



TOPICS

Famous Americans: Janis Joplin; compulsory education and truancy laws; to bask; to brace; to palm off; to follow one's hunch(es)

GLOSSARY

blues – an American style of music that is very slow and seems sad

* When Cecil's girlfriend broke up with him, he spent a lot of time in his room listening to the blues.

to catch the attention of – for someone to become interested in one; to have others look at or pay attention to one

* Carl and Mandy played their music in small clubs for years until they caught the attention of a music producer, who wanted to record their music.

lead singer – the most important singer in a band; the singer in a group who sings by himself or herself and stands in front of the other musicians

* Is Roberta the lead singer of the band, or one of the back-up singers?

solo artist – a singer who isn't part of a band, but instead has his or her own albums or recordings

* Before Michael Jackson became a solo artist, he sang in groups with his brothers.

to struggle with – to have problems with something and try to fight against it, but maybe not successfully

* The mail carrier struggled with their three dogs in yard when he tried to deliver the mail to their house.

to relapse – to begin doing something bad again, such as drinking alcohol or using drugs, after one had already stopped

* I quit smoking last month, but I had a relapse when my friend, who is a smoker, stayed with me over the weekend.

compulsory – required; obligatory; mandatory; required by law

* In some countries, military service is compulsory.



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to play hooky – to be away from school without permission; to not be in class when one is supposed to be there

* My brother played hooky yesterday to go see the new Star Wars movie with his friends.

to skip school – to be away from school without permission; to not be in class when one is supposed to be there

* We need to call the parents of the students who aren't in school today to make sure they haven't skipped school.

truancy – an official term or name for being away from school without permission, or to not be in class when one is supposed to be there

* The governor said that truancy in schools is a major problem, and she is going to do something about it during her term in office.

detention – a type of punishment for students where they are forced to sit quietly in a room, maybe studying, before or after school, or while other students are having their lunch or a break

* Leona and Cindy were caught fighting in the schoolyard and both were given five days of detention.

mandate – an official order to do something; a law or rule that tells people what they must do

* A new company mandate requires that all employees wear protective glasses while working in the factory.

to bask – to relax and enjoy the warmth of something, such as the sun or a fire; to enjoy the success of something

* When Samir came on stage to receive his reward, he stood for a moment to bask in the applause of the audience.

to palm off – to hand over a problem to someone else, sometimes by cheating or lying to the person

* I am so mad at Sharon. She palmed off on me the department report right before a long holiday weekend!

to follow one's hunch(es) – to act or make a decision according to a guess, one's feelings, and/or an idea of what might be best, without having much or any evidence; to have a suspicion

* Gamblers often follow their hunches when placing bets.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

Ditch Days

Each school campus has different “policies” (rules) about whether students may leave the campus during the school day. Some schools allow students to leave the campus at lunchtime, if their parents give written “permission” (support; agreement). Students, then, receive a “pass,” which is a piece of paper or card showing that they may leave campus at certain hours for specific purposes. Others schools, however, do not allow students to leave campus at all, from when students arrive at school to the end of the school day. This is especially true for schools in large, “urban” (in the city) areas, where schools are particularly concerned about students’ safety.

While schools may have these policies “restricting” (limiting) when and where students may go, students themselves may have a different idea. Some students may decide to play hooky or to skip school. Another informal term for doing this is “ditching.” Without their parents’ permission, students may ditch an entire school day, or ditch one or more classes. This is not allowed by the school, of course, and the school may call the students’ parents to report that the student was “absent” (not present; not there).

Sometimes, a large group of students may organize a “ditch day,” where many students don’t attend school for a day. A popular type of ditch day is sometimes organized by the “senior class” (fourth-year students). Since the senior year is the last year of high school and students expect to graduate from school soon, some students like to organize a ditch day near the end of the school year. On senior ditch day, students from the senior class may all go to the mountains, to the beach, or on another type of short trip together, celebrating their “upcoming” (soon to be) graduation. While these ditch days are often not “condoned” (given support by) parents, some parents “turn a blind eye” (pretend not to notice) on such ditch days, allowing their teenagers to have one day of fun.



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 213.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café episode 213. 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 famous Americans, talking about Janis Joplin, who was a famous singer and songwriter. We're also going to talk about compulsory education, the amount of schooling that all Americans are required to have, and the laws that require schooling for children. As always, we'll also answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

We begin this Café with a continuation of our series on famous Americans. Today we're going to talk about Janis Joplin, who was an American singer and songwriter from Texas. She began her career singing the "blues," which is a style of music that is very slow and sad, I guess you could say. "To be blue" means to be sad. The blues were very popular, coming from the African American (or black) musicians in the South, but also in some northern cities such as Chicago.

Joplin began by singing in this style – the blues style. She had a beautiful voice for singing the blues, and in 1966 she caught the attention of a rock band called Big Brother and the Holding Company. The phrase "to catch the attention" of someone means for someone to become interested in you. I like to think that I caught the attention of my wife with my beautiful hair – back when I had hair! But this is Janis Joplin catching the attention of a rock group – a rock band.

She became the lead singer of this band. A "lead" (lead) singer is the most important singer – the main singer in a band. Other band members may sing a little bit, but most of the singing is done by the lead singer. So for example, in the rock band Bruce Springsteen and the E Street Band, well, the lead singer is Bruce Springsteen. That's the lead singer.



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This band did very well, but the attention, again, was focused mostly on Joplin, because she was such a good and powerful singer. Many people said she was the star – she was the reason the band was doing well, and they encouraged her to leave the band, which she eventually did. After leaving the band, she became what we would call a solo artist. A “solo artist” is a singer who isn’t part of a band, but instead has his or her own albums or recordings. Elvis Presley was a solo artist for most of his career. Michael Jackson is another example of a solo artist, at least after he left his brothers behind. Obviously there are still musicians who play the instruments – who play the music for these singers, but the solo artist is really the focus. It’s the solo artist’s name that appears on the albums.

Janis Joplin’s greatest hit single, the most popular song she ever recorded, was “Me and Bobby McGee.” This is a song about losing one’s lover and wanting to be with that person again. The song was originally written by another 1960s and 70s singer, Kris Kristofferson, and a writer by the name of Fred Foster. It was about a woman named Bobby, but Janis Joplin changed it so that it was about a man named Bobby. You’ve probably heard this song. Joplin has a very distinct voice; she has a deep voice that’s perfect for singing this kind of song. One of the main, most popular parts of the song goes like this – one, two, three, four:

Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,
Nothing don't mean nothing honey if it ain't free, no no.
And feeling good was easy, Lord, when he sang the blues,
You know feeling good was good enough for me,
Good enough for me and my Bobby McGee.

Of course here, Bobby would have to be a woman.

Another popular song by Joplin was “Mercedes Benz,” the German made car. In the song, Joplin asks God to buy her a Mercedes-Benz, a color television, and a “night on the town.” A night on the town is a fun evening where you go to many different places, usually restaurants or bars, eating food and having a good time. That’s a night on the town. Her song is really a critique – a criticism of how people believe that their happiness depends on buying and having expensive things. Joplin is saying, of course, that it doesn’t. Once again, it’s impossible to imitate Joplin’s voice; it was very unique. The song, “Mercedes Benz,” begins:

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all have Porsches, I must make amends.
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?



The song goes “Oh Lord, won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz?” meaning please buy me this car. “My friends all have Porsches (a Porsche is another expensive European car), I must make amends” (amends). “To make amends” means to do something that would somehow make up for the crime or sin or thing that you’ve done wrong. Of course, the only thing that the singer has done wrong is be poor, so there’s actually nothing wrong with that, but she’s saying it’s like I have committed some sort of sin – I have done something very wrong because I don’t own one of these expensive cars, so she’s asking God to buy her one of these cars. She says that she’s worked hard her whole lifetime, and hasn’t gotten any help from her friends, so she needs someone to help her.

Unfortunately, Joplin struggled with drug abuse throughout her career. To “struggle” with something means to have problems with something, to try to fight against it, perhaps not successfully. We often use this in talking about, for example, some addiction – to alcohol or other things that are bad for you or that are hurting you. Joplin drank a lot of alcohol and she used illegal drugs such as heroin. Several times in her career she was able to stop using alcohol and the other drugs, but she always relapsed. To “relapse” (relapse) in this case means to start drinking or using drugs after you’ve already stopped. So, if somebody relapses, they’ve gone back to their old, bad habits of drinking or using alcohol and so forth. In 1970, at the age of 27, Joplin died from an overdose of heroin. An “overdose” means taking too much of a drug so that it kills you.

Joplin died very young, she was only 27 as I said, but she had a major impact on American music – a major influence. During that time, the mid to late 1960s, rock-and-roll singers were mostly men. You could say that even today, but it was much truer back then. She was really the first woman to become very successful at rock-and-roll in the 1960s, and so you could perhaps consider her a “pioneer” (pioneer), a person who’s the first to do something and makes it possible for other people after him or her to do that same thing. There have been many other musicians that have written songs about her; movies have been made about her as well.

When Rolling Stone magazine, which is the leading popular music magazine in the U.S., made a list in 2004 of the 100 Greatest Artists of All Time, Janis Joplin was number 46 on that list. When the magazine made a list of the 100 Greatest Singers of All Time, she was number 28. That’s pretty impressive for someone who only lived to be 27. I don’t think I was actually included on that list; maybe next time!



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Now let's turn to our next topic, which is compulsory education and truancy laws. The word "compulsory" means required, obligatory, or another word would be mandatory; something you have to do. Something that is compulsory must happen, usually because it's required by law. Compulsory education is the amount and type of education that children must receive and that the government must provide, according to the law.

In early U.S. history, there was no compulsory education as there is today. Most children were expected to work on a farm with their families and learn what they could at home by themselves. Schools were private schools, meaning that the children had to pay "tuition," or money that is paid to a school to be able to study there. "Tuition" is used specifically for money for a school. Most families didn't have money to pay for tuition, and they needed their children's help at home and on the farm anyway, so most children didn't go to school in the early part of American history.

In the 1920s however, compulsory education began to spread across the U.S., it began to become common. The first public schools were opened in the mid 19th century, so there was a public school system in some states before the 1920s. In fact, most big cities and most towns had a public school system by the beginning of the 20th century, but it was not until the 1920s that compulsory education began to become more and more common in the United States. One of the reasons this happened was that there were many immigrants and Americans wanted them to go to school to learn English and to become like American citizens – to become part of American culture. Another reason was that labor unions, the organized groups of workers, didn't want children competing with adults for their jobs, because companies knew they could pay the children less money. So for a variety of reasons, including the increase in immigration as well as the rising power – the increasing power of labor unions, compulsory education became more common and the amount of education required increased.

In the United States, even today, each state can set or decide how much education is compulsory. In most states, compulsory education begins when the child is between five and eight years old, six is the typical age, and ends when the child is either 16, 17, or 18. In the state of Illinois, for example, they require that children attend school until they are 16 years old, but Oklahoma requires school through age 18. So, every state is different. Most states, at least traditionally, have had the compulsory education age as 16, so that means a student has to go school until they're 16. When they turn 16 – when they reach



their 16th birthday they can then leave school if they want to. Of course, the parents will also have some influence here, we hope.

Some people think compulsory education is bad because it requires that a child study for many years without giving the child a choice. This is a minority view however, most people don't think this is true in the U.S.; most people believe that compulsory education is a good thing. It makes sure that most children learn how to read, write, and do math. This is supposed to prepare children for jobs or additional education when they get older. So, compulsory education – according to majority argument, we could say – prevents children from being forced to work when they are very young, and gives them the opportunity to do better later in life by getting a good education.

Nevertheless, many students don't like going to school – that's no surprise – so they sometimes play hooky or skip school. "To play hooky" (hooky) is an informal expression meaning to be away from school without permission, to not be in class when you are supposed to be in class. "To skip school" means the same thing. I was a pretty good student and I usually went to class like I was supposed to. I am sure that at least once I might have played hooky; I didn't tell my parents if I did!

The more technical, legal name for playing hooky or skipping school is "truancy" (truancy). Usually a student has to skip school for a certain number of days before he or she is officially called a truant (truant). A "truant" is someone – a student – a young student, who has not been in school for a certain number of days, it depends on the school where they are attending.

Students who are truants are sometimes punished, in fact are usually punished in some way. Most states have truancy laws that are created to keep students in school, at least up to the age of compulsory education – up until 16, for example, or 18. In most states, schools are initially responsible for enforcing the truancy laws; in other words, the teachers and the leaders of the school – the principal, who is the head of the school, and the vice principals, who help the principal – they are in charge of making sure the students stay in class. Now, if the student is skipping a lot of classes – skipping school a lot, they may be punished through something which is very common in U.S. schools called detention. "Detention" is when students are forced to sit quietly, usually, in a room, maybe studying, either before or after school, or sometimes while other students are having their lunch break. So it's a punishment where the students have to come early to school, stay late after school, or sometimes even come on Saturday. Detention is usually given for perhaps less serious cases of truancy. If a student skips school



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one day, they'll probably be sent to detention, or put in detention, meaning they'll have to stay after school for an hour or two hours.

I went high school back in St. Paul, back in the 1920s, and we had at the end of every day an announcement where the principal would announce the names of the students who had to report to room 309. "To report" means to go to, in this case. Room 309 was the room – the classroom that was right next to the principal's office, and if your name was read and you had to report to room 309, that means you were being punished. So you were punished in two ways: First, everyone in the school knew that you were being punished because your name was announced to the entire school, and secondly, you were punished by having to stay after school, usually an hour or so. I went to a school that didn't have any school buses, so everyone came to school either by walking or by taking a public or city bus. You could, however, miss your athletic team practice – those teams usually practice after school – if you were sent to detention. So, the worst thing that could happen to you is to find out that you have to report to room 309 at the end of school. Did I ever get called to report to room 309? I think once, maybe twice. My older brother, however, was always in room 309, but we won't talk about that!

If detention doesn't work – if the student continues to be truant, then the local government – the local police could be involved. They might, for example, "mandate," or require counseling for the student and his or her parents. They might investigate if there is some larger family problem.

Many truancy laws hold the parents accountable for their students' truancy, meaning that even though it's the student who is deciding not to go to school, sometimes the parents themselves are punished for it. In some states, such as Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Texas, parents can even be "fined," that is, forced to pay money, or in an extreme case they could be put in jail if their children do not go to school. This doesn't happen very often, however.

Of course, some children don't go to school because they are schooled at home, what we call "homeschooling." Parents often homeschool their children because they think they can do a better job than the schools, or because they have strong religious beliefs that they want their children to learn. In most states, truancy laws make an exception for homeschooling, meaning that if the parent says they are schooling their child at home they're not considered truant. In some states however, there are still parents who have difficulties trying to educate their children at home. Homeschooling is another topic that we don't have time to talk about today. The most important question is whether compulsory education



works, if it actually helps keep students in school. Again, that's a big question that we don't have time to answer now.

We do have time, however, to answer some of your questions, so let's do that.

Our first question comes from Jorge (Jorge), originally from Peru, now living in the United States. The question has to do with the difference between the words "bask" (bask) and "brace" (brace). Well, these are two very different words. Jorge saw them in a couple of sentences and wanted to know what they meant.

Let's start with "bask." "To bask" usually means to relax and enjoy the warmth, for example, of the sun. To sit outside and to bask in the sun means to go out and enjoy the warm sun – if you like enjoying the warm sun. It can also mean, more generally, to enjoy your success for something. For example if you are giving a concert, and everyone in the concert – the music concert loves your performance, and they all stand up and they clap – bravo, woohoo – you would sit there and say thank you and you could bask in that moment; you could enjoy that moment for as long as possible. There's an expression "to bask in the glow (glow) of something." To bask in the glow of something means to, again, be part of that positive experience and try to keep that experience going, to enjoy that experience as long as possible. The "glow" of something is the light that something gives off. So if you light a fire, there's a glow – there's a light that comes from the fire.

"To brace" (brace) usually means to get ready for some sort of pain or a difficult or painful situation. It can also mean to hold onto something because you are about to hit something – you're going to have some sort of physical impact: "The plane crashed and all of the passengers (the people inside the plane) braced themselves." They held onto the seats in front of them, or tried to prevent from getting injured by bracing themselves. So, to brace yourself can usually mean, in a more general sense, to get ready, to prepare yourself for something difficult. If you're going to tell someone some very bad news, you may say to them first "brace yourself," meaning prepare yourself, I'm about to tell you some bad news.

Harald (Harald) in Austria wants to know the meaning of the expressions "palm off," "foist off," and "fob off." All of three expressions are similar in meaning. "To palm off" means to give a problem to someone else, sometimes by lying to that person or cheating that person. Sometimes we use this expression when someone is trying to sell you something that isn't very good quality or that they know doesn't work, but they don't tell you. For example, if you had an old car that didn't work very well and you tried to sell it to someone, telling them, "Oh,



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yeah. This is a great car,” that would be trying to palm off your car on someone. Sometimes we use this expression, also, for a job or a task that you have to perform: “My sister tried to palm off the dishwashing on me.” She tried to make me do it.

The expression “palm off” is usually followed the preposition “on,” because you’re palming off this thing or this activity on someone else. “He tried to palm off the car on his neighbor,” for example.

The expressions “to foist (foist) off” or “to fob (fob) off” are similar in meaning, but they are not that commonly used here in the U.S.; the most common expression would be “to palm off.”

Bana (Bana), I think that’s the correct pronunciation, from I’m not sure where, we don’t have a country, wants to know what the expression “to follow your hunches” (hunches) means. When someone says “follow your hunches,” or “I have a hunch,” what does that mean?

A “hunch” is a guess; it’s an idea. You’re not sure; it’s something that you think is true, but you are only guessing at this point. So, “to follow your hunches” means to believe that your guesses are correct and try to make a decision based on that guess, or to find out some information based on that guess. A good police detective, someone who tries to solve crimes, might follow his or her hunches – follow what they think is true, even though they don’t have evidence that it is true. At least, they don’t have evidence yet.

I have a hunch that you may have a question. You can email us; our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com. We’ll try to answer as many of your questions as 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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