

Common Dialect Feature Reference Sheet

This cheat sheet contains information concerning Southern American English (SAE) and African American English (AAE), as these are two of the most stigmatized dialects at Coastal Carolina University according to our first year writing survey. Years of research on dialects of English have identified these as some of the most common and recognizable linguistic features of SAE and AAE. You may notice some of the sound examples occurring in the spelling within student writing. Likewise, the grammar examples often appear in the sentence structure of student papers. These are regular, predictable, and rule governed linguistic features of these dialects and should be addressed with care and respect. Please print this to keep and use during student tutoring sessions.

Southern English

- Sounds
 - The r sound
 - R sound maybe absent or partly absent
 - -ing and -in alternation
 - -ing becomes unstressed and ends up sounding like -in.
 - Ex. running translates to runnin’.
 - The ai sound (sounds like “I”)
 - The merging of *ah* or *ai* sounds.
 - Ex. time sounds like tom, tire sounds like tar.
 - The oy sound (as in “boy”)
 - The *oy* sound may be pronounced as *oh* when it occurs before an *l*.
 - Ex. oil may be pronounced as oll or all.
 - The “pin”-“pen” merger
 - Lax *i* and *e* vowel sounds similar when in front of nasal sounds *n*, *m*, and *ng*.
 - Ex. pen may be pronounced as pin, Jenny may be pronounced as Ginny.
- Grammar
 - Ain’t
 - *Ain’t* is often used as a helping or linking verb. Ain’t is used in the place of am not, isn’t and aren’t.
 - Ex. “I ain’t doing that.”
 - Multiple negative
 - Even those these sentences are deemed as unfit for academia, they are still very understandable.
 - Ex. “He don’t know nothing” or “I ain’t seen him neither.”
 - Absence of plural markers
 - For nouns of weight or measurement, the plural marker becomes optional.
 - Ex. four pound, twenty mile, three foot.
 - Fixin’ to
 - Means *about to*, *getting ready to*, or *planning to*.
 - Ex. It looks like it’s fixin’ to rain.”
 - A-prefixing
 - An *a-prefix* is attached to words—it is pronounced “uh.”
 - Ex. I went a-runnin’ to the store.

African American English

- Sounds

- Ask
 - Ask is usually pronounced as *axe*.
 - Ex. “I *axed* ha a question.”
- The *th* sound
 - Usually pronounced as a *d* sound.
 - Ex. *that*=*dat*, *these*=*dese*.
- Consonant blends
 - Reduction of *sk*, *nd*, *ts*, *kt*, *sts* and *sks* sounds.
 - Ex. *lists*=*liss*, *best*=*bess*.
- Grammar
 - Habitual or invariant forms of *be*
 - Often known as *habitual be*.
 - Uses invariant *be* to convey habitually in a way that does not require the addition of certain words.
 - Ex. “The students *be* missing class when the bus comes late” versus “The students *typically* miss class when the bus comes late.”
 - The call –self construction
 - Involves the verb to call plus a personal reflexive pronoun.
 - Describes a situation in the opinion of the speaker.
 - Ex. “He calls himself cooking.”
 - Stressed been
 - Pronounced *bin*.
 - Paired with a main verb in the simple past tense and indicates that an event has happened in the remote past, a long time prior to the present time.
 - Ex. “I *been* finished my homework.”
 - Absence of –s inflections
 - Absent in third-person singular verb forms.
 - Ex. “He *talk* too much” versus “He *talks* too much.”
 - Absent in possessive constructions.
 - Ex. “Look at John *hat*” versus “Look at John’s *hat*.”
 - Absent in plural constructions.
 - Ex. “Give me 50 *cent*” versus “Give me 50 *cents*.”
 - Existential *it*
 - *It* is used to denote the existence of something in a way that it is generally equivalent to the use of *there is*, *there’s*, or *there are*.
 - Ex. “*It’s* a pencil in the drawer” versus “*There’s* a pencil in the drawer.”

Resources: these are resources that will give you more information on dialect features.

Charity Hudley, Anne H. and Christine Mallinson. *Understanding English Language Variation in U.S. Schools*. New York: Teachers College Press. 2011. Print.

Green, Lisa J. *African American English: A Linguistic Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2002. Print.

Nagle, Stephen J. and Sara L. Sanders. *English in the Southern United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2003. Print.

Wolfram, Walt. *American English*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing. 2006. Print.