

# British Culture in One Word: Quite! [B2]

È la parola polisemica perfetta per la proverbiale ambiguità britannica; un termine che permette di essere educati senza compromettersi o offendere il proprio interlocutore.



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Traditionally, English people **take pride** in **politeness** and good manners. One consequence of this is that they can be very indirect and don't **say what they mean**. The result can be that non-mother-tongue English speakers can easily misinterpret them. Perhaps of all the many expressions Brits use to not quite **say what they mean**, 'quite' is one of the most confusing.

## WHAT THE DICTIONARY SAYS

What does the word 'quite' mean exactly? There's no simple answer to that. It depends on the context, the other words surrounding it, and on what the speaker wants it to mean. In fact, understanding the word 'quite' is **rather** like trying to understand English culture itself, which can be difficult. If you check in an English dictionary you will find 'quite' has two, quite different,

meanings: 1. [to an absolute extent](#); 100 per cent. 2. to a certain extent; not 100 per cent.

## **ABSOLUTELY**

In the first instance, some synonyms are: 'completely', 'entirely', 'absolutely', 'totally'. For example: "You are quite right! I quite agree!" This means "You are absolutely right, I agree entirely!" This meaning of 'quite' is also associated with a more formal, traditional type of English, particularly when it is used as a single word answer to say 'absolutely'. For example, if you told me that this article was "very confusing" [so far](#), my answer would be: "Quite." In other words, "Absolutely."

## **NOT ABSOLUTELY**

The second meaning of 'quite', in the affirmative form, is: 'not absolutely, but to a certain extent'. This is the meaning that most second-language learners tend to know. Some English synonyms are: '[fairly](#)', '[rather](#)', 'relatively', 'a bit'. For example: "The exam was quite difficult." This means that the exam was a bit difficult, not so easy. The average grammar book will tell you that if we use 'quite' with an absolute adjective, 'quite fantastic', for example, it means 'absolutely fantastic'. This is quite logical, because something is fantastic or it is not. 'Fairly fantastic' or 'a bit fantastic' [makes no sense](#). If on the other hand, we use it with a gradable adjective, 'quite difficult', for example, it tends to mean '[fairly](#) difficult'.

## **BUT QUITE**

However, 'quite' is... well, quite flexible, and can be [stretched](#) between the above two meanings. That is, the speaker could sometimes use 'quite' to mean something approaching 'very', as in the following example: "His personality really is quite complicated." The [underlying](#) meaning here is that he is a 'very' complicated person, only that the speaker doesn't want to say so: "He's very complicated" seems offensive. To fully interpret all this confusion, and in particular to understand this '[stretched](#)' meaning, we need

to take into account traditional English culture, the context of the situation, the body language, the [word stress](#), the speaker's [background](#) and so on. Confused? Well, if it is any consolation, sometimes Brits are too. If you think that this is all quite mad, I quite agree with you.

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# Glossary

- **fairly** = abbastanza
- **underlying** = soggiacente
- **background** = origini
- **take pride** = essere fiero
- **politeness** = buona educazione
- **say what they mean** = dire ciò che si pensa
- **rather** = ma
- **so far** = fino a qui
- **to an absolute extent** = fino a un certo punto
- **makes no sense** = non avere senso
- **stretched** = espandere
- **word stress** = accento, intonazione