

## Chatterbox #255 – Tips for talking about art

### Episode description

It's hard to share your thoughts and feelings in a different language. Sometimes you don't have the words! In this episode, Andrew and Jeremy share their four tips for talking about art, films, and literature in English.

### Fun fact

Vincent van Gogh, one of history's greatest painters, only officially sold one painting while he was alive. He sold it to his fellow painter Anna Boch in early 1890, and it's his only painting with documentation showing that he sold it.

### Expressions included in the study guide

- On the right track
- You can say that again
- It's hard to say
- People/person behind the [something]
- Pick up [something]
- Expose yourself to [something]



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## Transcript

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Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

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**Andrew:** Hello, everyone. My name's Andrew.

**Jeremy:** And my name is Jeremy.

**Andrew:** And you are listening to Culips.

**Andrew:** Welcome back to Culips. This is a Chatterbox episode. If you're unfamiliar with Chatterbox, well, it's the Culips series where we have completely natural English conversations and we let you listen in. Today I'm joined by my cohost Jeremy. Hey, there, Jeremy. What's up?

**Jeremy:** Oh, nothing much. Just recording another Culips episode with my friend Andrew.

**Andrew:** What are we talking about today, Jeremy?

**Jeremy:** So today we are going to talk about how to express your opinions about art and movies and other things like this.

**Jeremy:** But before we do that, we should let everybody know about the study guide so they can follow along as they listen today.

**Andrew:** That's right. In the study guide, everyone, there is a transcript, there are detailed vocabulary explanations and examples, and there's a quiz, and there are some prompts that you can use for writing or speaking practice, as well. It's a great resource to complement your English studies, and we would encourage you to check it out. There are free study guide samples on our website, Culips.com. So if you want to see what kind of material is included in the study guide, you could visit Culips.com and check that out. And then if you would like to get unlimited access to our study guide library for every episode, you simply need to sign up and become a Culips member.

**Andrew:** So, Jeremy, let's get into it here. We are going to talk about how to talk about art, how to talk about movies and music, and the kind of artwork that enriches our lives. And this topic was suggested to us by one of our listeners.

**Andrew:** And she sent us an email, which I will read for everyone now, says: “Hi, Culips. My name is Somang Lee living in Korea, and my English name is Hope. Anyway, I’m a big fan of the Culips podcast. I always tune in to Culips and I’m glad that I can listen to this high-quality podcast. Your content is always good. Sometimes it’s hard for me to express my emotion and report how I feel after looking at art and listening to music. For example, someone asked me, ‘How do you feel after looking at that picture or listening to this song?’ And I always answer, ‘Oh, the song is so sad,’ or, ‘The high pitch of the song makes me feel thrilled’ or, ‘That art is like, I don’t know, but I guess if it were up for auction, it would be sold at a high price. It looks expensive.’ But I don’t think this is right. I don’t know how to describe my feelings because I’m not familiar with this topic. So would you please deal with how to express emotion and what effective words are in reporting about art, music, and literature? Once again, I’m a huge fan and look forward to listening to all of your episodes.”

**Andrew:** OK, so, Hope, great question. Thank you very much. First, we should say, Jeremy, that I think Hope is **on the right track** here. I think responding that way is not a terrible way to respond. I really liked that comment, like, if this painting were sold at auction, it would sell for a high price. I think that’s a great way to talk about the beauty of art.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, **you can say that again.**

**Andrew:** And, Jeremy, actually, that is one of the tips that you have for Hope today, isn’t it? And that is that we can use metaphor and simile to describe our emotions in reaction to different works of art.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, I think a lot of times people use a metaphor or a simile to explain their feelings, because usually feelings are difficult to express in words, in general. For example, if I saw a photo, I might say something like, oh, it reminds me of a butterfly. Or it makes me feel like I’m all wet. I use the word like to draw a comparison between another feeling and the feeling I have when I see the painting or listen to the song or something like that.

**Andrew:** Right. So just to back up and explain quickly here, a simile is a kind of metaphor, a metaphor is a comparison. So, you’re comparing one thing to another thing. And, specifically, a simile is a comparison using the word like or the word as. So, when Jeremy said, “Oh, I feel like blah, blah, blah when I look at this painting,” this is a kind of simile. Or “I feel as, you know, I look at this painting and I feel as if I am in the jungle with the animals that are in the painting, it’s realistic in this way.” This would be another type of simile.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, really, there’s an endless variety of comparisons you could make with any one piece of art. So rather than give people specific expressions to use, I would say they should just try to make a simile of their own.

**Andrew:** Yeah, and the more obscure and random the simile is, the more pretentious you will sound. And the more pretentious you will sound, the more of an expert you will sound like.

**Jeremy:** If that's what you're looking for, you are exactly right.

**Andrew:** And I don't know if this is true for every language, but definitely in English, people can sound very pretentious when talking about art, because they use obscure metaphors and comparisons when talking about art. And it makes them sound like they know what they're talking about. Maybe they don't in reality. **It's hard to say.**

**Jeremy:** You can also simply explain the emotion that the thing makes you feel. Like, there are some songs that make me feel very sad when I hear them. And there are other songs that make me feel very excited. So you can say, oh, it makes me sad seeing this painting or listening to that song makes me feel sad. I feel like the artist must be in great pain. And, actually, this is another thing that I think we do in English. We make comments about the artist or the person who created the piece of art. So we say, oh, he was a genius or she was a revolutionary, things like this. We make comments about the artists themselves, the **people behind the artwork.**

**Andrew:** Right. So that is our second tip for everyone. It's to not focus on the art or the movie or the music, but to focus on the context behind the artwork, right? So, as Jeremy mentioned, you could talk about the artist and comment on the artist's context when he or she was making the art. Or you could talk about the time period when the art was created, the historical context. That is another way to comment and express your opinions and feelings of the art without necessarily saying, oh, I feel depressed when I look at this painting, right? You could say, oh, maybe, wow, 200 years ago, when this painting was made, it must have been such a difficult time to live in. There's no electricity, people were starving, it was difficult, right? That is a different way to comment and talk about the art but without just making a basic sentence like I feel depressed when I look at it.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, sometimes that's just not enough. And I think Somang was commenting about that in her letter to us. She felt like her simple expressions weren't enough to capture her feeling or to capture the artwork.

**Andrew:** All right, the third tip that we have for you here today is to focus on a specific part of the art that you want to talk about. So instead of just saying what your general reaction to the art is, you could focus in on one narrow part and talk about that. So if you watched a movie that you thought was really awesome, maybe you could talk about the directing, or you could talk about the costumes, or you could talk about the colours in the movie. So instead of talking about it as a whole, just focus on one specific part and mention that.

**Andrew:** You know, I have a lot of friends who are musicians and we talk about music all the time. And we often talk about music in this way. We don't say, oh, that song is great. Instead, we focus more on the guitar tone. Wow, I love the guitar tone in this song. I wonder how the guitarist configured his amplifier to get that sound? Or we talk about the drums or the mixing on the record.

**Jeremy:** Or sometimes the person's voice. Some singers these days have very unique voices they, they can reverberate their skull when they sing to make a different note, sometimes, this is quite common these days. So you can comment on the voice or something unique about the singer, as well.

**Andrew:** Absolutely. I completely agree with you there, Jeremy.

**Andrew:** And I guess to wrap it up here, we will leave our listeners with one final tip, our fourth tip for today. And that is that if you want to learn how English speakers talk about art, about movies, about paintings, about literature, then you need to put yourself into the environment where English speakers are talking about these things. Now this is maybe not possible to do in real life if you live in a country where there are no English speakers, but you can do this through podcasts, through online magazines and newspapers, through YouTube. So just watch and listen to and read the kind of content where people are discussing these topics, and you'll **pick up the vocabulary**. You'll **pick up the expressions** that English speakers use when talking about art.

**Jeremy:** For example, someone could search YouTube for fine art reviews. Review videos are very common on YouTube. And when people review things, they use all of these kinds of expressions to express their opinion about that thing. So, movie reviews or music reviews or art or painting reviews, I don't know if that is a good term or not, but it's a good place to start.

**Andrew:** For art, I would suggest searching for art criticism, because, for whatever reason, the art world is a little bit more pretentious, as I mentioned. We don't use the word reviews to talk about art. We talk about art criticism, so you could search for that on the internet and find tons of content that will help you learn how to understand and to talk about this subject.

**Jeremy:** Great.

**Andrew:** So, everyone to summarize what we covered here today. The first tip we had for you is to use metaphors and similes when talking about art and music and films. The second tip is to comment about the artist's background or the historical context in which the art was created. Our third tip is to focus on one specific part that you found moving or troubling or depressing. Maybe it's the lighting, maybe it's the directing, maybe it's the brushwork, maybe it's the colour, something like that. And, finally, our fourth tip is to **expose yourself to English content** where you will hear people speak about the art that you also want to talk about.

**Andrew:** So that brings us to the end of today's episode. Thank you, guys, for listening. We hope you learned a lot with us today. If you like Culips, if you listen to us often, please support us. You could do that by becoming a Culips member on our website, Culips.com, by following us on social media, or by telling your friends about Culips.

**Jeremy:** You can also try using some of these tips today to leave us a five-star review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts. You can try using some of these expressions or ways of expressing your opinion to write a review of Culips.

**Andrew:** If you would like to send us an email just like Hope did, then please do. We love hearing from you. Our email address is [contact@Culips.com](mailto:contact@Culips.com). We will be back soon with another brand-new episode and we'll talk to you then. Bye, everyone.

**Jeremy:** Bye, everyone.

## Detailed Explanations

### On the right track Idiom

**On the right track** means to act or think in a way that will result in success or that will bring good results. This figurative expression comes from the literal interpretation of following tracks, a trail, a railing, or something similar to get to your destination. Someone who is **on the right track** isn't yet at their destination—in other words, their goal. They need to keep working on or thinking about whatever it is they're focused on. In this episode, Andrew says that Hope, in her guesses about how to talk about art, is **on the right track**. Her guesses about how to talk about art were almost completely correct. She just needs to build on that, follow her ideas further, in order to get a more complete answer.

Here are a couple more examples with **on the right track**:

**Yasin:** Ugh, I hate this class so much.

**Leroy:** What? Really? Why?

**Yasin:** I can never get the answers right! I've spent like an hour on this one question and it just never comes out the way it's supposed to.

**Leroy:** Can I see? Oh, OK! See, you're **on the right track** for the first half and then right here is where it all goes wrong. You've got a minus here when it's supposed to be a plus.

**Yasin:** No way. What? That was it? I just ...

**Leroy:** You wrote the formula down wrong, didn't you?

**Yasin:** I did. I really did. Well, that's good to know.

**Mollie:** As you can see from the graphs here, our emissions testing is showing a decrease in harmful emissions.

**Christine:** That's good, correct?

**Mollie:** Yes, very good. We're very much **on the right track** with this new environmental initiative. We should be seeing significant results within the next year.

## You can say that again

Expression

When someone says **you can say that again**, it means that they completely agree with what was just said. It denotes strong agreement. You can use this in all situations, happy or sad, positive or negative. The way it is said depends on the situation. For example, someone irritated or frustrated would say **you can say that again** with a sigh. If someone is happy, then the expression would be said with enthusiasm.

Here are a few more examples with **you can say that again**:

**Linette:** Do you have the report that's due this afternoon? I need to look it over before we hand it in to make sure it covers everything for tomorrow's presentation.

**Suk-ja:** Yeah, I'm finishing it up now. I'll email it to you before lunch.

**Linette:** Great. I can't wait for this project to be over. It's been so terrible.

**Suk-ja:** **You can say that again.** I get stress headaches just thinking about it.

**Yash:** Oh, man! I can't wait for the new game to come out. I've been watching videos of people playing and I just want to play it!

**Declan:** **You can say that again!** I've never been this excited about a game! Did you pre-order it?

**Yash:** Definitely, like 2 months ago!

**Declan:** Good, because I bet it'll be sold out within a few hours!

**Taylor:** Ugh, why is it so hot this week? I thought it was autumn!

**Sinead:** I don't know, but I need this heat wave to stop. It's hotter than a desert in here.

**Taylor:** I think I burned my legs on my chair today. We really need to get air conditioning in the office.

**Sinead:** **You can say that again!** If they don't, my computer is going to melt.



## It's hard to say

Expression

**It's hard to say** means that something is difficult to describe or put into words. You can also use **it's difficult to say**. Sometimes this expression is used to avoid having to answer a question. It can also be used when the question or answer is a sensitive topic that might insult someone.

Sometimes people will say it's hard to tell. This expression is a bit different. It's hard to tell means someone is having trouble making a decision or telling the difference. Note: Native English speakers will understand which definition the speaker means, regardless of whether they use say or tell.

Here are a couple more examples with **it's hard to say**:

**Leora:** So, we're ready to present our findings to the board. How do you think they'll react?

**Mohammed:** **It's hard to say.** I know a few of the board members are aware of the issues with the building, but I doubt they realize it's as bad as it is.

**Leora:** Do you think they'll get mad and yell at us?

**Mohammed:** No. Maybe. I don't know. If they do get mad, it won't be at us.

**Cerys:** Oh, I like these colours! What do you think of them for our bathroom?

**Zakariya:** Yeah, they're nice.

**Cerys:** Which do you like better, this blue or this green?

**Zakariya:** **It's hard to say.** They're both quite dark but in, like, different ways.

**Cerys:** Too dark?

**Zakariya:** Yeah, maybe.

**Cerys:** Hmm. Well, we're not here for paint, so I'll just take a few of these little card things and we'll keep shopping.

**Zakariya:** Good idea.

## People/person behind the [something]

### Idiom

The **people/person behind the [something]** are the people or person who created it or were responsible for its creation. Another way to say this is **the brains behind [something]**, or **the [man or woman] behind [something]**. This is usually used when talking about something that is created, such as art, music, literature, software, inventions, or innovations. In this episode, one tip for talking about art is to make comments about the artists themselves, the **people behind the artwork**. When you talk about an art piece or a movie, talk about the people who created it.

Here are a couple more examples with **people/person behind the [something]**:

**Owen:** Have you heard of dubstep music? It's something to do with synths and bass drops or something.

**Rakesh:** Yeah! I love dubstep. I listen to it when I'm working and it keeps me focused.

**Owen:** I was reading about the **people behind the style**, and it's a really interesting story. They made it for nightclubs in London or something.

**Rakesh:** If you like it, look for the classical music and dubstep mixes. They're really good and have no lyrics so you won't get distracted if you're working.

**Hanna:** How are you always so organized and on top of things? I feel like I'm trying to juggle a million things all the time and dropping them all.

**Nadia:** I started using this new notebook system. The **man behind the system** developed it to make it easier to stay organized. I have to admit, it really works!

**Hanna:** Obviously! You're always on top of things and ready to go. Maybe I should try it.

**Nadia:** You definitely should. I'll send you a few links to get you started.

## Pick up [something]

Verb

**Pick up** is a very versatile verb—it has a wide variety of meanings depending on the context. In this episode, Andrew says, “Watch and listen to and read the kind of content where people are discussing these topics, and you’ll **pick up the vocabulary**.” This is figurative. You’re not physically **picking up something**. Instead, you’re learning something or making habits through practice and experience.

Here are a few more examples with **pick up [something]**:

**Adam:** How was your summer? Did you get to go to camp?

**Su-Bin:** No. My parents were afraid I would **pick up bad habits** at camp if I went, so I wasn’t allowed to go.

**Adam:** Really? That sucks, man. I had a blast at camp! Learned a bunch of new campfire songs.

**Su-Bin:** Oh, man. I want to learn new campfire songs!

**Satomi:** Your French is really good. Where did you study?

**Penelope:** I didn’t study. I spent a summer in Paris when I was in high school and just **picked it up** when I was working at a café.

**Satomi:** In one summer? That’s pretty amazing.

**Penelope:** I guess. I **pick up languages** pretty easily, maybe because my parents speak so many different languages.

**Yui:** I love this song. Don’t you love this song?

**Kaoru:** I guess. The vocals are a little pitchy, though, like the singer is off key.

**Yui:** How can you tell? I never would have been able to tell.

**Kaoru:** My brother is a singer and always makes me listen to him practice. I **picked it up** from listening to him.

## Expose yourself to [something]

Phrasal verb

When you **expose yourself to [something]**, you are introducing yourself to or experiencing something new. This usually means that you are really diving into the new experience or thing and surrounding yourself with it. The fourth tip in this episode is to **expose yourself to English content** that will allow you to hear people speak about art, which means to put yourself in an environment where English speakers are talking about art.

You can also say **familiarize with**, **get acquainted with**, or **introduce to**. However, be careful when you use this expression, as “exposing yourself to [someone]” means to show your genitals.

Here are a couple more examples with **expose yourself to [something]**:

**Tomiko:** I’m having a really tough day.

**Kira:** Oh, no! That sucks. You need to treat yourself to something nice.

**Tomiko:** I dunno. I’ve got so much work to do, I don’t really have time for something nice.

**Kira:** What about something you can do while you work? Like, **expose yourself to something that smells good!** I find that a nice smell makes me feel better.

**Tomiko:** Hmm, I can try that. I have a scented candle somewhere that I’ve been meaning to light.

**Kira:** Try that! If it doesn’t work, I’ll think of something else you can try.

**Tomiko:** Thanks, Kira.

**Jonathan:** I’ve always been really into horror movies, but now I’m finding them boring. It feels like they’re all the same.

**Megumi:** Have you tried **exposing yourself to new genres**? Maybe murder mystery or noir films would be more exciting now?

**Jonathan:** I dunno. I’m not sure how I feel about mysteries.

**Megumi:** I’ve watched a few that are on the scary side. I’ll send you the titles so you can try one and see!

## Quiz

**1. Which of the following means you want to become better at reading English-language books?**

- a) I want to expose myself to more English books.
- b) I can't read any more English books.
- c) I want to explain more English books.
- d) I want to expose myself.

**2. What does it mean when someone says, "It's hard to say"?**

- a) it is difficult to talk
- b) they don't have any information on the topic
- c) they aren't allowed to talk about the topic
- d) it is difficult to describe or put in words

**3. If you want to encourage someone who is close to getting the right answer, which of the following could you say?**

- a) you're on the right hand
- b) you're on the right track
- c) you're on the left track
- d) you're on the wrong track

**4. What does it mean when someone tells you, "You can say that again"?**

- a) they want you to repeat yourself
- b) they disagree with you
- c) they agree with you
- d) they like the sound of your voice

**5. Which of the following is another way of referring to an artist?**

- a) the person behind the art
- b) the animal behind the art
- c) the art behind the person
- d) the person in front of the art

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## Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Describe a time when you were on the right track and just needed to keep working through the problem to get to the solution.
2. Have you ever agreed with someone so enthusiastically that you could have said, “You can say that again”? When was it and why?
3. Describe a time when you were asked a question but had a difficult time replying, because it was hard to say what the answer was.
4. Think about your favourite invention, book, piece of music, or art. Speak or write a little about the person or people behind your favourite thing.
5. The fourth tip shared in this episode is to expose yourself to English-language content. Describe a situation where you picked up information or knowledge in this way.

## Quiz Answers

1.a    2.d    3.b    4.c    5.a

### Episode credits

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