

# Lesson 42 – Using Vague Language

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*Martha is waiting for her teenage daughter, Rachel, to get home from a rock concert. Rachel finally walks in the door at 12:30 AM. Listen to their conversation and pay special attention to the phrases in blue.*

**Martha:** Hi honey! How was the show?

**Rachel:** Pretty good. **A bunch of** my friends from school went. It was **kinda** crowded though.

**Martha:** **About** how many people were there?

**Rachel:** I don't know... **I'd say** 500 **or so**.

**Martha:** That's a good turnout. What time did it end?

**Rachel:** 9:30-**ish**

**Martha:** That early?! But it's half past midnight - where have you been all this time?

**Rachel:** Well, by the time we got out of the traffic jam in the parking lot, it was **around** 10.

**Martha:** OK, and then what? Did you go to a friend's house **or something like that**?

**Rachel:** We went to the diner to grab a bite to eat, but then Laura's car got a flat tire and no one had that **thingamajig** you use to lift up the car to change the tire.

**Martha:** Oh, a... **whatchamacallit** - a tire jack.

**Rachel:** Yeah, that **thingy**. So we had to call Kim's cousin who's good with cars **and that kind of thing**. Then we all went to Laura's house.

**Martha:** What'd you do there?

**Rachel:** Just hung out, you know, talking about school and boys **and stuff**.

**Martha:** Were there any boys AT Laura's house?!?

**Rachel:** Yes - **tons of** them!

**Martha:** WHAT?!

**Rachel:** Chill out, Mom, I'm kidding. It was just me, Laura, Kim, and **a couple of** girls from Kim's class.

**Martha:** Oh. That's good. What are your plans for tomorrow?

**Rachel:** Um, I have **loads of** homework, but it's supposed to be nice out, so I don't want to stay inside the whole day. If I finish early I'll probably go for a jog in the park **or whatever**.

**Martha:** All right. Well, I'll be going out **sometime around** 11 tomorrow, so you're on your own for lunch. If you want, there's **a bit of** casserole left over from dinner.

**Rachel:** OK. G'night, Mom.

## Conversation Vocabulary & Phrases

In spoken English, it's very common to use vague (not precise or exact) expressions.

### Quantities & Qualities

When estimating time, distance, number, or some other measurement, we often make a guess if we don't know or can't remember the exact number.

You can use **around** or **about** to show it's a guess. The more formal way is **approximately**:

- "It costs **about \$1000**."
- "It costs **approximately \$1000**."
- ~~It costs more or less \$1000.~~  
*Don't say this – it doesn't sound natural*
- "We drove **around 10** miles."
- "She's **about 40** years old."

Another way to estimate quantity is to use **-odd** and **or so** after the number:

- "There were **20-odd** people in the meeting."  
*-odd is usually used directly after a number.*
- "He weighs **200 pounds or so**."

To express a small quantity, you can say **a couple of** (for countable nouns, 2-4 objects) or **a bit of** (for uncountable nouns):

- “I bought **a couple of T-shirts** at the store.” (T-shirts = countable)
- “You need to add **a bit of salt** to this soup.” (salt = uncountable)

For food, you can use **a dash of** (for spices and liquids) or **a dollop of** (for soft substances):

- “There's **a dash of** paprika in this recipe.”
- “To make this cocktail, take fruit juice and add **a dash of** tequila.”
- “I like to put **a dollop of** whipped cream on my hot chocolate.”

On the opposite end of the spectrum, here are some vague expressions for large quantities:

- **loads of / tons of** (countable and uncountable nouns)
  - I ate **tons of cookies** at the party.
  - I drank **tons of juice** at the party.
- **a bunch of / quite a few** (countable nouns only)
  - There are **a bunch of bookstores** on that street.
  - I bought **quite a few books** yesterday.

Finally, to describe qualities (and sometimes time) we can add the suffix -ish:

- I leave the house at **six-ish**, maybe 6:30 if I'm running late.
- She has **reddish** brown hair.  
(*brown with a little bit of red*)

Two VERY common ways to say "a little" + quality are **sort of** and **kind of**, which most people pronounce as **sorta** and **kinda** in informal spoken English:

- I'm **sorta** tired.
- These shoes are **kinda** ugly.

Note: The formal equivalents of these words are **somewhat** or **rather**.

## Placeholders

Vague words are also used as placeholders - taking the place of the more specific word.

We can use the vague word **thing** for objects – both physical and non-physical:

- **General situation:**
  - How are **things** at work?
  - **Things** have been going really well for me lately!
- **Objects:**
  - What are those **things** on the table?
  - Oh - those are computer parts; I was fixing my laptop. I'll put them away.
- **Facts, Ideas, Actions:**
  - Here's the **thing** (=fact): not everybody on the team is doing their part.
  - I'm not sure what we're going to do on our vacation, but I have a few **things** (=actions/ideas) in mind.
  - We considered a lot of **things** (=ideas/factors) before deciding to buy a house.

We can also use the vague word **stuff** for plural and uncountable nouns. Differently from the word **thing/things**, the word **stuff** is uncountable (don't say "**stuffs**").

- You like tomato juice? I think that **stuff** (=liquid, substance) is disgusting!
- When we moved to another city, I had to rent a truck to take all our **stuff** (=possessions)
- Sorry I'm so preoccupied. There's a lot of stressful **stuff** (=situations) going on at my job right now.

The informal words **whatchamacallit** / **thingamajig** / **thingy** are used for items for which you can't remember the name of the object - as you can see in the dialogue.

If you are trying to remember someone else's name, you can use **whatsisname** / **whatsername** until you remember it.

- I talked to that guy who works at the bank... **whatsisname**... Randy Smith - on Friday.

## Sentence Beginners & Enders

Finally, we have some sentence beginners and enders that help indicate that we are making a guess or being vague.

To make a guess, you can start your sentence with these phrases:

- **"It's difficult to say, but I think..."**
- **"I'd say..."**
- **"I'm not really sure, but I'd say..."**
- **"Off the top of my head, I'd say..."**
- **"If I had to take a guess, I'd say..."**
- **"It's somewhere in the region/ballpark of..."**  
*(only for numbers: "It's somewhere in the ballpark of 100 miles.")*

In the dialogue, we also saw some examples of ending sentences in a way that leaves them vague or implies similar things:

- **...or whatever / ...or something**  
I'll probably go for a jog in the park or whatever.  
*(= or a similar activity)*
- **...and that kind of thing**  
We had to call Kim's cousin, who's good with cars and that kind of thing.  
*(= and that type of topic/activity)*
- **...or something like that / ...or something along those lines**  
Did you go to a friend's house or something like that?  
*(= or a similar activity; of a similar type)*

You've finished Lesson 42!

Today's speaking task is simple: Record a message with your answers to the six questions below, using the phrases from this lesson in your sentences. I've shown you my sample answers.

You can record your message here: <http://www.speakpipe.com/espressoenglish>

# Lesson 42 – Speaking Task

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**1. Around what time do you go to bed?**

*Example: I go to bed around 11:30.*

Your answer: \_\_\_\_\_.

**2. About how many cups of tea/coffee do you drink per week?**

*Example: I drink about 15 cups of coffee per week.*

Your answer: \_\_\_\_\_.

**3. What's one thing you have loads of / tons of in your house?**

*Example: I have tons of computer cables on my desk.*

Your answer: \_\_\_\_\_.

**4. When was the last time you ate a bit of / a couple of something?**

*Example: Today, I ate a bit of yogurt. Yesterday, I ate a couple of grapes.*

Your answer: \_\_\_\_\_.

**5. How much time per week do you spend studying English? Start your answer with one of the sentence beginners.**

*Example: I'd say I spend about 25 hours a week preparing English lessons. 😊*

Your answer: \_\_\_\_\_.

**6. What's one thing you're planning to do - or do something similar? (end your answer with one of the sentence enders)**

*Example: Next year, I'd like to take guitar lessons or something like that.*

Your answer: \_\_\_\_\_.