
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

The joys of writing lists



This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Phil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Phil.

Beth

And I'm Beth.

Phil

A list is a collection of items with a single item written on each line, and they're everywhere: shopping lists, to-do lists, even **bucket lists** – a list of all the things a person would like to do before they die. In fact, there's an episode of 6 Minute English all about them.

Beth

Imagine you're at the supermarket and find someone's shopping list. This happens a lot to Jo Nolan, a linguistics researcher whose new book explores our love of lists. Here's Jo reading her shopping list on BBC Radio 4 programme Word of Mouth:

Jo Nolan

I only list the first four items, but the list read: "Nanas, aye-aye, **puke**, shrooms."

Beth

"Nanas, aye-aye, **puke**, shrooms." Err... can you work out what Jo was buying at the supermarket, Phil?

Phil

OK. Well, I'm going to guess that 'nanas' are bananas. And 'shrooms' – they've got to be mushrooms, right?

Beth

OK. But what about 'aye-aye' and '**puke**'? What could they mean? Well, here's Jo's explanation to Michael Rosen, presenter of BBC Radio 4's Word of Mouth:

Michael Rosen

And let's just come back to **puke**... I mean, were you instructing yourself to be sick in the supermarket? I'm just a bit lost there.

Jo Nolan

No, it's slightly grotesque. Erm... my husband doesn't like cucumber, and the abbreviation for cucumber would be 'cuc', so he has always referred to it as **puke**.

Phil

Aha! Cucumbers make Joanna's husband **puke** – a slang word for vomit. And **puke** rhymes with 'cuc', so it's a way of reminding her to buy cucumbers. Wow! Sometimes lists are like secret codes. **

Beth

In this episode, we'll find out why people love lists and learn some useful new words and phrases. And remember: you'll find another list – of all the vocabulary used – on our website, bbclearningenglish.com.

Phil

But first, a question for you, Beth. According to the list on the Internet Movie Database website, which movie has made the most money ever? Is it:

- a) Titanic,
- b) Avengers: Endgame, or
- c) Avatar?

Beth

I think it might be Avatar, although that might have been the most expensive to make. I'm not sure.

Phil

OK. Well, we'll find out at the end of the programme. Popular songs are full of lists, and one of the most famous is My Favourite Things, sung by Julie Andrews in the film The Sound of Music. The song lists all her favourite things, from 'raindrops on roses' to 'whiskers on kittens'. Here, Jo Nolan and Michael Rosen discuss the song on BBC Radio 4 programme Word of Mouth:

Jo Nolan

I feel like you get a lot – you get a big **bang for your buck** in that song. Maybe it's the positivity – it's a bit **saccharine**. Maybe that's also part of the issue. The list encourages you to think really efficiently and economically, so I think you don't

waste a lot of time and effort making a nice sentence or using long words. You just get to **the nub of** things quite quickly.

Beth

The song's list of 'favourite things' is long, and Jo says you get a big **bang for your buck** – an idiom meaning that you gain a lot in return for the money or effort you spend on something. But not everyone likes the song. Some call it **saccharine** – an adjective meaning excessively sweet, sentimental or insincere.

Phil

Lists often abbreviate the items they contain, so you get to **the nub of** things quickly. **The nub of** something means the most important or essential point about it.

Beth

Lists can be useful as well. Here's Jo Nolan giving an example of a useful list to BBC Radio 4's Word of Mouth:

Jo Nolan

A friend of mine who makes **pros and cons** lists finds that it really helps her resolve a situation. She halves her page: **pros, cons**. And she said by the end of it, she knows what she's doing.

Phil

Lists help us make decisions by writing down all the **pros and cons** of a situation. The **pros and cons** is another way of saying the advantages and disadvantages of something, especially when you're trying to choose between them.

Beth

The more you think about it, the more you see lists everywhere – in menus and bank statements, for example. And therapists even recommend listing all the good things in your life to feel happier – not bad for a few words on a scrap of paper.

Phil

OK. It's time to reveal the answer to my question. Beth, I asked you which movie had made the most money ever, and you said Avatar. And now, according to the Internet Movie Database... that's exactly right.

Beth

Yay!

Phil

OK. Let's recap the vocabulary we've learned, starting with **bucket list** – all the things you would like to do before you die.

Beth

Puke is slang for vomit or sick.

Phil

If something gives **bang for your buck**, you gain a lot of extra value in return for the money or effort you put into it.

Beth

If you call something **saccharine**, you criticise it for being too sweet or sentimental.

Phil

The nub of a problem or situation is the most important or essential thing about it.

Beth

And finally, something's **pros and cons** are its advantages and disadvantages. Once again, our six minutes are up, but remember – you'll find a quiz and worksheet for this episode over on our website, bbclearningenglish.com. Goodbye for now!

Phil

Bye!

** Later in the BBC World Service programme Word of Mouth, Jo Nolan explains that 'aye-aye' refers to broccoli, because during mealtimes her late father-in-law would often say to her children, "Aye-aye! Eat up your broccol-aye!"

VOCABULARY

bucket list

list of all the things a person would like to do before they die

puke

(slang) vomit, sick

bang for your buck

(idiom) value gained in return for the money, time or effort you spend doing something

saccharine

excessively sweet or sentimental and so considered insincere or inauthentic

the nub of (something)

the most important or essential point of (a situation, problem, etc.)

pros and cons

advantages and disadvantages