

Lesson 40 – Essential Discourse Markers

Conversation: Buying a car

Peter and Tara are a married couple who are discussing the possibility of buying a new car. Listen to their conversation and pay special attention to the words in blue.

Tara: You wanna buy a new car? Are you nuts?!

Peter: **Here's the thing:** our car is 15 years old... it's REALLY time to upgrade.

Tara: I don't know. Just because the car is old doesn't mean we should get rid of it. **Plus,** new cars are expensive, and we're trying to save up for our vacation, remember?

Peter: **Granted** - we couldn't afford a brand new car. That's why I've been looking at used cars. I found a 2008 Toyota in great condition that's selling for a pretty good price.

Tara: **Still,** shouldn't we try to keep the car we have for as long as possible? We could probably use it for at least another couple years. **You have to admit** that it would save us money.

Peter: **On the contrary:** we'd probably end up spending more on maintenance and fixing the old car than it would cost to just buy a new one - well, a used one - now. So it would actually cost us more in the long run.

Tara: If you say so. I'm still not convinced. **By the way,** did you pay that speeding ticket you got last month?

Peter: Umm... not yet. I did talk to a lawyer though. **Basically,** he said that there's a chance I could get the fine reduced. I'll try to take care of it this week.

Conversation Vocabulary & Phrases

The expressions in blue are discourse markers.

What are discourse markers? They're words or small phrases that express the connections between ideas when writing or speaking. You've already learned some of these in this course: for example, starting a sentence with "**as I was saying**," to get back to the topic after an interruption.

This lesson is going to focus on discourse markers that are typically used at the **beginning** of a sentence or phrase. They help indicate what you're going to say before you say it.

"Linking words" like **although**, **meanwhile**, **such as**, and **likewise** also fall into the category of discourse markers. Many of these can be used either at the beginning or in the middle of a phrase – and some can be used at the end. If you want to learn more specific details about linking words, check out these three lessons:

- [Linking Words: Adding, Organizing, and Summarizing](#)
- [Linking Words: Contrasting Ideas](#)
- [Linking Words: Reasons and Results](#)

Now let's look at some typical functions of discourse markers – with plenty of examples to help illustrate how they are used in spoken English.

Function #1 – Adding Information

Moreover and **furthermore** are typically used in more formal English. **What's more** is more frequently used in spoken English rather than written English.

For example:

- "I'm sorry to say that Tom has not been putting in much effort at work recently. His projects are typically full of mistakes. **What's more**, he has gotten to the office late almost every day this week."
- "Our company is rapidly expanding throughout the world. In the past year, we've opened five new branches in Europe. **Furthermore**, we have established a number of strategic partnerships in Asia."

In addition and **additionally** are also used in more formal English, especially when writing or presenting:

- “We have taken a number of steps to make our factories safer. All employees are required to wear protective equipment, and we offer regular trainings in the area of workplace safety. **In addition**, our machinery is inspected every year to check for defects that could cause accidents.”

In more informal English, we usually use **also**, **plus**, **besides**, and **not only that (but)** to add information:

- “I don’t want to go out tonight; it’s really late and I’m super tired. **Besides**, I have a class early tomorrow morning.”
- “I love yoga – it helps me relax after a long and stressful week. **Plus**, it’s a great workout.”
- “Henry broke his arm and got a concussion in the accident. **Not only that, but** his car was completely destroyed.”

Function #2 – Comparing / Contrasting

Sometimes you want to not only add information, but also show how it relates to the information you mentioned previously – by comparing it (showing how it is similar) or contrasting it (showing how it is different).

Use **similarly** and **in the same way** to show how two things are similar. There’s also an idiomatic expression: **“by the same token.”**

- “If you think positive thoughts, you’ll increase your chance of succeeding. **By the same token**, if you think negative thoughts, you’ll probably end up failing.”

When you want to show how two things are different, use **in contrast**, **conversely**, or the more informal expression **on the other hand**. There’s also the expression **on the contrary**, which is usually used to say that the previous statement was wrong, or to introduce the opposite idea.

- “President Bush lowered taxes. **In contrast**, President Obama has raised them.”
- “I don’t think that painting is ugly. **On the contrary**. I think it’s beautiful.”

Function #3 – Emphasizing & Persuading

When trying to persuade someone (convince them that your perspective is correct), you can use these phrases to add special emphasis to your main point.

Use **here's the thing** and **the thing is** to draw extra attention to what you are going to say.

- “I know you're concerned about keeping costs down, but **here's the thing**: if we don't repair this machine now, we'll eventually end up spending more to buy a new one.”

Use **above all** to introduce the *most important* point:

- “To become fluent in English, you must take every opportunity to practice the language. It's important to read, write, listen to, or speak English as frequently as possible. **Above all**, you must not give up!”

Use **after all** and **you have to admit** to introduce an especially *persuasive* point – one that you think the other person probably won't disagree with.

- “We should definitely create an online store for our company. **After all**, we do want to make more sales, don't we?”
- “I know it's a radical idea, and it's understandable that you're nervous about trying new things. But **you have to admit** that what we're doing right now isn't working.”

Use **like I said** or **as I mentioned earlier** (more formal) to repeat a point you talked about before.

- “Come on, let's have a party at my place! **Like I said**, my parents are out of town so they'll never know.”
- “I'm sorry, ma'am, but I cannot give you a refund. **As I mentioned earlier**, refunds can only be requested within the first 30 days after your purchase.”

Function #4 – Conceding (+ Counter-Argument)

“Conceding” means to recognize that the other person has a good point, or is correct

about some idea. When having a discussion, debate, or argument, it's common to concede and then introduce your counter-argument or counter-point.

Use the phrases **granted**, **admittedly**, and **of course** to concede. Here are some examples that follow directly from some of the situations in the previous section:

- "I know you're concerned about keeping costs down, but **here's the thing**: if we don't repair this machine now, we'll eventually end up spending more to buy a new one."
"Admittedly, a new machine would cost more in the future. But right now we simply don't have enough money to make the necessary repairs."
- "We should definitely create an online store for our company. **After all**, we do want to make more sales, don't we?"
"Of course an online store would increase our profits. But I'd rather focus on getting more customers in the local area."
- "I know it's a radical idea, and it's understandable that you're nervous about trying new things. But **you have to admit** that what we're doing right now isn't working."
"Granted – the current strategy isn't producing great results. But I don't think the idea you've proposed is a perfect solution."

In each of those examples, the person introduced the counter-argument with "but." However, there are a number of other phrases that can be used:

- **Having said that**, / **That said**,
- **All the same**, / **Just the same**,
- **Even so**, / **Still**, / **Nevertheless**,

Check out how to use them in the examples:

- "Admittedly, a new machine would cost more in the future. **Having said that**, right now we simply don't have enough money to make the necessary repairs."
- "Of course an online store would increase our profits. **All the same**, I'd rather focus on getting more customers in the local area."
- "Granted – the current strategy isn't producing great results. **Still**, I don't think the idea you've proposed is a perfect solution."

Function #5 – Changing the topic

Remember in the lesson about greetings and goodbyes, when we used the word **anyway** as a transition into saying we needed to leave?

“Anyway, it was great talking to you, but I’ve gotta run.” – This is an example of changing the topic with a discourse marker. **Anyway** is frequently used to either bring the conversation to a close or come back to the main topic.

Here are more ways to change the topic. The expressions **speaking of...** and **that reminds me** are often used to introduce a *related* topic:

- [in a conversation about travel in general] “**Speaking of** traveling, don’t you have a trip to China coming up?”
- [in a conversation about online videos] “**That reminds me** – I saw a funny video on YouTube the other day; I’ve got to send it to you!”

The expressions **by the way** and **incidentally** can be used to introduce a related topic OR add a side comment:

- [in a conversation about a project at work] “**Incidentally**, I need to leave the office early today – so I can only work on this for another half hour.”
- [in a conversation at a restaurant] “**By the way**, the soup here is delicious.”

Function #6 – Paraphrasing / Summarizing

“Paraphrasing” or “summarizing” means expressing a lot of information in a short time, giving just a general summary of the main point. To do this, we have the expressions **basically**, **essentially**, **in short**, and **to sum (it) up**.

- “I asked the doctor about this rash. **Basically**, he said it’s nothing to worry about.”
- “We discussed a lot of things at the meeting – but **to sum it up**, the director decided to cancel the program.”

There’s also an idiomatic expression: **in a nutshell**.

- “How was your trip?”
“I don’t have time to tell you all about it right now, but **in a nutshell** – it was wonderful!”

You’ve finished Lesson 40! Now take the quiz and try to select the best discourse marker for every sentence.

I also recommend trying to write your own examples with each one – this will help you remember them better, so that they’ll come to mind more easily when you’re speaking. If you’d like to e-mail me your writing, you can send it to homework@espressoenglish.net

Quiz – Lesson 40

1) You have a point - that country is a bit dangerous. _____, it's worth visiting to experience the culture.

- A. Above all
- B. Besides
- C. Still

2) ...and that's how my wallet was stolen. _____, can I borrow \$15 to take a taxi?

- A. By the way
- B. On the contrary
- C. The thing is

3) I know you think she's a little bit crazy, but _____ she's very smart.

- A. in short
- B. similarly
- C. you have to admit

4) He's stupid, annoying, and lazy. _____, he's dishonest.

- A. Even so
- B. In contrast
- C. What's more

5) I hope you'll join us for the Christmas party. _____, everyone else is coming!

- A. After all
- B. All the same
- C. By the same token

6) Those other problems are not important right now. _____: if we don't get new donors within the next month, we'll have to shut down the organization

- A. Admittedly
- B. By the way

C. Here's the thing

7) I just got back from the library. Oh, _____ - could you give me back that book I lent you?

- A. in addition
- B. that reminds me
- C. to sum it up

8) You didn't miss much in yesterday's class. _____, the teacher just told us to read chapter 5.

- A. In short
- B. Not only that
- C. That said

9) This new computer program will help us run our database more efficiently. It integrates with all our current systems. _____, it's very easy to use.

- A. Conversely
- B. In addition
- C. In a nutshell

10) The crime rate in the city center has gone down. _____, it has gone up in the suburbs.

- A. After all
- B. In contrast
- C. Similarly

11) I understand why you made the mistakes. _____, I do expect better performance from you in the future.

- A. Granted
- B. Having said that
- C. That reminds me

12) Children learn language primarily by listening. _____, listening practice is essential for adults.

- A. In the same way
- B. Nevertheless
- C. On the other hand

Lesson 40 Quiz – Answers

1.C 2.A 3.C 4.C 5.A 6.C 7.B 8.A 9.B 10.B 11.B 12.A