your answer.

- 1 Another common proverb is **All that glitters is not gold**. Which proverb has a similar meaning? *Never judge a book by its cover. They both warn against trusting how something looks.*
- 2 Which proverb has an opposite meaning to **Many hands make light work**?
- 3 Another common proverb is **Absence makes the heart grow fonder**. Which proverb has an opposite meaning?
- 4 Which two proverbs warn against anticipating the future?
- 5 Another common proverb is **A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush**. Which proverb has a similar meaning?

97.3 People often refer to proverbs by only saying half of them and leaving the rest for the listener to 'fill in'. Complete the proverbs in these dialogues.

- 1 A: Joel's always criticising people who are selfish, yet he's terribly selfish himself.
B: Yes, well, people who live in glass houses ... *shouldn't throw stones.*
A: Exactly.
- 2 A: The people in the office have been playing computer games all day since the boss fell ill.
B: Well, you know what they say: when the cat's away ...
A: Right, and they're currently doing that.
- 3 A: I didn't believe those rumours about Nick and Gill, but apparently they are seeing each other.
B: You shouldn't be so naïve, you know what they say, where there's smoke ...
A: Mm, I suppose you're right.
- 4 A: Amazing, he's made a fortune from just one little shop!
B: Well, I think it's a case of take care of the pennies ...
A: Sure, he's always been very careful with his money.

97.4 What proverbs do these pictures make you think of?



1 *One swallow doesn't make a summer.*



2



3



4

Over to you

Try translating some proverbs word for word from your language into English. Then, if you can, ask a native speaker if they can tell you an English proverb with the same or a similar meaning.

8 The language of signs and notices

Signs and notices in English often use words and expressions that are rarely seen in other contexts. Look at the signs and notices below with their 'translations' into more everyday English.

- 1 

Get off here for Buckingham Palace.
- 2 

People who walk on this private land will be taken to court.
- 3 

Please don't use mobile phones in the theatre/hall.
- 4 

You can be taken to court and made to pay £100 for dropping rubbish.
- 5 

You can buy lunch here now.
- 6 

Young people under 18 years old can only come in if they are with an adult.
- 7 

You are not allowed to feed the animals.
- 8 

There is no way out at the other end of this road for cars.
- 9 

You may not enter without permission or if you do not work here.
- 10 

Please put the things you are going to buy / have bought here.
- 11 

What is in this packet is officially considered bad for your health.
- 12 

Start going more slowly now.
- 13 

Buy a ticket and put it in a place where it can easily be seen.
- 14 

Cyclists should get off their bikes here.
- 15 

Only people with special cards giving them permission are allowed to fish here.

Exercises

98.1 Where would you expect to see each of the notices on the opposite page?

EXAMPLE 1 on a bus

98.2 Match the words on the left with their meanings on the right.

- | | | |
|------------------|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1 to prosecute | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | a a young person under the age of 18 |
| 2 a penalty | <input type="checkbox"/> | b to get off a bicycle or a horse |
| 3 a purchase | <input type="checkbox"/> | c to bring a legal case against |
| 4 a trespasser | <input type="checkbox"/> | d not to do something |
| 5 to refrain | <input type="checkbox"/> | e to forbid something |
| 6 to alight from | <input type="checkbox"/> | f a means of transport |
| 7 to prohibit | <input type="checkbox"/> | g a punishment |
| 8 an auditorium | <input type="checkbox"/> | h something which has been or is to be bought |
| 9 to dismount | <input type="checkbox"/> | i to get off a means of public transport |
| 10 a minor | <input type="checkbox"/> | j a large place where an audience sits |
| 11 a vehicle | <input type="checkbox"/> | k someone who goes on private land without permission |

98.3 Where might you see each of these notices? Explain what they mean.

1 SHOPLIFTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED in a shop: people who steal will be taken to court	5 Admission to ticket holders only	9 Flat to let
2 <i>English spoken here</i>	6 No vacancies	10 Dogs must be carried
3 NOTHING TO DECLARE	7 FISHING STRICTLY PROHIBITED	11 Priority seats for the elderly, disabled and pregnant
4 Clearance sale starts today	8 Cycles for hire or sale	

98.4 What notice would a café-owner or a shop-owner put up if they wanted to:

- 1 indicate that their café was now open for breakfast? Breakfast now being served
- 2 let people know that the staff can speak Spanish?
- 3 prohibit people under 18 from entering unless they are with an adult?
.....
- 4 ask customers not to enter the kitchen or the work area?
- 5 announce that they will take people who steal anything to court?
.....
- 6 ask people politely not to handle the food or goods?

98.5 **Over to you**

Look at the notices in your own language that you see around you every day. How would they be expressed in English? Try to find out, if they are not included in this unit. Also, look out for any signs in English in non-English-speaking countries. Why do you think they are in English?

A The grammar of headlines

Newspaper headlines try to catch the reader's eye by using as few words as possible.

- Grammar words like articles or auxiliary verbs are often left out, e.g. EARLY CUT FORECAST IN INTEREST RATES.
- A present simple form of the verb is used, e.g. MAYOR OPENS HOSPITAL.
- The infinitive is used to express the fact that something is going to happen in the future, e.g. PRESIDENT TO VISIT FLOOD AREAS.

B Short dramatic words

Newspapers usually prefer words that are shorter and sound more dramatic than ordinary English words. The words marked * can be used either as nouns or verbs.

newspaper word	meaning	newspaper word	meaning
aid*	help	key (<i>adj</i>)	essential, vital
axe*	cut, remove	link*	connection
back (<i>verb</i>)	support	move*	step towards a desired end
bar*	exclude, forbid	ordeal (<i>noun</i>)	painful experience
bid*	attempt	oust (<i>verb</i>)	push out, remove
blast*	explosion	plea (<i>noun</i>)	request
blaze*	fire	pledge*	promise
boost*	incentive, encourage	ploy (<i>noun</i>)	clever activity
boss*, head*	manager, director	poll*	election, public opinion survey
clash*	dispute	probe*	investigation
curb*	restraint, limit	quit (<i>verb</i>)	leave, resign
cut*	reduction	riddle (<i>noun</i>)	mystery
drama	tense situation	strife (<i>noun</i>)	conflict
drive*	campaign, effort	talks (<i>noun</i>)	discussions
gems (<i>noun</i>)	jewels	threat	danger
go-ahead	approval	vow*	promise
hit (<i>verb</i>)	affect badly	wed (<i>verb</i>)	marry

Newspaper headlines often use abbreviations, e.g. PM for Prime Minister, MP for Member of Parliament. (See Unit 77 for more abbreviations.)

C Jokes in headlines

Some newspapers also enjoy making jokes in their headlines. They do this by playing with words or punning, e.g. a wet open-air operatic concert was described as:

TORRENTIAL RAIN IN MOST ARIAS

An announcement that a woman working at the Mars chocolate company had got an interesting new job was:

WOMAN FROM MARS TO BE FIRST BRITON IN SPACE

Note: the word 'Briton' is almost exclusively found in newspapers.

Exercises

99.1 Match the headlines on the left with the appropriate topic on the right.

- | | | | | | | |
|---|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1 | PM BACKS PEACE PLAN | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | 4 | QUEEN'S GEM RIDDLE | <input type="checkbox"/> | a marriage of famous actress |
| 2 | MP SPY DRAMA | <input type="checkbox"/> | 5 | Star weds | <input type="checkbox"/> | b royal jewels in mystery |
| 3 | SPACE PROBE FAILS | <input type="checkbox"/> | 6 | Key witness death threat | <input type="checkbox"/> | c person who saw crime in danger |
| | | | | | | d proposal to end war |
| | | | | | | e satellite is not launched |
| | | | | | | f politician sells secrets to enemy |

99.2 Explain what the following headlines mean in ordinary English.

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| 1 | SHOP BLAZE 5 DEAD | 2 | MOVE TO CREATE MORE JOBS | 3 | GO-AHEAD FOR WATER CURBS |
| Five people died in a fire in a shop. | | | | | |
| 4 | Woman quits after job ordeal | 5 | POLL PROBES SPENDING HABITS | 6 | Bid to oust PM |
| 7 | Princess vows to back family | | | | |

99.3 The words marked * in the table opposite can be either nouns or verbs. Note that the meaning given is sometimes in the form of a noun. In the headlines below you have examples of words from the table used as verbs. Look at the underlined verbs and explain what they mean. You may need to use more than one word.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1 PM TO <u>CURB</u> SPENDING limit | 4 BOMB <u>BLASTS</u> CENTRAL LONDON |
| 2 BOOK <u>LINKS</u> MI5 WITH KGB | 5 PM <u>PLEDGES</u> BACKING FOR EUROPE |
| 3 CHANCELLOR <u>CUTS</u> INTEREST RATES | 6 PRESIDENT <u>HEADS</u> PEACE MOVES |

99.4 Explain the joke in these headlines.

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| 1 | SURGICAL CUTS
Number of surgeons at hospital to be reduced.
<i>The headline is a play on two meanings of cuts (reductions; by the surgeon's knife).</i> | 3 | DRAMATIC PAWS
A new version of the musical Cats opens. |
| 2 | HAMMER HIT HARD
Businessman Joe Hammer badly affected by the recent economic downturn. | 4 | HOT HEIR
Prince gives speech about climate change. |

99.5 **Over to you**

Would you be interested in the stories under the following headlines? Why (not)?

- | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---------------------------|---|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Mortgages cut as bank rates fall again | 2 | NEW TENNIS CLASH | 3 | PRICE CURBS BOOST EXPORTS |
| 4 | Teenage £4m fraud riddle | 5 | Royal family quits | 6 | WOMEN BARRED FROM JOBS |

A English in the USA

English in the USA differs from British English. Pronunciation is the most striking difference but there are also differences in vocabulary and spelling as well as some differences in grammar. Americans say *the fall*, while British English speakers say *autumn*; American speakers say *on the weekend*; British English prefers *at the weekend*. Yet, generally, British and American speakers have little difficulty in understanding each other.

B American English spelling

American English spelling is usually simpler. For example, British English words ending in *-our* and *-re* end in *-or* and *-er* in American English, e.g. *colour/color*, *centre/center*. Words ending in *-ise* in British English end in *-ize* in US English (*realise/realize*). There are differences in individual words too, e.g. British *jewellery* is *jewelry* in American English.

C US words and their British equivalents

Travel and on the street		In the home	
American English	British English	American English	British English
gas(oline)	petrol	garbage, trash	rubbish
truck	lorry	elevator	lift
baggage	luggage*	eraser	rubber
sidewalk	pavement	apartment	flat
crosswalk	zebra crossing	closet	wardrobe
line	queue	yard	garden
vacation	holiday	drapes	curtains
parking lot	car park	flashlight	torch
trunk (of car)	boot	French fries	chips
hood (of car)	bonnet	Scotch tape	Sellotape
freeway/interstate	motorway	cookie	biscuit
one-way trip	single	candy	sweets
round trip	return	bathroom, rest room**	toilet, WC
railway car	railway carriage	diaper	nappy
subway	underground	pantyhose	tights

* *baggage* is also common in British English, especially in the context of air travel

** *wash room* is commonly used in Canada

Language help

American and British pronunciations are often different. You can hear the British and American pronunciation of words on the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* at Cambridge Dictionaries Online.

D Different meanings

Here are some words and phrases which could cause confusion when used by Brits and Americans talking together because they mean something different in each 'language'.







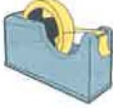

Cafe: check (AmE), bill (BrE)
 vest (BrE), undershirt (AmE), underpants (AmE/BrE), pants (BrE)
 pants (AmE), trousers (BrE)
 vest (AmE), waistcoat (BrE)
 the second floor (BrE), the second floor (AmE), the first floor (BrE), the ground floor (BrE), the ground floor/the first floor (AmE)
 bill (AmE), (bank)note (BrE)
 wash the dishes (AmE/BrE), wash up (BrE)
 wash up (AmE), wash your hands (BrE)

Exercises

100.1 If you saw words spelt in the following way, would you expect the writer in each case to be British or American? Why?

- 1 favor American (ends in -or) 3 hospitalized 5 colour
- 2 centre 4 a movie theater 6 jewelry

100.2 What are (a) the American and (b) the British words for the following things?

			
1 <u>closet, wardrobe</u>	2	3	4
			
5	6	7	8

100.3 Translate the following into British English.

- | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| 1 We went there in the fall. We went there in the autumn. | 6 Our bags are in the trunk. |
| 2 Pass me the cookies. | 7 One-way or round trip? |
| 3 It's in the closet. | 8 Let's take the subway. |
| 4 Open the drapes. | 9 We've been working in the yard. |
| 5 We've run out of gas. | 10 I hate waiting in line. |

100.4 Can you avoid some of the most common confusions arising between British and American speakers? Try the following quiz.

- Where would you take (a) an American visitor or (b) a British visitor who said they wanted to wash up – the kitchen or the bathroom? (a) bathroom..... (b) kitchen.....
- You have just come into an unknown office block. If (a) an American or (b) a Brit says that the office you need is on the second floor, how many flights of stairs do you need to climb? (a) (b)
- If (a) an American or (b) a Brit asks for a bill, is he or she more likely to be in a bank or a café? (a) (b)
- Would a man wear a vest under or over his shirt (a) if he is British or (b) if he is from the USA? (a) (b)

100.5 Complete the sentences in two ways, an American way and a British way.

- We can park the car in the parking lot / car park..... behind the station.
- I've written the wrong number here. Can I borrow your ?
I'll correct it.
- All that food is no good any more – we'd better throw it in the
- We can take the up to the fifth floor.
- Don't cross here – it's dangerous. There's a further down the street.
- The car wouldn't start so we opened the to see if we could find what was wrong.

100.6 Over to you

If you were going on holiday/vacation to the US, which of the words listed opposite do you think it would be most important for you to know?