



TOPICS

American Cities: Indianapolis; Malcolm Gladwell and his books; to brush up on versus to polish up; to come off; a matter of

GLOSSARY

to observe (a holiday or anniversary) – to celebrate; to do something special because of a holiday or anniversary

* Our family observes the anniversary of my father's death each year by having a special family dinner.

spectacle – something that people want to see, usually because it is very interesting or unusual

* The performers created a spectacle on stage by using special lights and loud music.

to count (something) as (something) – to consider something to be something; to include something within a particular definition

* If you don't count French fries as vegetables, then no, I didn't eat any vegetables today.

racetrack – round or oval-shaped (egg-shaped) path that people, horses, or cars race around

* The horses ran so fast around the racetrack that we had trouble seeing which horse was which.

lap – one time around a circle; going around a path or racetrack one time

* As punishment for being lazy during practice, our coach made us run three extra laps before we finished for the day.

canal – a long, narrow piece of water that is created by people to connect two other bodies of water

* When it rained for 10 days without stopping, the canal flooded and the homes around it were destroyed.

second only to – with only one better; with little or few better

* Isaiah is very good at math. He is second only to his older sister in solving difficult math problems.



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based in – living and working in a particular city; having one's home in a particular city

* As a flight attendant, Glenda travels a lot, but she's based in Chicago.

implication – a suggested result; a consequence of doing something or of having something happen

* Our boss didn't say anything, but the implication of our company earning less this year is that some of the employees will likely lose their jobs.

fake – something that is not real; something that is a copy of the original

* I thought I bought a genuine designer purse at that store, but now I think it's a fake.

outlier – something that is very far from the average

* These research results don't make sense unless we remove those outliers. Then, we definitely see a clear pattern.

influential – someone or something that has a lot of influence over other people, or can make other people change how they think about things

* We've talked to several influential people in our community about starting a music program at the high school.

to brush up on – to renew an already learned skill or talent that has not been practiced for some time, or that needs more work

* Ellen asked me to play the piano at her wedding, but I'm not sure I'll have time to brush up on my playing in just two weeks.

to polish up – to bring closer to perfect; to improve so that one is very good or perfect

* I'll need to polish up my French if I want to be able to move to France this summer.

to come off – to have recovered from; to have finished something and be moving onto something else

* Coming off of a bad divorce, Liam is reluctant to date again.

a matter of – having to do with a particular subject or kind of situation; based on or influenced by something else

* Whether I'll be able to visit you this year is a matter of money.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

Single-Word Book Titles

There are many things that encourage a “consumer” (buyer) to purchase a book. Some factors may be a “familiarity” (knowing about) with the author or a good “blurb” (short written description of the book, usually printed on the back or on the cover of the book). It may even be the “design” of the book, including such things as the images, pictures, colors, and other design elements of the cover.

One successful strategy book publishers use to influence consumers’ decisions is to give a book a title that “grabs” (gets) attention. In the past few years, one trend in the “non-fiction” (writings about real people or events) world is to give books one-word titles. These short titles try to “convey” (communicate) the most important “central idea” (main point) of the book, and at the same time, grab a reader’s attention.

Two of Malcolm Gladwell’s books, Blink and Outliers, are excellent examples of this trend, and many other authors and publishing companies have “jumped on the bandwagon” (begun to do the same thing). A look at the “bestseller” (most popular) booklist in the past couple of years show just how popular this trend has become. Many “self-help books”—books that help you improve your life—use this “convention (way of doing things).

For example, books that are aimed at helping you become happier have titles such as, Happiness and Happier. Another example is a very popular book about how economics can explain events in “pop culture” (what is popular in society based on cultural tastes) called Freakonomics. Former President Bill Clinton published a book in 1997 about how individuals can make a big difference through “charity” (giving to people who need help) and “activism” (taking actions that can make political or social change). The title of that book is just one word: Giving.



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 196.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café episode 196. 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 Indianapolis, which is the capital of Indiana. We're also going to talk about one of my favorite authors, Malcolm Gladwell, and the books that he has written. 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 Indianapolis, which is the capital of Indiana. Indiana is a state located between the states of Illinois and Ohio in the north central part of the United States; it is just below the state of Michigan. Indiana has a capital city called Indianapolis. A "polis" is a Greek word meaning "city," so the name Indianapolis means, if you will, "Indiana City," "Indiana" coming from the word "Indian" meaning, in this case, Native Americans.

The city of Indianapolis is probably most famous for something called the Indianapolis 500. If you ask an American what's famous about Indianapolis, they will almost certainly say the Indianapolis 500. Sometimes it's simply called the Indy (Indy) 500. This is a 500-mile race for very fast cars. The cars go around and around in a circle – well, an oval, I guess. It is held – it is done each Memorial Day weekend. Memorial Day is a holiday in the United States, a national holiday, on the last Monday in the month of May. We "observe" or celebrate Memorial Day to remember those Americans who have died in wars.

The race, the Indy 500, is "billed," or advertised or promoted as "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing." A "spectacle" (spectacle) is something that people want to see, usually because it is very interesting or unusual. "Spectacle" comes from the Latin verb "spectare," meaning to look. Sometimes the word "spectacle" is



used to means something that you may want to look at but isn't necessarily a good thing. But here, it's meant to mean something good: a spectacle in racing.

The Greatest Spectacle in Racing, then, or the Indy 500, is the biggest single-day sporting event in the world – if you count car racing as a sport. Some people think, well, you don't actually have to do much so it's not really a sport, but most people will say that racing cars is a sport just like football or basketball or baseball; a different sport, to be sure. I said that people may not count car racing as a sport. This phrase “to count (something) as (something)” means to consider something to be in a certain category or class, or to include something in a particular definition. It doesn't mean counting as in numbers: one, two, three, four, five. “To count as (something)” means that it is part of some category, something that fits a definition. For example, many people count tomatoes as a vegetable, even though they are technically a fruit. So, if you count car racing as a sport, that means you think that car racing can be called a sport. If that's true, then the Indianapolis 500 is the world's biggest single-day sporting event. That's because at the race there are seats for approximately 400,000 people. The race is held at a place called the Speedway. The Speedway is just the, what we would call, if “racetrack,” that's the circle or oval that the cars go around.

The Speedway is a very large racetrack. As I say, the racetrack is shaped like an oval – like an egg; it's used for people to race around. For example, at the Olympics we have a racetrack. It's also used for horses and cars. They usually have to go around the racetrack many times in order to finish the race. If you go around one time, that's called a “lap” (lap): to go around the entire racetrack one time. At the Indianapolis 500, one lap is about two and a half miles.

As of 2009, there have been 93 races – 93 years where the Indianapolis 500 has been held. Many tourists go to Indianapolis to see the race, but there are many other things for people to do in Indianapolis. Well, maybe not *many* other things, but other things for you to do in the city. For example, in the summertime there's something called the Indy Jazz Festival where many jazz musicians go to perform their music.

This Indy Jazz Festival is held or takes place along the “banks” or sides of the Indiana Central Canal. A “canal” is a long, narrow piece of water that is created by humans to connect two other bodies of water: two oceans or two lakes, or a river and an ocean. You're probably familiar with the Panama Canal, which connects the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean through the country of Panama. Large boats can go through the Canal Instead of having to go around the southern tip of South America. Well, the Indiana Central Canal was built to



connect the Wabash and Erie Canal to the Ohio River, however it was never finished. It's an eight-mile long canal that is now used more as a recreation area, not as an actual place for ships or boats, or whatever you want to call things that float in the water.

Indianapolis also has a lot of memorials and monuments, things like buildings and statues that are used to “commemorate” or to remember and honor people and events from the past. In fact, for some reason Indianapolis is second only to Washington, D.C. in terms of the number of monuments that are in the city. That something I didn't know, although I don't know most things, so that's not surprising!

The expression “is second only to (something)” means that the first thing you mention is in the number-two position, and the second thing you mention is in the number-one position. For example, I might say that The Wall Street Journal newspaper is second only to The New York Times in the number of people who read the newspaper each day. That would mean that The New York Times is number one, and The Wall Street Journal is number two. So in terms of the number of monuments, Washington D.C. is number one and Indianapolis is number two. I have no idea why that is, why Indianapolis would have so many monuments. Perhaps there's nothing better to do there! Well, as we've seen, you can go to the Indy 500, you can go to a jazz festival, and you can look at a lot of monuments if you visit the beautiful city of Indianapolis.

Now let's change topics and talk about a popular author or writer by the name of Malcolm Gladwell. Gladwell is a Canadian writer; he was actually born in Great Britain, but he is now “based in” New York City, meaning that he lives and works in New York City and spends most of his time there. He is a writer for a very famous magazine in the U.S. called The New Yorker, but he is even more famous for three books that he has written in recent years that all have been very popular in the U.S.

All of his books and most of his articles focus on (or are about) the social sciences, such as psychology and sociology. He refers to a lot of academic research; that is, research or studies that are done by professors at universities, but he usually concentrates on the unusual or unexpected implications of that research. An “implication” is a result or consequence of doing something or having something done. For example, a scientist might discover a new type of protein in a cell, and the implication of this research might be that other scientists and doctors will be able to find a cure for a disease. So the “implications” are the results of something.



Malcolm Gladwell's first book, published in the year 2000, was The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference. This book talks about how very small, seemingly unimportant events can have very important consequences – very important implications. For example, he tries to understand what events caused the crime rate, or the number of crimes that occur in a certain period of time, to go down in New York City, what are the causes of that. Sometimes they seem small and insignificant, but they can be very important.

“The tipping point” has entered into the English language as an expression now. When people talk about “the tipping point” they mean some point where something suddenly becomes very popular or suddenly something changes. The expression originally comes from the study of diseases and how diseases are spread. There comes a certain point at which a disease might start to spread very rapidly, like a flu. The point at which it starts to increase rapidly is the “tipping point.” Gladwell is saying that ideas can have tipping points, or products can have tipping points; suddenly they become very popular. So he analyzes how that happens and he looks at a number of different things that cause something to become, for example, very popular.

His second book was published in 2005; it was called Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking. The verb “to blink” means to close and open your eyes very quickly; it's something that your body naturally does, it's something that happens very quickly. Gladwell, here, is talking about how people make decisions very quickly, much more quickly than you might expect. Many of us have been taught not to make quick decisions, and instead to search for more information and to think about it. But Blink uses many examples to show that people can sometimes make better decisions when they make them quickly. This is usually because that person has a lot of experience in the area, so they already have the knowledge – the information to make a quick decision.

I used to go into classrooms and watch teachers. When I was teaching at the university I would sometimes do that, and it was usually very easy to tell who was a good teacher and who wasn't a good teacher, not within the first hour or the first half hour. Often within the first two or three minutes you could just tell – you could know if you were an experienced teacher whether the person standing up in front of the class was a good teacher or not. Now, some people say, “Well, that's impossible,” or “That's not fair. What if the person's having a bad day?” and all of these things, of course, are somewhat true. But the idea is that you can usually tell very quickly if you are an expert – if you have a lot of knowledge already, you can usually make a very quick decision or a quick determination



about things, and that's what Gladwell is talking about in this very interesting book called Blink.

In one of the examples in his book, he talks about a piece of art where many experts were asked to analyze this piece of art and decide whether it was a "fake," that is, whether it was something that wasn't real, that was a copy of some original artwork. This actually was an example that was taken from the Getty Museum here in Los Angeles. They bought a piece of ancient art, and many people wondered whether it was really a piece of ancient art or whether it was a fake, someone who had made it to look like a piece of ancient art. So what they did is they did a lot of tests and studies on it, and they decided that it was an original piece of art – it was an actual statue of something from the ancient world. The museum then spent a lot of money to buy this piece of art. But then other experts came and with just one quick look, they said that it was a fake. That's because, again, they already had a lot of knowledge and expertise, they could tell very quickly that this was not a real piece of ancient art.

Now, many times when people make quick decisions, they can't tell you exactly why they think that is true. In other words, they're able to see things and understand things without necessarily being able to analyze them, and that's what Gladwell was talking about here.

Malcolm Gladwell's third book, published in 2008, is called Outliers: The Story of Success. An "outlier" (outlier) is something that is very far from average. An outlier is not typical. In his book, Gladwell talks about people who are outliers because they are much more successful than other people. In the book, he looks at the factors behind their success, or the reasons that some people become very successful and others do not.

He emphasizes that people are successful not only because of what they do or don't do, but also because of the situation and circumstances in their lives, sometimes which contribute to their success much more than people think. An example is Bill Gates, the head of Microsoft. Gates is a very intelligent man, and he became very rich – very wealthy when he created Microsoft. Gladwell explains that part of the reason for Gates' success is that he lived in a city where he had access to a computer when he was in high school, back in the early 1970s. This was something that was very unusual; almost nobody had access to computers in the early 70s, at least in high school. It was this access that Gates had because of where he lived, in Washington, that he was able to become such a genius in computing.



I've read all three of Gladwell's books and I enjoyed them very much. He's a very clear writer; he's an interesting writer. It is English that is not too advanced; I think you would enjoy the subjects of the books. You might want to try to find them and try to read one of them.

Many people have read Gladwell's books; in fact, Time Magazine, a popular news magazine, said he was one of the 100 most influential people in the world. An "influential" person is someone who has a lot of influence over other people; that is, someone who can make people, in this case, change the way they think about things.

Now let's answer some of the questions that you have sent us.

Our first question comes from Ariel (Ariel) in Taiwan. Ariel wants to know the difference the expression "to brush up on (something)" and "to polish up." For example, someone says, "I need to brush up on my French before I go to Paris." You could also hear someone say, "You should polish up your Spanish before you go to Madrid." What do these expressions mean, and what's the difference between them?

"To brush up on (something)" means to practice or to pick up a skill or talent that you have already acquired – you have already achieved, but you haven't used for a long time, and therefore it may need some work. For example, if you learned to play the piano when you were 10 years old and now you are 30 years old and someone says, "Oh, could you play the piano for me?" you might say, "Well, I need to brush up on my piano playing." I did know how to do it once, but I need to practice a lot more now because it's been so long I have forgotten.

"To polish (something)" usually in this case means to make it more perfect, so it's similar in meaning. "To polish" means that it's already very good; you just need to get it to be great. You need improve it a little bit. "He's going to polish his writing skills over the summer," he already writes very well, now he's going to try to write even better.

Usually these two expressions, then, are used in the same way, but "to brush up on" something implies that you had a skill that was good once, but it's been many years or a long time since you've used it. "To polish" usually means to make something even better. There isn't necessarily this idea that you haven't used it for a long time. "Polish" doesn't require the word "up." You could say "polish up," or just "polish."



Seung-hoon (Seung-hoon) from Korea wants to know what the expression “coming off” means. For example, you often hear when you are watching a sporting event someone says, “He’s coming off an injury,” or “He’s coming off the bench,” the place where the players sit who are not playing.

“To come off” means to have recovered from something or to have finished doing something. For example, the tennis player hurts her arm, and she waits six months, and then she comes off her injury. She is coming off of her injury, she is able to start playing again; the arm has recovered, it’s gotten better. “To come off the bench” is an expression that means that you are now going to be playing on a regular basis; you’re no longer going to be sitting on the bench. Something has changed, and now you will be a regular player.

So, “coming off,” when we talk about an injury, means that you had this injury but now you are better, you’ve recovered. “To come off the bench” means to go from not playing – not being active, to being active and playing on a regular basis.

Finally, Vasyl (Vasyl) from Ukraine wants to know the meaning of the expression “a matter of (something).” For example, if someone says, “it’s a matter of choice,” or, “it’s a matter of convenience.”

The expression “a matter of” means having to do with or related to a certain subject or a certain situation. You might say, “I love this new car, but I don’t think I can afford it. I don’t have enough money. It’s a matter of price,” meaning it’s related to – the reason is related to the price. Someone may also said, “Well, I think that movie was excellent, but it’s a matter of opinion,” meaning I liked it, but other people with different opinions might not like it; it depends on your opinion.

That’s the usually use of this “matter of” expression. However, there is one somewhat special expression, which is “a matter of fact.” When someone says “as a matter of fact,” they mean actually or in fact to show that they believe that what they are talking about is true and everyone would recognize it as being true. For example: “I know she works at the museum. As a matter of fact, I saw her there just yesterday.” “As a matter of fact” is a way of emphasizing that this is true.

If you have a question for us, you can email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com. We don’t have the opportunity to answer all of your questions, it’s a matter of time, but we will certainly do our best to answer as many as we can.



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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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