

100 Essential English Phrases

English learning resource · EN

Key words & expressions · English

18 learning entries

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

1 to fill in the blanks

DEF

to supply the missing information or words in a sentence, situation, or understanding; to complete what is incomplete
Fill in the blanks is both a literal exercise (completing gap-fill activities) and a powerful metaphor — your brain naturally fills in blanks when it hears familiar patterns, which is how listening comprehension works.

When you already know a phrase, your brain fills in the blanks even before you consciously process it.

The goal of learning essential phrases is to give your brain more patterns to fill in the blanks with.

2 off the top of your head

DEF

from immediate memory, without stopping to look things up or think at length; spontaneously

Off the top of your head is the target state in conversation — being able to answer, respond, and express without pausing to search. It is the measure of how well something is truly integrated into your English.

If you can say a phrase off the top of your head, it is truly yours — not just studied, but owned.

He couldn't name three phrasal verbs off the top of his head, which told him exactly what to work on next.

3 to think on your feet

DEF

to respond quickly and effectively to situations or questions without preparation

Think on your feet is the phrase for real-time processing in language. It captures the skill most learners want and fear: not the prepared speech, but the spontaneous conversation. Developing this skill requires deliberately placing yourself in situations where you cannot prepare.

The best way to learn to think on your feet in English is to have unrehearsed conversations.

She had rehearsed for her presentation but was caught off guard by the questions — she needed to think on her feet.

4 to grope for words

DEF

to struggle to find the right word in the moment, searching mentally without immediately finding it

Grope for words is the honest phrase for the gap that learners feel — you have the meaning, you know what you want to say, but the English word will not come. This is normal, especially in a second language. Naming it reduces panic and helps you develop bridging strategies.

Everyone gropes for words sometimes — the skill is learning how to bridge the gap while you search.

She sometimes groped for words in complex discussions, but she had learned to paraphrase rather than go silent.



5

to paraphrase

DEF

to express the same meaning using different words — especially when you do not know or cannot recall the exact term

Paraphrase is one of the most powerful fluency tools. Instead of stopping when you cannot find a word, you describe it. 'The thing you use to open a wine bottle' is a perfectly acceptable paraphrase for 'corkscrew'. Native speakers paraphrase constantly — it is not a sign of weakness.

When you cannot remember a word, paraphrase it — describe the thing until the word comes or the listener helps.

She paraphrased brilliantly: 'It is the feeling when you are embarrassed for someone else' for the word she could not recall.

6

fluency

DEF

the ability to speak or write a language smoothly and confidently, with natural speed and without excessive pausing

Fluency is often misunderstood as perfection — it is not. A fluent speaker makes errors. Fluency means flow: the ability to keep going, to communicate without constant breakdown, to express yourself in real time. Fluency and accuracy are different skills, and fluency often improves when you stop focusing on accuracy.

Fluency is not speaking perfectly — it is speaking smoothly enough that the conversation keeps moving.

She achieved fluency not by eliminating errors, but by developing the confidence to speak past them.

7

filler words

DEF

sounds or short expressions used to fill pauses while thinking, such as 'um', 'er', 'well', 'you know', 'kind of', or 'like'

Filler words are not errors — they are how all speakers, including native speakers, manage thinking time. The problem is overuse, which makes speech sound hesitant. Learning which fillers sound natural in English, and which are overused, is a real fluency skill.

Replace silence with filler words when you need thinking time — 'well', 'let me think', or 'that is a good question'.

She reduced her use of filler words not by eliminating them but by choosing more natural English ones.

8

to keep the conversation going

DEF

to maintain a dialogue beyond a simple exchange — to ask follow-up questions, add information, or respond in a way that invites a reply

Keep the conversation going is a social fluency skill, not just a linguistic one. Many learners can answer questions but cannot keep the conversation alive. The techniques — asking follow-ups, echoing words, adding personal connections — can be learned and practised deliberately.

Keeping a conversation going in English is a skill — ask follow-up questions and offer your own perspective.

She used to give short answers and let conversations die, but she practised keeping them going for at least five minutes.

9

to hesitate

DEF

to pause before speaking or acting, often because of uncertainty, self-doubt, or the need to think

Hesitate is the verb for the pause before speaking. In a second language, hesitation is almost universal — it is not a sign of low ability but of careful thinking. The goal is not to stop hesitating entirely but to hesitate less often and recover from it more smoothly.

It is normal to hesitate in a second language — the goal is to hesitate less as confidence grows.

She used to hesitate for so long before answering that conversations became awkward, but she learned to speak immediately.



10

a speaking partner

DEF

a person you practise speaking with regularly — ideally a native or advanced speaker who can give feedback

Speaking partner is the informal term for a conversation practice companion. For many learners, having a regular speaking partner is the difference between stagnation and breakthrough. The speaking partner creates accountability, regular speaking time, and a safe space for errors.

Find a speaking partner for English — even one thirty-minute session a week will accelerate your progress.

Her speaking partner gave her honest feedback on her errors, which no textbook had ever done.

11

Could you help me?

DEF

A polite and direct request for assistance.

Could is normally softer than can in requests to strangers.

Could you help me find the nearest bus stop?

Excuse me, could you help me with this form?

12

Excuse me

DEF

A polite phrase used to attract attention, interrupt or move past someone.

It is not normally an apology for a serious mistake.

Excuse me, is this seat free?

Excuse me, could I get past?

13

How much is it?

DEF

A standard question used to ask the price of one item or service.

Use how much for uncountable amounts and prices.

How much is it with the discount?

I like this jacket—how much is it?

14

Could you please repeat that?

DEF

A polite request for someone to say the same information again.

Please and could make the request suitable for strangers and formal situations.

Could you please repeat that more slowly?

I missed the number—could you please repeat it?

15

I didn't catch that

DEF

A natural way to say that you did not hear or understand something.

Catch means hear and process here, not physically capture.

I did not catch that—what time did you say?

Sorry, I did not catch your surname.



16

What do you mean?

DEF

A question asking someone to clarify their meaning.

Tone matters: a neutral or curious tone avoids sounding confrontational.

What do you mean by flexible hours?

I understand the words, but what do you mean exactly?

17

Where is the nearest...?

DEF

A practical question pattern for asking the location of the closest place.

Complete it with a singular place: the nearest station, pharmacy or bus stop.

Where is the nearest bus stop?

Could you tell me where the nearest pharmacy is?

18

I'm not sure

DEF

A natural phrase for expressing uncertainty or a cautious disagreement.

Softer than saying I do not know or you are wrong.

I am not sure which platform is leaving first.

I am not sure that this is the best option.

