

got, gotten

The past participle of *get* is either *got* or *gotten*. In British English *got* has come to predominate, while in North America *gotten* predominates in some constructions and *got* in others. Marckwardt 1958 points out that in North American English *have gotten* means that something has been obtained, while *have got* denotes simple possession:

- ▶ ... the IMF has already gotten pledges for more than \$55 billion —E. J. Dionne, Jr., *Commonweal*, 16 Jan. 1998
- ▶ *Wise Blood* finally came out in England and has gotten good reviews —Flannery O'Connor, letter, 21 Oct. 1955
- ▶ I haven't got a son —Mordecai Richler, *The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz*, 1959
- ▶ ... as long as I have got a chance to win —Dwight D. Eisenhower, quoted in *U.S. News & World Report*, 16 July 1954

This practice is not absolutely uniform, however:

- ▶ If you haven't got your license yet —James Thurber, letter, 1937

Gotten has been under attack in American handbooks as somehow improper. Lindley Murray 1795 apparently started the controversy by calling *gotten* nearly obsolete. It was passing out of use in British English at that time, though it was still being used in the 1820s:

- ▶ As the Greeks have gotten their loan, they may as well repay mine —Lord Byron, letter, 9 Apr. 1824

Murray's books were widely used in American schools, and his opinion was adopted by American usage books like Bache 1869 and Ayres 1881; MacCracken & Sandison 1917 called *gotten* "less acceptable in general" and Jensen 1935 repeated Murray's judgment that it was obsolete. One version of this notion, even though it is wrong, persists as recently as Einstein 1985, who insists on *got* only. The schoolmastering has perhaps kept *got* more current than it might have been had natural selection been allowed free play. Thus we find both *got* and *gotten* in use as past participle. Freeman 1983 says that *gotten* is preferred to *got* when there is a notion of progression involved. This is frequently true:

- ▶ Squirrels had gotten into the mattress —John Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, 1957
- ▶ ... it was recommended that the President not inform Congress until we had gotten the hostages back —Edwin Meese 3d, quoted in *The Tower Commission Report*, 1987
- ▶ Have investors gotten any smarter ...? —Jane Bryant Quinn, *Newsweek*, 31 Jan. 2000

But it is also used where there is no idea of progression:

- ▶ I had gotten up to go to the men's room —William Styron, *This Quiet Dust and Other Writings*, 1982
- ▶ ... explains why your having gotten flu two years ago didn't protect you against the different strain that arrived this year —Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, 1997

And *got* is used both when the notion of progression is present and when it is not:

- ▶ ... in composing my list of guests I haven't got beyond him and Anne Parrish —Alexander Woollcott, letter, 19 Nov. 1936
- ▶ Since he has got grown, it's the races, of course, he likes —Peter Taylor, *The Old Forest and Other Stories*, 1985
- ▶ They had then got to the approaches of French Canada —John Cheever, *The Wapshot Chronicle*, 1957
- ▶ ... until a small group of friends could be got to sit still for a few minutes —Russell Lynes, *Harper's*, April

1970

- ... had got word that Tom Bird wanted to meet with him again —Calvin Trillin, *New Yorker*, 6 Jan. 1986

English speakers in North America seem to use both *got* and *gotten* in a way that is almost freely variable. The observation of Marckwardt is largely true; that of Freeman less so. The learner of English might find it useful to follow their distinctions, but the native speaker will pick whichever form seems more natural at the time.

For other questions involving this verb, see [GET](#); [HAVE GOT](#).