

## Catch Word #209 – Asleep at the wheel

### Episode description

Have you ever gotten so distracted that you forgot to do something very important? Have you ever wondered if there's a way to explain that situation in English? Well, look no further than this Catch Word episode! Andrew and Jeremy walk you through a few useful expressions about losing focus during an important task. Make sure to study hard, you wouldn't want to fall asleep at the wheel during your English learning journey!

### Fun fact

Drowsy driving, or driving while tired, is a common and serious problem nowadays. Driving with poor or little sleep decreases your ability to focus, make quick decisions, and use your fine motor skills, which are all necessary for driving. Over 72% of drivers in Ontario, Canada, have admitted to driving while fatigued.

### Expressions included in the study guide

- Asleep at the wheel/switch
- It will cost you
- A buddy
- To catch a lucky break
- To sneak in/out
- To drop the ball
- To drop the mic



## 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, C-U-L-I-P-S.com.

Hello, everybody. My name is Andrew.

Jeremy: And I'm Jeremy.

Andrew: And you're listening to Culips.

Hey, Jeremy.

Jeremy: Hey, Andrew.

Andrew: How are you?

Jeremy: I'm doing well. It's been a while since we've done one of these.

Andrew: It has. It's been a while. How have you been?

Jeremy: Pretty good, pretty good. How about yourself?

Andrew: I've been keeping busy, working a lot, running a lot, studying a lot. You know, the usual.

Jeremy: That's good. Very active.

Andrew: Very active and, Jeremy, I've been paying a lot of attention to my responsibilities. I've been very focused in my work, which is important, right? To be focused and to pay attention.

Jeremy: Of course, very important. You wouldn't want to fall **asleep at the wheel**.

Andrew: Perfect segue, Jeremy. So, everyone, today we're going to do a Catch Word episode. And this is our series where we teach you very important English vocabulary that will help make your English sound more natural. And, in this episode, we'll teach you two expressions that you can use to describe people who are not like me, who don't pay attention to the work that they need to do and the responsibilities that they have.



Andrew: But, Jeremy, just before we get to that, I would like to remind all of our listeners that we have a study guide for this episode, and it's an awesome way to study with us, actually. It includes a transcript, detailed vocabulary explanations, real-world examples, and a quiz. And if anyone is interested in studying with the study guide, just visit our website, Culips.com, to give it a download.

Today, we are looking at two expressions that describe people who are not paying attention to their responsibilities.

Jeremy: People who are not focused, right?

Andrew: Not focused, yeah. So what is our first expression for today?

Jeremy: Our first expression for today is **asleep at the wheel** or to be **asleep at the wheel**.

Andrew: **Asleep at the wheel** and so, when I hear this, I think about somebody driving a car or driving a truck and falling asleep while they're driving. They're sitting behind the steering wheel of the vehicle and they fall asleep. Bad situation, right?

Jeremy: Very, very dangerous.

Andrew: Very, very dangerous. So, in this situation, if somebody falls asleep while they're driving, then they're not paying attention, they're not focused on the most important responsibility that they have at that moment, which is operating the vehicle safely.

Jeremy: Yeah.

Andrew: So if you are **asleep at the wheel**, it simply means that you are not paying attention, right?

Jeremy: Yeah.

Andrew: You're failing to fulfill the role, the job that you need to do, at that moment.

Jeremy: Well, I don't think people would use this if you're just not paying attention. For example, if I'm talking to you and you're not listening, I don't think we would use this expression. But, if you are the team leader for a project or something and you forget to come to a meeting, then maybe we could say he's falling **asleep at the wheel**, or he is **asleep at the wheel**.



Andrew: That's a very good point. It's not just that you're not paying attention, right? It's that you're not paying attention when you have a task to do and, because you became distracted and you didn't do your task, well, then this is falling **asleep at the wheel**.

Jeremy: Yeah, I agree.

Andrew: OK, Jeremy, I think we are ready to listen to a couple of examples using this expression.

Jeremy: OK, here we go.

Coworker 1: I just got a call from Dan from the downtown office. He was expecting you to send him the contract this morning.

Coworker 2: Oh no, I totally forgot to do that.

Coworker 1: You can't keep falling **asleep at the wheel** like this. One of these days **it'll cost you** your job.

Andrew: All right. So, in this example, an office worker gets in trouble because he forgot to send a contract to the downtown office. And this was his responsibility, but he was **asleep at the wheel** and forgot to do it. So this is a perfect example of when we can use this expression, because if you are **asleep at the wheel**, you're distracted, you're not paying attention and, as a result, you fail to do your job correctly. OK, Jeremy, let's listen to one more example here.

Jeremy: OK.

Friend 1: Ugh, housing prices are so high these days. I don't think I'll ever be able to buy a house.

Friend 2: You can blame the government for that. They were **asleep at the wheel** during the economic crisis.

Friend 1: Well, I sure hope the economy improves soon.

Friend 2: Yeah, man, me too.

Jeremy: In this example, two friends complain about the economy. They blame the government for falling **asleep at the wheel** during an economic crisis. So during a crisis, when the government should have been actively trying to improve the economy, they did nothing. And this is why the friends say that the government fell **asleep at the wheel**.



- Andrew: Jeremy, I hear this expression used a lot to describe politicians.
- Jeremy: Oh yeah, me too.
- Andrew: And, actually, one of the ways that I do research for Catch Word is to type the expression into Twitter to see how native speakers are using the expression.
- Jeremy: Oh, that's a good idea.
- Andrew: And one of the common, common, common tweets that I saw was "Washington is **asleep at the wheel**."
- Jeremy: Oh my gosh.
- Andrew: Meaning that the politicians in Washington, DC, are **asleep at the wheel**. They're not doing their job correctly because they're distracted with other things.
- Jeremy: Or sleeping.
- Andrew: Or maybe literally sleeping, too.
- Jeremy: Yeah.
- Andrew: OK, well, our second expression for today is almost exactly the same, almost exactly the same in meaning and in form. And our second expression for today is **asleep at the switch**. **Asleep at the switch**. S-W-I-T-C-H, switch. And, Jeremy, what comes to mind, what is the image that you have when you think of this expression?
- Jeremy: So, I actually haven't heard this expression before. But, if I did hear it, I would immediately understand.
- Andrew: OK, that's interesting. I've heard **asleep at the wheel** more often. I think it's more common. But I have heard **asleep at the switch**, and I think it's because it is more of a British English-style expression.
- Jeremy: That sounds right to me. Now that you say it, I can imagine it being spoken with an English accent.
- Andrew: And since I'm Canadian, I think one of the unique things about Canadian English is we have a mix of American-style English and British English. It's kind of the best of both worlds. So perhaps this is why I've heard it more than you.



Andrew: But, OK, **asleep at the switch**. I think of somebody falling asleep while they're trying to operate a piece of machinery, like maybe in a factory or something.

Jeremy: You know, while you were saying that, I thought, in London, for example, people usually take the subway, right? The streets are very, very narrow and there's lots of traffic. So I thought maybe **asleep at the switch** is the same expression, but the driver of a subway has a switch and not a wheel, right?

Andrew: It could be that. Yeah, that's a good theory, I like that.

Jeremy: Either way, maybe it will help someone to remember it.

Andrew: So this expression actually has exactly the same meaning as **asleep at the wheel**, and that meaning is that you have a job to do, you have a responsibility but, for some reason, you become distracted or you're not paying attention and, as a result, you fail to do the job you are supposed to do.

I think that's about all of the explaining that we need to do. And let's move on to some examples using this expression, **asleep at the switch**.

Jeremy: All right, sure.

Friend 1: Did you see the game last night?

Friend 2: Yeah, it was horrible.

Friend 1: It's like our goalie was **asleep at the switch** all night long.

Friend 2: I know, he let in like 10 goals. That's crazy.

Andrew: In this example, two **buddies** are complaining about their favourite sports team. They played horribly last night because the goalie fell **asleep at the switch**. He was distracted all night long and he let in 10 goals. So remember that when you're **asleep at the switch**, you're distracted or busy doing something unimportant, and this causes you to make errors and be irresponsible and fail to do your job correctly.

All right, our final example for today's episode, Jeremy, let's go and listen to it now.

Friend 1: I was late to work this morning.

Friend 2: Did your boss yell at you?

Friend 1: No, thankfully he was **asleep at the switch**, playing around with his phone and didn't even notice.

Friend 2: Sounds like you **caught a lucky break**

Friend 1: Yeah, man.

Jeremy: In this example, a guy tells his friend that even though he was late for work this morning, he didn't get in trouble. This is because his boss was **asleep at the switch** and didn't notice him **sneak in** late. His boss was using his phone and, because of this, was too distracted to notice his late-arriving employee.

Andrew: Jeremy, just a moment ago you mentioned to me, off the air, a really good point. And that is that there's another related expression that, actually, I didn't even think of, that is almost exactly the same in meaning to **asleep at the wheel**, **asleep at the switch**, and that's **drop the ball**, **drop the ball**.

Jeremy: Oh yeah.

Andrew: So what does it mean if you **drop the ball**?

Jeremy: Well, if you say he really **dropped the ball** on that one, it's pretty much the same meaning as he was **asleep at the wheel**. If I throw a ball to you, your job is to catch it, but if you don't catch it and you **drop the ball**, then you are not doing your job or accomplishing the task that you're supposed to do. You're not doing what you're supposed to do. So **dropping the ball** has, I think, the very same meaning.

Andrew: Yeah, exactly, and this is another very commonly used idiom in everyday conversation, **drop the ball**.

Jeremy: I think in almost all of our examples, if we replaced **asleep at the wheel** or **asleep at the switch** with **dropped the ball**, it would be almost the same meaning.

Andrew: I agree. I think that they're interchangeable in many, many situations.

Jeremy: Yeah.

Andrew: Many, many contexts.

Jeremy: Good to know for our listeners, I think.



Andrew: Yeah. So, everyone, there is a special bonus expression right at the end of today's episode: **drop the ball**.

Jeremy: And with that, we **drop the mic**, just kidding.

Andrew: Yes, **drop the mic**.

Well, thank you for listening, everyone. And if you have any comments or questions, suggestions for future episodes even, please drop us a line, send us a message. You can do that via our Facebook page, which is [Facebook.com/CulipsPodcast](https://Facebook.com/CulipsPodcast), or you can email us directly. Our address is [contact@Culips.com](mailto:contact@Culips.com), C-O-N-T-A-C-T@Culips.com.

Jeremy: You can find more episodes of the show at [Culips.com](http://Culips.com) or wherever you get your podcasts.

Andrew: And we'll be back soon with another episode, so stay tuned and we'll talk to you then. Good bye.

Jeremy: Take care.



## Detailed Explanations

### Asleep at the wheel/switch Idiom

To be **asleep at the wheel** or **asleep at the switch** is to be inactive and inattentive and, as a result, something bad happens. Andrew and Jeremy explain this expression very nicely in this episode. Just like literally falling **asleep at the wheel or switch** will cause real-life damage, the idiom falling **asleep at the wheel/switch** represents what can happen if you lose focus and cause an accident or miss an amazing opportunity.

Here are a couple more examples with **asleep at the wheel/switch**:

Tomas:	Hey, Bill. How are you holding up? I heard about the divorce.
Bill:	Yeah, not so good. I really <b>fell asleep at the wheel</b> during this marriage. We were great at first, but then I got that promotion, started working too much, drinking, travelling ... I really messed up, man.
Tomas:	That sucks. At least it ended nicely. You guys don't hate each other or anything?
Bill:	No, I almost wish we did hate each other. Instead it's just so sad and meaningless.
Tomas:	Chin up, Bill. Maybe this is for the best.

Tina:	Sunny, I am in so much trouble! Lena's gonna kill me!
Sunny:	Why? What did you do?
Tina:	I told her I was gonna buy the tickets to this concert next Friday. She was supposed to make the reservations for this fancy restaurant, and I was supposed to make the reservations for the concert.
Sunny:	How did you forget something so important?
Tina:	Well, Lena said the tickets were available to buy today at 8:00 p.m. She told me to get them because I have a really fast internet connection, but I fell asleep at 7:00 and didn't wake up until 9:00. I was really <b>asleep at the switch</b> on this.

## It will cost you

### Idiom

**It will cost you** has two very commonly used meanings. The first meaning is that whatever you plan to do will be very expensive. For example, you want to upgrade your airplane ticket to first class; the ticket is available, but it **will cost you**. In other words, you can buy the plane ticket, but it will be very expensive.

The second meaning is that something you do may have a negative impact on your life. For example, in this episode, there was the example “You can’t keep falling asleep at the wheel like this. One of these days, **it’ll cost you** your job.” This sentence means that if this employee doesn’t become more focused on his job, he will be fired.

Here are a couple more examples with **it will cost you**:

Maggie:	I decided to take that job in Manhattan.
Alicia:	Oh, Maggie. Please don’t do it. That job is nothing but trouble.
Maggie:	Alicia, it pays really well and it will boost my résumé for future jobs.
Alicia:	Yeah, but the bosses are horrible and they’ll make you work such long hours. It might pay well, but it <b>will cost you</b> all your happiness.

Sebastian:	Hello, sir. I came to pick up my rental car. Is it possible to upgrade to a bigger model?
Agent:	Yes, but it’s gonna <b>cost you</b> .
Sebastian:	Really? It’s really that much more expensive?
Agent:	Yes, sorry, sir. Since you are asking on such short notice, we only have a few more cars left, and the price has increased. You’re looking at a \$100 per day increase.
Sebastian:	Wow, you really weren’t kidding! That is expensive.



## A buddy

Noun

**Buddy** is another name for a close friend. A **buddy**, a pal, a friend: they are all synonyms. People use the term in a cute way to talk about their relationships, as well. For example, a workout **buddy** is a friend that you exercise with, or a study **buddy** is a friend that you frequently study with. It's also common to hear fathers call their sons **buddy**.

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

Tianqi:	Hey, Lin, you're on bus C for our field trip next Thursday right?
Lin:	Yup.
Tianqi:	Do you wanna be bus <b>buddies</b> ? We can sit next to each other, share snacks, and listen to music. It'll be fun.
Lin:	Sure! Thanks for asking, Tianqi.

Dad:	Hey, <b>buddy</b> , how was school today?
Tim:	Hey, Dad, it was good. I had gym class.
Dad:	Oh yeah? What happened in gym class?
Tim:	We played dodgeball, and we had Big Mike on our team, so we won.
Dad:	Big Mike?
Tim:	He's this really tall, strong kid in my class. He's the best dodgeball player.



## To catch a lucky break

### Idiom

**To catch a lucky break** is to have a lucky turn of events. If you get a good opportunity or have good fortune, then you have **caught a lucky break**. In one of the dialogue examples in this episode, an employee got to work late. Fortunately, he **caught a lucky break** and his boss never even noticed.

Here are a couple more examples with **to catch a lucky break**:

Jeff:	Did you hear about Martin?
Niko:	No, what's up?
Jeff:	He went to play basketball with this club team he's on. You know, very casual, right? Well, one of the players on the opposing team was a recruiter for Duke University. He saw Martin play and offered him a scholarship to play at Duke!
Niko:	No way! He sure <b>caught a lucky break</b> .
Jeff:	Yeah, tell me about it! I hope we're half as lucky when we become seniors.

Michelle:	I really think today is the day I'm gonna <b>catch my lucky break</b> . I'm going to do amazingly at these auditions and finally fulfill my dream of being an actress.
Jean:	You've said that before your last five auditions.
Michelle:	Yes, I know, but I really believe it this time! You'll see.

## To sneak in/out

### Verb

A person who moves very quietly so that no one can hear them is being sneaky. A teenager who wants to go to a late-night party with her friends will try **sneaking out** of the house when her parents are sleeping. Or a student who is late to class may try to **sneak into** his classroom without getting yelled at by the teacher.

Here are a couple more examples with **to sneak in/out**:

Gigi:	What did you do this weekend?
Isabelle:	I did the craziest thing! I <b>snuck out</b> of my house and went to a concert with Josh on Saturday night.
Gigi:	No way! Did your parents find out that you left?
Isabelle:	Yeah, they heard me when I tripped on the stairs trying to <b>sneak back in</b> the house after the concert.
Gigi:	What did they do?
Isabelle:	Oh, I'm grounded for a month. I can't do anything but go to school and come home. It was totally worth it, though. The concert was awesome!

Derek:	Have you ever tried <b>sneaking into</b> a movie without paying?
Noah:	No, that's illegal, isn't it?
Derek:	I guess, but everybody does it. Do you wanna try?
Noah:	Why don't we just ask my parents for some money to see the movie?
Derek:	'Cause that ruins the fun of it!
Noah:	Doing something illegal is fun?
Derek:	Well, yeah. Isn't it?
Noah:	No, not really. I think I'll pass.

## To drop the ball Idiom

**To drop the ball** is very similar to asleep at the wheel and asleep at the switch. If you fail to live up to a certain expectation or if you make a big mistake, then you have **dropped the ball**. This phrase probably comes from American football. In American football, the most important part of the game is getting the ball and not dropping it until it reaches the end zone for a touchdown.

Here's one more example with **to drop the ball**:

Hye-Ji:	The boss really <b>dropped the ball</b> with this company party. The food is terrible and the party is boring.
So-Min:	I heard her secretary quit last week. The secretary was in charge of planning everything. She deleted all the plans off the computer, cancelled all of the catering contracts, and quit.
Hye-Ji:	Wow, she must have really hated that job.
So-Min:	Yeah, I guess so.

## To drop the mic

Phrase (informal)

**To drop the mic** literally means to drop the microphone on the ground at the end of a speech or performance. **Dropping the mic** is way of making an impressive exit from the stage after finishing one's performance. In this episode, Jeremy and Andrew were joking when they said they were **dropping the mic** at the end of the recording.

Jerry:	Do you wanna hear a joke?
Bob:	Uh, all right.
Jerry:	What do you call an alligator wearing a vest?
Bob:	What?
Jerry:	An investigator. Get it? IN-VEST-i-GATOR.
Bob:	Did you just try to <b>drop the mic</b> on your horrible joke?
Jerry:	Hey, what do you mean horrible? That was comedy gold!

## Quiz

### 1. What does it mean to be sneaky?

- a) to make a loud squeaking noise
- b) to lie
- c) to move very quietly
- d) to wear a lot of sneakers

### 2. Which phrase is not a synonym of the others?

- a) to fall asleep at the wheel
- b) to drop the ball
- c) to fall asleep at the switch
- d) to drop the egg

### 3. In the sentence “You can buy the tickets, but it will cost you,” what phrase could replace the underlined phrase cost you?

- a) make you pay for them
- b) be very expensive
- c) hurt you
- d) cause regret

### 4. What is the abbreviation for microphone?

- a) m-phone
- b) micro
- c) mc
- d) mic

### 5. Which is an example of a lucky break?

- a) breaking your finger instead of your arm
- b) running out of gas next to a gas station
- c) being offered a job you interviewed for
- d) meeting your friend when you finish work



## Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Was there ever a time that you lost focus on something and ended up making a mistake or losing something important? How did it happen?
2. Have you ever literally fallen asleep at the wheel, or driven while extremely tired? Did you get hurt?
3. When you were young, did you ever try to sneak out of the house while your parents were sleeping? What did you do?
4. What kind of buddy would you like to have? A study buddy? An exercise buddy? Why?
5. Was there ever a time in your life that you caught a lucky break? How and what happened as a result? If not, what area of your life do you wish you could improve by catching a lucky break?

## Quiz Answers

1.c    2.d    3.b    4.d    5.c

### Episode credits

Hosts: Andrew Bates and Jeremy Brinkerhoff

Music: *Something Elated* by Broke For Free, *Step On* by Jahzzar

Episode preparation/research: Andrew Bates

Audio editor: Andrew Bates

Transcriptionist: Heather Bates

Study guide writer: Kassy White

English editor: Stephanie MacLean

Business manager: Tsuyoshi Kaneshima

Project manager: Jessica Cox

Image: Samuele Errico Piccarini (Unsplash.com)