



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 215

TOPICS

American Cities: Houston; how to become a police officer; incredible versus unbelievable; to rule the roost; to sort out

GLOSSARY

to be named after (someone/something) – to be named in honor of someone or something; to be given the name of someone, usually because that person is important or famous

* Toby was named after his grandfather, and Alicia was named after the city where she was born.

oilfield – areas where there are many machines that drill (dig down) into the ground to get oil

* This land used to be used for raising animals, but now it is an oilfield.

cultural offering – things for people to do that are related to the arts, music, and dance; entertainment activities related to the fine arts

* Before we decide to go on vacation to that city, let's find out more about its cultural offerings.

urban sprawl – the uncontrolled growth of a city area; the expansion of a city from the center out to wider and wider areas

* The city of Phoenix grew very quickly and you can see signs of urban sprawl in every direction.

lot size – the amount of land for each home or building; the size of the land around a house or a building

* We like this house a lot, but the lot size is too small and there won't be enough room for a swimming pool in the backyard.

low/high urban density – having few/many people living in an area; an area in the city with few/many people living there

* Our company is looking to open new stores in areas with high urban density.

forensics – using scientific methods to investigate crime; using scientific tests and techniques to try to solve a crime

* The forensics team found blood in the suspect's car.



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ride-along – an opportunity to be in a police car with a police officer while he or she is working, so that one can watch and learn more about the job

* Will you allow one of our reporters to do a ride-along with one of your police officers?

endurance – the ability to do something difficult for at least a minimum amount of time; being able to do physical activities, such running and lifting weights, for a long period of time

* Emil must have very high levels of endurance if he can work in a very noisy office all day without going crazy!

drug test – the taking of blood and urine samples to see if someone has been using drugs

* All of the athletes on the team are given drug tests at least twice a year.

background check – an investigation by an agency to learn as much as it can about one's past behavior, including whether one has used drugs or been arrested

* Since our company has sensitive government contracts, we require that all engineers have a background check before they are hired.

police academy – a special school where one learns to be a police officer

* In the police academy, Sam learned how to shoot a gun and to arrest suspects.

incredible – hard to believe; too extraordinary to be believed; amazing; fantastic; great

* It's incredible that Kira was able to pass that difficult test without studying at all!

unbelievable – too extraordinary to be believed; hard to believe; amazing

* Darren didn't do any of his work and left it all for me to do. Unbelievable!

to rule the roost – to be in charge; to be the boss or leader, usually of a household or family

* While Mom and Dad were at work, my sister Shanice ruled the roost and told us what we could and could not do.

to sort out – to solve a problem; to make sense out of a confusing situation; to figure out

* The police officer tried to sort out what happened at the scene of the accident when each person told a slightly different story.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

U.S. Cities Named After People

In this podcast, we talked about the city of Houston, which is named after Sam Houston, who was a very important “political figure” (person involved in politics) in the history of Texas. Many other American cities are also named after important “historical figures” (people in history).

Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States, was named after George Washington, the first president of the United States, in 1791. The “D.C.” stands for District of Columbia. “Columbia” was another informal name for the United States at the time, and the first “session” (official meeting) of Congress, the lawmaking part of the government, was held in Washington, D.C. on November 17, 1800.

Seattle, Washington, is another city named after an important historical figure. The city was named for Chief Seattle, a leader of two Native American tribes. He was a “prominent” (important and famous) leader who wanted to have a peaceful “coexistence” (living together) with the white “settlers” (people who move to an area, usually with few other people living there).

Not all cities that were named for people were named after political or historical figures. Several California cities, for example, were named after religious figures. The city of Los Angeles, for instance, was named after “Our Lady the Queen of the Angels,” another name for Mary, the mother of Jesus, who was the founder of the Christian religion. Similarly, the cities of San Jose and San Diego were named after Christian “saints,” people who are considered very “holy” (dedicated or special to God).



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 215.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 215. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

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On this Café, we're going to continue our series on American cities, focusing on Houston, Texas. We're also going to talk about how to become a police officer in the United States. And, as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

This Café begins with a continuation of our series on American cities. Today we're going to talk about the City of Houston (Houston), in the State of Texas. Houston is huge – it's very large, although it is not the capital of Texas; it is not the government center in Texas, that would be Austin, Texas. It is the second-largest city in the state however, and it's the fourth-largest city in the United States, with about 2.2 million people in the city itself, and almost 6 million people in the area around the city, what we would call the larger metropolitan area.

Houston was "established," or created as a city in 1836 by two brothers. It was named after Sam Houston, a famous American in our history. To be named after someone or something means that you are named in honor of someone or something, so that person will be remembered. You might, for example, name your child Johnny after your father, Jonathan, because you want to honor your father – you want to show respect for him. My father named his second son Patrick Junior. When asked why he didn't name his first son Patrick, he said that people who named their first son after themselves – fathers who name the boy, or give the boy their name – lack confidence. He knew he would have other sons, and so he named his second son Patrick. My brother, by the way, named his oldest son Patrick – I guess he didn't have any confidence, although he does have other children!



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Anyway, the City of Houston is named after not my father, but Sam Houston, who was a general, or a military leader, for something known as the Republic of Texas. We have to step back a little – that is, we have to go back and explain the background of the State of Texas. Texas was originally part of Mexico, and the people who were living in Texas – who had moved to Texas from the United States wanted to separate from Mexico; they wanted to be their own country. So, Sam Houston became a general and led a “battle,” an important fight in a war, called the Battle of San Jacinto, at least that’s how it would be pronounced in Spanish. San Jacinto was a city near Houston. The Texans eventually achieved their independence from Mexico and were their own country; they were called the Republic of Texas. Eventually, however, the Republic of Texas joined the United States. Soon after, in fact, they received their independence from Mexico they joined the U.S., and became an American state. We’ll talk about the Republic of Texas some other day.

Houston had a lot of strong economic growth during the early part of its history in the 19th century, because it was near railroads and ports. A “port” is a place where boats can come and transport goods and products. The Port of Houston is on the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico, which is the part of the Atlantic Ocean, between the United States and Mexico. The port of Houston, today, is the United States’ largest port for international trade, and the 10th-largest port in the world, so a lot of ships go in and out of the port of Houston. In 1901, oil was discovered in the Houston area, and this brought a lot of economic development to the city, to the region, and to the State of Texas. Today, Texas is often called “the energy capital of the world.” Well, it’s called “the energy of the world” by some Americans. Americans tend to think everything in this country is the capital of the world. Houston is one of the biggest energy producers. Five of the world’s six biggest energy companies have large offices in Houston.

Interestingly, one of the things that helped Houston’s growth was the invention of air conditioning! Because Texas is in the southern United States, near the border of Mexico, it’s very hot there, especially in the summertime. There’s a lot of desert there. Once air conditioning became available in the 1950s, many companies decided to relocate to Houston – to move to Houston and the city continued to grow, in fact it continues to grow even today. The weather can be particularly bad in Houston because not only is it hot, in a typical year the temperature in Houston is above 90 °F (or 32 °C) for about 100 days. There’s also a lot of “humidity” in Houston – there’s a lot of water in the air that makes the temperature feel even hotter. So almost all of the buildings and cars in Houston have air conditioning. In fact, in 1980, Houston was described as “the most air-conditioned place on earth.”



Houston is an industrial city nowadays, with a lot of companies working, as I mentioned, in energy, but also in transportation and manufacturing. However, when most people in the United States hear the word Houston, they immediately think of the oilfields, the areas where there are many machines that are “drilling,” or digging down into the earth in order to bring up oil. Houston has a lot of companies that also make equipment for these oilfields. So in the American mind, Houston is very much associated with oil.

Houston has a large medical center, called the Texas Medical Center, which is a large group of buildings with a great deal – a large number of companies and hospitals – clinics. Space exploration is also important in Houston, because the National Aeronautic and Space Administration (what we call simply NASA) has its Johnson Space Center in the city. In fact, that is another reason why Houston is famous in the U.S. Houston is where the Mission Control Center is. When an American rocket or a spaceship is flying, such as for example the space shuttle or the Apollo missions back in the 1960s and 70s, the people who work in Mission Control Center are the ones who are controlling the flight and communicating with the “astronauts,” the people who are inside the spaceship. When I was growing up, during the time of the Apollo missions, when they were sending ships to the moon, I remember whenever one of the spaceships was launched (that is, whenever it was put up into space), there would always be pictures of a huge room with lots of computers and television monitors. That was Mission Control and the people who were working there, you could see all of them in this big room.

There were some problems in the American space program back in the 60s and 70s; there were also problems later, of course, with the space shuttle. But one of the most famous expressions from the era of the Apollo mission was “Houston, we’ve got a problem.” These astronauts, if they had a problem, would have to tell Mission Control about it, and that expression is one that people will sometimes say, not related to the space program, maybe there’s a problem with something else. You may say to your boss, “Houston, we’ve got a problem,” meaning we’ve got a big problem, because, of course, if there’s a problem with the spacecraft – the spaceship, well, that would threaten (that could endanger – that could put at risk) the lives of the astronauts.

Sports fans also know about Houston. Houston is famous for something called the “Astrodome.” The Astrodome is a huge stadium; it was built in 1965 to be one of the first indoor sports stadium that had a “dome,” or a rounded roof on top. The word “Astrodome” was a made up word (an invented word), “astro” relating



to the stars. Once again, the connection between Houston and NASA and our space program, because of the presence of Mission Control Center. They also invented, in order to have something like grass inside of this stadium – because, of course, there was no sun, there was a roof on top – they have something called “Astroturf,” which is sort of an artificial grass that is used. Afterwards, other cities also put up large sports stadiums that were domed. In Minneapolis, there’s something called the “Metrodome” in downtown Minneapolis, where the professional sports teams in Minnesota play – or at least, several of them do. However in the last several years, people have been moving away from the domed indoor stadiums to outdoor stadiums, even in cold places like Minnesota. I think it’s a little crazy, but that’s what they do!

Back to Houston: Houston has a lot of other cultural offerings, things that people can do, such as art museums, music, performances, dance, and other things. Houston has a museum district that has several popular museums. There’s also a very large theater district – or a large theater district, I’m not sure if it’s very large. Houston isn’t considered the entertainment capital of the world by any means; that is, not at all! But it is a large city, and so it has some cultural things – I guess. I’ve only been to Houston once – well, actually twice, but I didn’t really take a tour of the city. I was there for some conferences (for some presentations), and I didn’t really get to see much of the city.

One of the problems people associate with Houston is urban sprawl. “Sprawl” (sprawl) is a major problem in many American cities, especially western cities. We would consider Houston a western city; Los Angeles is a western city. Cities in the western part of the U.S. have a lot of land (have a lot of space), and what happens is that people begin to build farther and farther away from the central part of the city. When you have a lot of homes and businesses that are spread out – that are large distances (long distances) from each other, this is called “sprawl.” So urban sprawl (“urban” relating to the city) refers to the spreading out of the buildings and the homes over a very large area of land. Part of the reason this happened is that Houston required that houses have a certain lot (lot) size. The “lot” is the land that your home is on. This meant that there was what we call a “low urban density,” there were very few number of people in a given, say, square mile. In cities with a lot of urban sprawl, people need cars, of course, to get from one place to another. And if you have a lot of cars, you have a lot of traffic, if you have a lot of traffic you have a lot of pollution. Even here in beautiful Los Angeles we have problems of urban sprawl. I might add, especially here; it’s a very common phenomenon. You can see it as you come into the city. Nevertheless, Houston continues to grow.



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It's attracted a lot of immigrants as well. Houston, for example, has the third-largest population of Vietnamese Americans, people who came originally from the country of Vietnam in Southeast Asia, particularly after the end of the Vietnam War in the 1970s. There's even part of the city known as Little Saigon, Saigon being the name of the capital of South Vietnam – well, the old name, I should say. There are a lot of Vietnamese Americans who live in this section, and many of the signs that you will see are in Vietnamese. We have a little Saigon here in Southern California as well.

I don't know if I were picking three or four places where I would want to visit in the U.S. if I would pick Houston, Texas. But, if you have to go there, it's not too bad! [Jeff laughs]

Okay! Our next topic is a discussion of how to become a police officer. We've talked in the past about how different people get their jobs, what training is required for different jobs. Today we're going to talk about police officers. Many children, at least in the U.S., if you ask them what they want to do when they grow up, they'll often say become a police officer. Well, like any other profession or job, becoming a police officer requires a lot of preparation. The requirements for becoming a police officer are different in different cities and different states; every city and state has its own requirements. But in general, you have to at least have a high school diploma. You have to have finished 12 years of schooling, grade school and high school, before you can become a police officer.

If you want to become a police officer, the first step you usually have to take is a civil service exam, which is a written test of basic knowledge and of English skills. Many government jobs require a civil service examination; it's a test that you have to take. After the civil service exam, if you get a good score, then there will probably be an interview with police officers. You might even have what's called a "ride-along," an opportunity to go into a police car with a police officer while he or she is working, so that you can learn more about the job. This also gives you an opportunity to see whether you really want to do this (whether you really want to become a police officer).

Another typical part of the application process is a physical test of strength and of endurance. "Endurance" is the ability to do something difficult for a certain amount of time; maybe it's running or lifting heavy objects, doing pull-ups (pulling your body up by your arms). These are tests of endurance. We want our police officers to have a certain amount of physical strength because, of course, not every one will cooperate if there's a problem. Police officers may have to use what we would call "physical force," they may have to force someone to do



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something. The physical test or examination might also include a test of your vision (how well you can see), as well as your hearing. [Jeff shouts] I said as well as your hearing! It's an old joke. You probably also will have to take a drug test. They'll take some blood or other bodily fluids to see if you have been using drugs. Of course, we don't want our police officers to be drug users – illegal drug users, that is.

Having additional education is helpful if you want to become a police officer. Many people who want to become a member of the police go to college to study something called "criminal justice," sometimes called "forensics." Forensics or criminal justice is the practice of investigating crimes. You can actually get a degree at the university in criminal justice. The university I taught at had a degree; I had some people in my class who were going to become police officers. You could also study other areas that would be useful on the police force (the police force refers to the group of police officers). You could study computer science, law, psychology, other areas that might be helpful. Some people also choose to join the "military," the army, the navy, or the air force, to get some leadership experience that might help them later as a police officer, but that's not necessarily the most common thing among police officers.

Your application to become a police officer will also include a background check. This is where a company or the government tries to learn as much as possible about your past, including whether you've used drugs, whether you've ever had problems yourself – legal problems, and so forth.

If you pass all of these tests, then you will join the police academy, which is a special school where you learn to be a police officer. At a police academy, you would probably study human behavior, police procedures (what police are supposed to do in certain circumstances), types of crimes, shooting a gun, of course, as well as the law (what is and is not illegal). The length of time spent at the police academy depends on where you become a police officer. I think here in Los Angeles, it's less than a year, I'm not exactly sure. Once you finish all of your courses at the police academy, then you officially become a police officer.

Now let's answer a few of your questions.

Our first question comes from Arik (Arik) in Germany. Arik wants to know the difference "incredible" and "unbelievable."

"Incredible" means very difficult to believe, very hard to believe, something that is so strange or so unusual it is difficult to believe. "Incredible" can also mean



amazing, fantastic, great. “My friend bought an incredible new car,” a wonderful, great car.

“Unbelievable” means that it’s too weird or too extraordinary to be believed. You might describe a story as being “unbelievable,” meaning it’s too strange for anyone to believe it. However, the more common meaning is similar to “incredible,” something that is difficult to believe but not impossible to believe. Usually, “incredible” and “unbelievable” are used to mean roughly the same thing. You can also use “unbelievable” to mean fantastic or great. “I have an unbelievable teacher this year,” she’s wonderful, she’s great. You could also say, “I have an incredible teacher this year.” It would mean the same thing.

“Incredible” is probably a little more common than “unbelievable” if you’re talking about something that’s great, something that’s really good: “It was an incredible film.” You can also make both “incredible” and “unbelievable” adverbs by adding an “ly” at the end, so you get “incredibly” and “unbelievably.” Often when you use that, it means “extremely,” or simply “very.” And it could be positive or negative, for example: “That’s an incredibly ugly dress she’s wearing.” It’s very ugly – it’s incredibly ugly. You could say, “He’s an unbelievably bad baseball player. I mean really, really bad.” Those are also possible uses of “incredible” and “unbelievable.”

Daniele (Daniele) from Italy once you know the meaning of the expression “to rule (rule) the roost (roost).”

“To rule the roost” means to be the boss, to be the leader, to be in charge of something. For example: “Her father thought that he was the head of the family, but really it was her mother that ruled the roost,” the mother who made all the important decisions.

A “roost” is a resting place for a group of birds, often in a large tree or perhaps in a little house. When the birds get together, there’s typically one bird that is strongest and will establish itself as the leader. That’s where this expression comes from, “to rule the roost.” The idea was first discussed in a scientific paper way back in 1922, when someone – a zoologist, someone studying animal noticed that there was this hierarchy. They were some hens – some chickens that were more important than others, and that they would tend to boss around – they would tend to literally “peck” (peck), use their nose, what we call their “beak,” and hit the other hens (the other chickens) to determine who was going to stand where inside of the roost. We also have another expression, “the pecking order,” that refers to this hierarchy, this notion that some people are on the top



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and some people are on the bottom. Well, in this case, some hens are on the top!

I should probably explain that “chicken” is the general term; the female chicken is called a “hen,” the male chicken is called a “rooster.” “Rooster” coming, of course, from this area where chickens are kept, called a “roost.”

Finally, Thomas (Thomas) in Germany wants to know the meaning of the phrasal verb “to sort out.”

“To sort out” can mean a couple of different things; it can mean to solve a problem, usually a very complicated problem often involving people who have different ideas – different stories about what happened. A mother might come home and her children are all fighting, and she says, “I’m going to sort out what happened” – I’m going to figure out what the problem was here, try to make sense of this confusing situation. Or you might, like I do, have a lot of receipts, things that you get after you buy something; they give you a little piece paper. You come home, you have all these different receipts; you may need to sort them out. You may need to put some over here and some over there, separate the business receipts from the personal receipts. That’s another meaning of to sort out.

If you have an English problem you’d like us to sort out, you can email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com. We won’t have time for everyone’s questions, but we’ll do the best we can.

From Los Angeles, California, I’m Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us next time on the English Café.

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