

## Catch Word #197 On the fence

### Episode description

Join Andrew and Jeremy (our newest Culips host) for a lesson about how to use two everyday English expressions about decision-making.

### Fun fact

In this episode, you'll be introduced to our newest Culips host, Jeremy. To learn more about him, check out his [YouTube channel](#) and podcast, [Sponge Mind](#).

### Expressions included in the study guide

- To be a [something] veteran
- To be on the fence
- To be all about [something]
- To be in limbo
- To be torn between [two options]
- To be split down the middle
- Gruesome
- At play



## 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.

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Andrew: You're listening to the Culips English podcast. To download the study guide for this episode, which includes the transcript, detailed vocabulary explanations, real-world examples, and a quiz, visit our website, [Culips.com](http://Culips.com), [C-U-L-I-P-S.com](http://C-U-L-I-P-S.com).

Hey, everybody. My name is Andrew.

Jeremy: And my name is Jeremy.

Andrew: And you're listening to Culips.

Hey, Jeremy, how are you?

Jeremy: I'm very good. How are you?

Andrew: I'm doing really well, and it's awesome to have you back on Culips. Welcome back.

Jeremy: Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Andrew: Yeah, so you're going to be helping me co-host some episodes here in the future, today included. Just in case people don't remember, you were on Culips last year. But could you just refresh everybody, give a brief introduction?

Jeremy: Sure. My name is Jeremy. I am a language teacher, I teach English and Korean to people learning those languages, and I also do a YouTube channel and a podcast, as well.

Andrew: You're a **podcast veteran**.

Jeremy: I guess you could say that. Maybe not a veteran, but.

Andrew: And where are you from?

Jeremy: I'm from California, and so I'm American but I lived in South Korea for 4 years and my wife is Korean, and now I live in Los Angeles. But I live like a Korean person. Most of the people I see are Korean here.

Andrew: That's so interesting. Well, anyway, Jeremy, it's great to have you back on Culips. And today we're going to do a Catch Word episode, and Catch Word is our series where we take a look at really interesting and useful English vocabulary and expressions and idioms, phrasal verbs, even. And we teach them to all the listeners. We tell you how to use them and give you examples, all of this good stuff.

Jeremy: Sounds great.

Andrew: Just before we get started, I wanna remind everyone out there that we have a study guide for this episode, and that includes the transcript, some detailed vocabulary explanations, real-world examples, and also a comprehension quiz. And if you'd like to study with this, which I recommend, it's a great resource, just visit our website, Culips.com, to download it.

OK, Jeremy, so today our two expressions that we're going to look at are related to when you have a hard time making a decision.

Jeremy: Ah, yes.

Andrew: Happens to me all the time, I don't know about you.

Jeremy: Me too. Every day.

Andrew: Yeah, which shirt should I wear? Yeah, these kind of things. Good. So the first expression we'll look at is **to be on the fence**. **To be on the fence**.

Jeremy: Good expression.

Andrew: Yeah, **to be on the fence**. I use this expression often, actually, in my everyday life.

Jeremy: Yeah.

Andrew: So, Jeremy, what does it mean if you're **on the fence**?

Jeremy: Well, if you imagine someone sitting on a fence, one side of their body is on one side of the fence and the other side of their body is on the other side of the fence. So it's sort of used when you're not sure what to do, both options sound good. Do I want sandwich or soup? Both sound good, which one? Something like that.

Andrew: Right, you're indecisive, you're unsure about which option you should select.

Jeremy: Yes.

- Andrew: We also have a related expression, which is **to be in limbo**, right?
- Jeremy: Yes.
- Andrew: You're sort of in this state of unsureness. And this is what it means when **you're on the fence**. And this is a very visual expression, you just have to really picture somebody sitting on a fence or standing.
- Jeremy: That would be so uncomfortable.
- Andrew: It would be very uncomfortable, but delicately balancing, right? Swaying side to side, and leaning towards one option and then leaning towards the other option. So if **you're on the fence**, you are unsure, undecided.
- Jeremy: That's interesting that you say that, because usually the next sentence someone will say "I'm leaning toward this." For example, "**I'm on the fence** about A and B, but I'm leaning toward B."
- Andrew: Right, right. You feel stronger about that option.
- Jeremy: Yeah, yeah.
- Andrew: Yeah, it's **all about balance**.
- Jeremy: Yeah, except when you have to make the decision quickly.
- Andrew: Right, that is the difficult part. Well, Jeremy, I think we can listen to some examples with this expression, **to be on the fence**.
- Jeremy: All right.

- Friend 1: Are you going to Mark's birthday party this Saturday?
- Friend 2: I don't know, **I'm on the fence**.
- Friend 1: Yeah, me too. I'd like to go but I was hoping to spend some time with my family this weekend.
- Friend 2: Yeah, and he lives so far away.
- Friend 1: Sure would be a fun party, though.
- Friend 2: Yeah, anyway, we'll see. I might end up going.

Andrew: In this example, two friends talk about going to their buddy Mark's birthday party. But they're unsure if they'll go or not. **They're on the fence**. Let's listen to that part of the example, where one of the friends uses **on the fence** to describe how he feels about going to the party.

Friend 2: I don't know, **I'm on the fence**.  
I don't know, **I'm on the fence**.

Andrew: So on one hand, the friends think it'll be fun to go to the party, but on the other hand it's far away from where they live and they might not actually want to drive all the way out to the party. **They're on the fence**.

OK, Jeremy, we have one more example with this expression. Let's listen to it now.

Friend 1: Hey, take a look at this ad.  
Friend 2: Oh, nice car. Are you thinking about buying it?  
Friend 1: I don't know, maybe. **I'm on the fence**. I do need to buy a new car, but this one is a little bit more than I wanted to pay.  
Friend 2: Why don't you go and take it for a test drive? See how you feel.  
Friend 1: That's not a bad idea. I'll give the seller a call and see if I can try it out.

Jeremy: In this example, a guy says that **he's on the fence** about buying a new car. He wants a new car but isn't sure if he can afford the car he is currently considering. Let's listen again to that part of the example.

Friend 1: I don't know, maybe. **I'm on the fence**. I do need to buy a new car, but this one is a little bit more than I wanted to pay.

Jeremy: So, when someone is **on the fence**, like the guy from the example is, it means that it is difficult for that person to make a decision.

Andrew: Buying a car is a big decision.

Jeremy: Yeah, definitely.

Andrew: It's understandable that you might be **on the fence** about that.

Jeremy: Yeah, that's a big fence.

Andrew: Big fence, indeed.

Andrew: OK, Jeremy, I think we are ready to introduce today's second expression. And, actually, maybe I'll let you introduce it. What is today's second expression?

Jeremy: Today's second expression is **to be torn between two options**, so **to be torn between this and that**, or something like that.

Andrew: Exactly, **to be torn between option A and option B**, something like this, yeah.

So what does it mean? Well, when you're **torn between two options**, you have to make a decision and there are two possibilities, right? Option A and option B, but you don't know which one to choose. There are advantages and disadvantages to option A, and also advantages and disadvantages to option B, so it's almost like half of your body wants to select option A and half of your body wants to select option B, and **you're split down the middle**.

Jeremy: Yes.

Andrew: There's a tear in your body, you don't know which option to choose.

Jeremy: Yeah, it's like someone is pulling on one hand and another person is pulling on your other hand. That's how I imagined it when I was a child, I think, when I first heard this.

Andrew: Yeah, it's actually a **gruesome** image to think about.

Jeremy: Yeah, I don't wanna tear anybody, but still it's quite commonly used.

Andrew: It's a very commonly used expression, indeed. It goes back to **being on the fence**, too, right? There's this balance, there's this half-and-half image that is **at play** here.

Jeremy: Yes.

Andrew: For an example for my own personal life, right now I've been considering going back to university. And **I'm kind of torn between whether I should go back to university and do a PhD, which takes a lot of time and money and effort, or if I should just continue to work and build my career**. This is something where I can see advantages and disadvantages to doing both things. But **I'm torn between** and I've been considering it for a while.

Jeremy: So your career is pulling you in one direction, but your study is pulling you another direction?

- Andrew: Exactly.
- Jeremy: Two equal opposing desires.
- Andrew: Exactly, two equal opposing desires and, yeah, I see the advantages and disadvantages to both. So, yeah, this is just a personalized example from my own life, of how I use this expression.
- Jeremy: Yeah.
- Andrew: Well, I think we are ready to get to some dialogue examples now. So let's take a listen to the first one.
- Jeremy: All right.

Friend 1: Which pair of shoes should I get? The Nikes or the Adidas?

Friend 2: I don't know. Which ones do you like more?

Friend 1: That's the thing, I don't know. **I'm torn between both.**

Friend 2: Well, go for the Adidas, then. They're on sale.

Friend 1: Yeah, that's a good call.

Andrew: In this example, two friends are shoe shopping. One of the friends **is torn between two different pairs of shoes**. He doesn't know if he should buy a pair of Nikes or a pair of Adidas. Let's hear this part of the example again.

Friend 1: That's the thing, I don't know. **I'm torn between both.**

**I'm torn between both.**

Andrew: OK, so **he's torn between both**. This means that he likes both pairs of shoes and doesn't know which ones to buy. In the end, he takes his friend's advice and decides to buy the shoes that are on sale. Good choice, I think. Save some money, right?

Jeremy: If they're equally desirable, then why not?

Andrew: Yeah, why not? All right, let's listen to the final example for today's episode.

Friend 1: I read an interesting article online last night.

Friend 2: Oh yeah? What was it about?

Friend 1: It was about some of the big decisions our generation has to face. It described how a lot of **young people these days are torn between starting a family or building a career.**

Friend 2: Sounds familiar. You should send me the link to that article. I'd love to give it a read.

Friend 1: Sure thing.

Jeremy: In this example, two friends discuss an article about a problem facing the current generation of young people. The problem is that this **generation is torn between family and career**. Starting a family or building a career, both have advantages and disadvantages, and choosing only one or the other is a very difficult decision to make. When someone is indecisive, and doesn't know which option to select among two options, you can say that person **is torn between the two options**.

Andrew: Exactly.

Hey, Jeremy, that about brings us to the end of today's episode.

Jeremy: Wow.

Andrew: I think just before we finish, we should recap and summarize what we looked at.

Jeremy: Yeah, sounds good.

Andrew: Could you tell us one more time, what are the two expressions we looked at today?

Jeremy: The first expression was **to be on the fence**, as in **I am on the fence** about this. The second expression was **to be torn between two things**, as in **I am torn between the Nike shoes and the Adidas shoes**.

Andrew: And we use both of these expressions when we have to make a decision and we don't know which option to select. And, everyone, I recommend that you use these expressions in your English next time you're speaking or writing. They're very natural, everyday expressions. They'll really help your English come alive and pop.



- Andrew: That's it for us today. If you have any comments, or questions, or even some suggestions for future episodes, drop us a line. You can email us, our email address is [contact@Culips.com](mailto:contact@Culips.com), or you could send us a message via our Facebook page, which is [Facebook.com/CulipsPodcast](https://www.facebook.com/CulipsPodcast).
- Jeremy: You can find more episodes of the show at [Culips.com](http://Culips.com) or wherever you get your podcasts.
- Andrew: We will be back soon with another episode, so stay tuned.
- Jeremy: Talk to you soon, bye.
- Andrew: Bye.
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## Detailed Explanations

### To be a [something] veteran *informal expression*

In this episode, Andrew calls Jeremy a **podcast veteran**. A veteran is someone who has a lot of experience doing something. So when Andrew calls Jeremy a **podcast veteran**, he means that Jeremy is an experienced podcaster.

Used on its own, the word veteran refers to someone who served in the military and has experience fighting in a war. In the United States, there is even a public holiday called Veterans Day that celebrates the service of veterans.

If you place a noun in front of the word veteran (for example, **broadcasting veteran**, **hockey veteran**, **sales veteran**), it describes someone who is very experienced in that field, career, or activity.

Here are a couple more examples with **to be a [something] veteran**:

Ryan:	Hey, I was telling my friend about you the other day.
Jill:	Oh yeah, what about?
Ryan:	I was telling him how you're the best skateboarder I know.
Jill:	Well, I'm not that good.
Ryan:	No way! You're a total <b>skate veteran</b> . You rule!

Claire:	Did you know that this is my sister's third gold medal in speed skating?
Steve:	Wow! No, I didn't. She's an <b>Olympic veteran</b> !
Claire:	She's happy with three, so she's going to retire next year.

## To be on the fence

*idiom*

When you have to choose between two or more options and you don't know which option to choose, you **are on the fence**. If you **are on the fence**, you are unsure and hesitant about making a decision between several options or possibilities.

**To be on the fence** is a common idiomatic expression that you'll hear often in casual conversation, movies, TV, etc. It describes someone who is having a difficult time making a decision.

Here is one more example with **to be on the fence**:

James:	Are you going snowboarding this Saturday?
Lisa:	Yes! Are you?
James:	<b>I'm on the fence.</b> A few of my friends are going on a road trip this weekend and I might go with them.
Lisa:	Oh man, that is a tough choice.

## To be all about [something] *modifier/slang expression*

In this episode, Andrew explains that the imagery behind the expression **to be on the fence is all about balance**. In this context, Andrew uses the word all to strengthen about. It is incorrect to say very about balance or extremely about balance, but the same meaning can be communicated by saying **all about balance**. To say that the imagery related to **to be on the fence is all about balance** is just another way of saying that the imagery is focused around balance.

So when we use all to modify the word about, about becomes stronger. For example, a book that **is all about trains** is completely dedicated to the topic of trains, or a magazine article that **is all about fashion trends for summer** is completely dedicated to the topic of summer fashion trends.

**To be all about something** also has a second meaning: to be really interested in something/someone or to really like something/someone. You can often hear this version of the expression in movies and pop music, including [Meghan Trainor's All About the Bass](#) and [Puff Daddy's All About the Benjamins](#).

Since this is a slang expression, you should avoid using it in formal situations, but it's fine to use in casual, everyday conversation.

Here are a couple more examples with the slang version of **to be all about [something]**:

Carol:	Hey, do you want to go to an all-you-can-eat buffet?
Brian:	Do you even have to ask? You know I'm <b>all about the all-you-can-eat buffets!</b>

Stephanie:	Hey, do you want to go see a movie tomorrow?
Greg:	No, sorry, I need to study.
Stephanie:	But it's Saturday night.
Greg:	I know, but I'm <b>all about getting a perfect report card</b> this semester and I don't have time to watch movies.
Stephanie:	OK. Have fun.

## To be in limbo

*idiom*

**To be in limbo** means to wait for something to happen before you can make a decision or a plan. When someone **is in limbo**, it means they are waiting for something to occur before they make a decision. If **you're in limbo**, your life is on pause until some other action or event occurs.

For example, a high school student might **be in limbo** while waiting to hear back about university applications. Before the student can make a solid plan about which university to attend, what to study, where to live, etc. she needs to know what universities accepted her. This period of uncertainty and waiting is called limbo.

In this episode, Andrew mentions that this expression is related to **to be on the fence** because both expressions involve hesitation, uncertainty, and indecision.

So, if someone **is in limbo**, it means they are waiting for something to happen before making a decision or executing a plan.

Here are a couple more examples with **to be in limbo**:

Mark:	Hey Rick! I haven't seen you since high school! What have you been up too?
Rick:	Hey Mark! After high school I <b>was in limbo</b> for a while, I wasn't sure if I should go to university or travel. So I worked for a year, travelled over the summer, then went to school.
Mark:	That's awesome!

Duncan:	Did you hear what happened to Zach?
Helen:	No, what happened?
Duncan:	The poor guy <b>was left in limbo</b> for a bit while his landlord tried to illegally increase his rent. It was a stressful few weeks there.
Helen:	Oh no! But he got everything sorted out OK?
Duncan:	Yeah. He made a complaint to the housing board and they were able to take care of it.

## To be torn between [two options]

*idiom*

When you have to make a decision between option A and option B but you don't know which one to select, **you're torn between option A and option B**.

For example, after graduating from university, Paul applied to many companies and ended up receiving two great job offers. The first offer is from an engineering firm in his hometown. The second offer is from a software developer on the other side of the country. Both offers are great, but Paul is **torn between the engineering firm and the software developer** because he isn't sure which one is right for him. The expression **to be torn between [two options]** is perfect to use in this situation because it communicates Paul's uncertainty about which job offer he should choose.

Here is another example with **to be torn between [two options]**

Dana:	What are the chances that your two favourite sports teams would be playing the same day? Are you going to watch hockey or football?
Sara:	I'm so <b>torn between the two!</b> I wish I could watch them both at the same time.
Dana:	You'll just have to flip the channel back and forth.

## To be split down the middle

*idiom*

To be **split down the middle** means to be divided into two equal parts. If a person is **split down the middle**, it means their opinion about an issue isn't firm or they are unsure about a decision they have to make. Someone who is **split down the middle** is uncertain or hesitant. Part of that person thinks option A is a good idea, and the other part of that person thinks that option B is a good idea. The end result of being **split down the middle** is doubt or uncertainty.

If a thing is **split down the middle**, it is simply divided into two parts. For example, a couple of friends might agree to **split a restaurant bill down the middle**. This means they each pay 50% of the bill.

Here are a couple more examples with **to be split down the middle**:

Chris:	I was thinking of going to the town hall meeting and hearing the prime minister talk. Would you want to come with me?
Roberta:	No way, our government is so <b>split down the middle</b> . He is all talk at these town hall meetings and then does nothing about it.
Chris:	I know, but it's still interesting to go hear. You can stay home if you feel that way.

Customer:	Excuse me, could you bring us our bill?
Waiter:	Yes, of course! Will that be together or separate?
Customer:	Could you <b>split it down the middle</b> ?
Waiter:	For sure.

## Gruesome *adjective*

**Gruesome** is an adjective that describes death or injury that is difficult to look at or disgusting. You'll often see it used in newspapers and on the news describing accidents, murders, etc. For example, a **gruesome** death is one where the body of the dead person has been extremely mutilated or disfigured.

In this episode, Andrew says that the imagery behind the expression **to be torn between [two options]** is **gruesome** because it makes him think of a body being pulled in half.

Here are a couple more examples with **gruesome**:

Sally:	I went and saw a movie the other day.
Esther:	Oh yeah? Did you like it?
Sally:	The title was deceiving! I thought it was a romance and it turned out to be a horror.
Esther:	Too <b>gruesome</b> for you?
Sally:	Totally—it was awful.

Jeri:	Please don't let Tommy play that video game. I know you want to be the cool uncle, but it's too <b>gruesome</b> and he'll get nightmares.
Ron:	OK, OK, I promise.



## At play *idiom*

Andrew mentions that the image of balancing is **at play** in both of the key expressions from this episode: **to be on the fence** and **to be torn between [two options]**.

When something is **at play**, it means that it has an influence or impact on something. For example, you might read a sentence like this in the newspaper: "Several factors are **at play** in determining the unemployment rate." This means that several factors are influencing the unemployment rate.

When a factor has an influence on the outcome or result of something, you can say that factor is **at play**.

This is high-level vocabulary that is usually used when talking about academic subjects like politics, the economy, art, etc.

Here are a couple more examples with **at play**:

Rose:	I don't understand why the president can't just put that bill through himself.
Jimmy:	There are a lot of issues <b>at play</b> in determining if the bill is passed or not.
Rose:	So he has no control over it?
Jimmy:	Nope, not really.

Mother:	What did you learn in school today?
Son:	We studied World War II in history class.
Mother:	OK, let me quiz you. What factors were responsible for the start of the war?
Son:	There were a lot of factors <b>at play</b> , but I can't tell you about them now. I'm late for soccer practice.
Mother:	OK, have a good practice!

## Quiz

**1. What kind of movie could be described as gruesome?**

- a) romantic comedy
- b) horror
- c) drama
- d) science fiction

**2. What does “I’m all about pizza” mean?**

- a) I like pizza
- b) I don’t like pizza
- c) I don’t know if I want pizza
- d) I made pizza

**3. Fill in the blank: Solving the homelessness crisis is complicated because there are many factors \_\_\_\_\_.**

- a) in play
- b) with play
- c) of play
- d) at play

**4. What thing can’t be split down the middle?**

- a) water
- b) a restaurant bill
- c) public opinion
- d) a pizza

**5. Fill in the blank: If someone is on the fence, they are \_\_\_\_\_.**

- a) honest
- b) emotional
- c) indecisive
- d) sarcastic

## Writing or discussion questions

1. Talk about a time when you were on the fence.
2. When you visit a restaurant with a friend, how do you handle the bill? Do you split it down the middle?
3. What's the most gruesome thing you've ever seen?
4. What's something that you're all about?
5. Describe a time when you were in limbo.
6. Have you ever been torn between doing two things? Talk about it.

## Quiz Answers

1.b    2.a    3.d    4.a    5.c

### Episode credits

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