

Lesson 45 – Differences between Speaking and Writing in English

A lot of English learners can read and write well - but have a lot of difficulty with listening and especially speaking. Of course, some of this difficulty comes from the fact that when listening and speaking, you have less time to think about and analyze what the other person is saying or what you will say.

However, there are also some real differences between written and spoken English in terms of vocabulary and grammar. In this lesson, you'll learn three major ways that spoken English is different from written English. This will help you speak better, understand better, and hopefully relax more!

1) In spoken English, we almost ALWAYS use contractions

If you're speaking, and it's possible to use a contraction (short form) - use it! Native English speakers almost never use the "long form" in casual everyday conversations.

Don't say: I do not like it.

Say: I don't like it.

Don't say: He is really smart.

Say: He's really smart.

Don't say: I will call you.

Say: I'll call you.

Don't say: What time is the party?

Say: What time's the party?

Don't say: You would love this book.

Say: You'd love this book.

Don't say: We have already seen that movie.

Say: We've already seen that movie.

Don't say: They are not happy.

Say: They're not happy (or: They aren't happy.)

Don't say: I could not access the website.

Say: I couldn't access the website.

When speaking, not only do we use these typical contractions – which you probably studied in your first year of English – but we also “shorten” words like **is, are, has, have, had, did, will, and would** whenever possible. Here are some contractions that you might not have studied, but which you'll hear in spoken English.

Instead of: How did you do that?

Say: How'd you do that?

Instead of: They might have gone out.

Say: They might've gone out.

Instead of: You should have called me.

Say: You should've called me

Instead of: That would be great!

Say: That'd be great!

Instead of: The road was closed because there had been an accident.

Say: The road was closed because there'd been an accident.

Instead of: What are you thinking about?

Say: What're you thinking about?

Instead of: Where did she go?

Say: Where'd she go?

Instead of: Why is he angry?

Say: Why's he angry?

Instead of: The food is delicious!

Say: The food's delicious!

Instead of: My husband has been traveling a lot lately.

Say: My husband's been traveling a lot lately.

You can download the “[English Contraction List](http://www.espressoenglish.net)” to review all the commonly used contractions in spoken English.

2) Spoken English uses a LOT of phrasal verbs

Phrasal verbs, like "get up," "put on," or "take out," are combinations of a verb and preposition with a specific meaning. When speaking English, we use phrasal verbs *very* frequently!

Instead of: "The price increased."

Say: "The price went up."

Instead of: "I won't tolerate this!"

Say: "I won't put up with this!"

Instead of: "He contracted pneumonia."

Say: "He came down with pneumonia."

Instead of: "Can you discover the hotel's phone number?"

Say: "Can you find out the hotel's phone number?"

Instead of: "He removed his jacket."

Say: "He took off his jacket."

Instead of: "She understood quickly."

Say: "She caught on quickly."

These are just a few examples. There are hundreds and hundreds of phrasal verbs in English - and if you'd like to learn more of them, check out the [Phrasal Verbs in Conversation course](#)!

3) The grammar of spoken English is "more relaxed"

A lot of students are especially nervous about speaking English because they're afraid they'll make a mistake - but the truth is that spoken English grammar is MUCH more relaxed than written English grammar. This means that you do not need to be perfect... because not even native speakers talk with "perfect" grammar!

Here are a few of the specific things that are OK in spoken English:

Starting a sentence with "but" or "and"; ending a sentence with a preposition

For example:

"Who did you talk **to**?"

(not "To whom did you talk?")

"I don't know what that machine's used **for**."

(not "I don't know what purpose that machine serves" or something like that!)

Ending a sentence with a preposition is especially common when there's a phrasal verb:

- "Time to get **up**!"
- "I don't need that receipt; you can throw it **out**."
- "I have a ton of stuff to deal **with**."

Sentence structure is not so rigid. It's OK to use fragments and run-ons

In written English, every sentence must have a subject and a verb; a sentence without this is called a "sentence fragment." These are unacceptable in writing, but they are perfectly OK when speaking:

"Nice job on your presentation!"

*(instead of "You **did** a nice job on your presentation!")*

"I'm gonna buy a new dress. And maybe a new pair of shoes, too."

*(instead of "And maybe **I'll buy** a new pair of shoes, too.")*

In written English, a run-on sentence is one that is too long, containing various phrases that are not properly separated by punctuation. On the other hand, in spoken English, we don't have punctuation! This means it's common for sentences to be long, with various interruptions:

"The first time I took an art class was in college, and I decided to try it because I felt like I was more of a... I dunno, I'd always been more interested in science, like, the more "practical" and analytical stuff, and I never had any interest in art - so I wanted to develop my creative side, because I think it's important to be a well-rounded person, you know what I mean?"

That would be completely unacceptable in written English, but spoken English is much more flexible!

In casual spoken English (among friends) questions are often shortened

This is an informal way of speaking, but it's very common:

"You hungry?" (or, "Hungry?")

instead of "Are you hungry?"

"Sleep well?"

instead of "Did you sleep well?"

"Finished your work?"

instead of "Have you finished your work?"

"Been waiting long?"

instead of "Have you been waiting long?"

"OK if I make a quick phone call?"

instead of "Is it OK if I make a quick phone call?"

There are a number of other grammatical details that are different – but what's important is **not to let the fear of grammar mistakes stop you from speaking English!**

It's completely normal to have "imperfect" sentences and grammar that is not "technically" correct. So... relax and go speak English!

English Speaking Practice

Although it's certainly useful and important to *study* spoken English, it's also essential to *practice* it! I know that it can be uncomfortable or difficult at times, but practicing speaking is the only way to improve your fluency and increase your confidence.

So how can you get more opportunities to practice your English speaking?

There are two things I recommend:

- 1) **Practice speaking ALONE.** Go to one of these websites, which have hundreds of discussion questions organized by topic:

<http://www.esldiscussions.com>

<http://www.eslconversationquestions.com/english-conversation-questions/topics>

<http://iteslj.org/questions>

Imagine that someone is asking you the question, and respond by speaking out loud. This helps you train the ability to **put your ideas into spoken English** - without the pressure of a real conversation, so it's OK if you make mistakes because no one will hear you! Also, if you don't know a word, you can take a moment to look it up in the dictionary. It's essential to get

comfortable with expressing yourself in English, and speaking spontaneously (but alone) is a good way to practice this.

- 2) **Practice speaking WITH ANOTHER PERSON.** On a “[conversation exchange](#)” website you can find a partner who speaks English, but wants to learn your native language. Then, you can schedule a conversation session and speak half in English, half in your native language so that both of you can practice (and help each other correct any errors). If you don’t know what to talk about, you can use some of the discussion questions from the websites listed in step 1. This is a great way to practice speaking **in a low-pressure situation** (not in a job interview, presentation, meeting, or other “high-pressure” event!)

This brings us to the end of the Everyday English Speaking Course! I’ve enjoyed preparing these lessons; I hope you’ve enjoyed taking them ☺

If you have a few minutes to send me your feedback on this course, please fill out this short survey:

<https://www.espressoenglish.net/everyday-english-speaking-course-feedback/>

As always, I’m happy to answer any questions you have about any of the lessons – or about the English language in general.

You can always reach me at shayna@espressoenglish.net

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