

Catch Word #229 – I'm racking my brain

Episode description

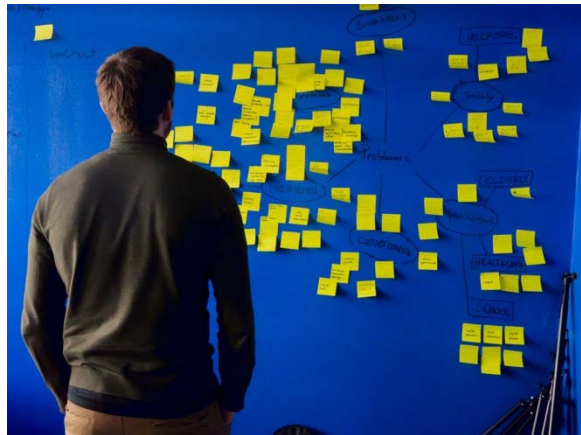
There are so many ways to tell people that you're thinking. In this episode, Andrew and Kassy cover two expressions that you can use to tell someone just how hard you're thinking about something.

Fun fact

Naps can improve your memory. German researchers at the University of Lübeck asked study participants to do some tasks; half of them had to stay awake while the other half got to nap. The group that napped was able to remember more than the group that stayed awake.

Expressions included in the study guide

- To rack your brain
- To chew on [something]
- To throw out ideas
- Draining
- To talk [something] over
- To gloss over [something]



Transcript

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.

Andrew: Hello, everybody. My name's Andrew.

Kassy: And I'm Kassy.

Andrew: And this is Culips.

Andrew: Hey there, everyone. You are listening to Catch Word, the Culips vocabulary series where we teach you interesting and useful English vocabulary and expressions. There is a study guide for this episode on our website, Culips.com, and we suggest that you study along with the study guide while you listen to us here today. Of course, I'm not alone. I am joined by my cohost, Kassy. Kassy, hello.

Kassy: Hello.

Andrew: Kassy, what are we going to study today? What are we going to learn about today?

Kassy: Well, today we are going to talk about two expressions about thinking.

Andrew: Yes, two expressions about thinking, specifically about thinking deeply. And our first expression for today is **to rack your brain**. **To rack your brain**, rack spelt R-A-C-K.

Kassy: **To rack your brain**.

Andrew: Kassy, what does it mean **to rack your brain**?

Kassy: **To rack your brain** means kind of to think deeply about something that maybe you forgot or it's not coming, like, to the front of your mind right away. You have to think deeper and kind of, like, go into your deep memories to pull that information out.

Andrew: Yeah, I think there's two situations where we use this expression. The first is, like you just mentioned, when we have a memory in our head, but it's really fuzzy and not clear. And we really need to put all of our brainpower towards pulling that memory out, towards remembering something, right? This happens to me a lot when I need to remember somebody's name. I'm really bad with remembering names. So sometimes, you know, I know their face, I know all about that person, but I just can't remember their name.

Kassy: Isn't that the worst? Yeah.

Andrew: It's the worst. So, if I **rack my brain**, if I think about it, you know, for a moment or two or sometimes until the next day, then finally I can remember. So, this is situation 1. And situation #2 is when you need to devote all of your brainpower towards solving a problem. I think this is the other situation where we use **rack your brain**, so you could **rack your brain** to come up with a new idea or to solve a problem or to find a solution.

Kassy: Yeah, so when you're problem solving, or maybe doing some sort of team building activity or solving physics homework, something really difficult, you would try to **rack your brain** to, like, organize it so that it can be used to the best of its ability.

Andrew: And, Kassy, I don't know if you know this, but when I was doing some research for this expression, I learned that to rack, the verb to rack, is actually an outdated verb that we really don't use very often in English anymore, except for **rack your brains** and actually another expression related to pool, to rack, to rack them up, to rack the pool balls. But what this originally meant, like, 500 years ago, was to torture. To torture. It was related to an old torture device. So I think this expression is left over from that meaning of to torture, because you're kind of torturing or punishing your brain in order to remember something. I think that makes sense, when you think of it that way, like you're punishing your brain. Come on, hurry up. Remember this information.

Kassy: That makes sense, but I never heard that true definition before. Thanks for the new information.

Andrew: Yeah, a little trip back in time through history.

Andrew: All right. So, Kassy, why don't we move on to some examples. And we could take a listen to this expression, **to rack your brain** used in a conversational situation.

Kassy: Sounds great.

Friend 1: What was that guy's name that we met in the park last week? You know, the guy that was walking his black poodle?

Friend 2: Oh, was it Jason?

Friend 1: Ah, no, that's not it. I've been **racking my brain** all day trying to think of it. It was something with a J, though.

Friend 2: James?

Friend 1: Nope.

Friend 2: Ah, I got it. It was Jeff.

Friend 1: Jeff. Ah, that's it.

Andrew: In this example, we heard two friends talking about a man who they met in the park. And they were trying to remember that man's name, both of them couldn't remember. So they were **racking their brains** trying to remember what his name was. Ah, is it Jason? Is it Jordan? Is it James? Is it Jeff? Aha, it was Jeff. So, they **racked their brains**. They thought very deeply. They **threw out a lot of ideas**. And then finally they realized that his name was Jeff. Jeff, the poodle guy.

Kassy: Yes. I think, also, one phrase I liked in this conversation was I got it. We often say that when a memory resurfaces from inside deep in our brain, like, ah, that's right, I got it.

Andrew: I got it. I got information. I got that memory. Yeah, that's a good one for sure and very common, very common.

Andrew: All right, why don't we listen to example #2 now?

Friend 1: How was your day today?

Friend 2: Terrible, I'm exhausted. My whole team spent the whole day in meetings. We were **racking our brains** trying to come up with a new marketing strategy. It was just so, so **draining**.

Friend 1: Well, you guys are the best. I'm sure you'll come up with a terrific idea in no time.

Kassy: So in this example, it is the second definition for **racking my brain**. Instead of trying to remember a piece of information that you forgot, this is the one where it's kind of like torture, we were torturing our brains, using it really hard trying to come up with a solution to their problem. In this case, trying to come up with a new marketing strategy.

Andrew: Kassy, one more thing that we should add is that, depending on who the subject of the sentence is, we need to change this expression a little bit. I **rack my brain**. If I'm talking about you, Kassy, you are **racking your brain**. If we're talking about our friends, they are **racking their brains**. So, guys, just be careful that you do need to change the possessive pronoun in this expression to match the subject.

Andrew: Kassy, let's move on to the second expression for today. What have we got lined up for expression #2?

Kassy: Expression #2 is **to chew on**.

Andrew: **To chew on. To chew on. To chew on, chew on something or to chew on.** Yeah. And we're not talking about eating here, are we? Of course, when we hear the word chew, usually we think of our mouth and that action that we do with our mouth to grind and digest our food. That is chewing. But this is a completely different way to use chew. What are we talking about when we're **chewing on something**?

Kassy: **To chew on something** is also to think about something, but it's to think about something for a longer period of time. For example, if someone asks you a really difficult or complicated philosophical question, you know, you can't just answer that right away. You need **to chew on it**. You need to think about it for a few minutes, maybe even a few days, before you answer.

Andrew: Yeah, that's a great explanation. I think that I use this expression often when I'm talking about decision-making because often we need time to think about things before we make an important decision, right? So, say let me **chew on that** for a bit or I'm **chewing on that**. I'm just gonna **chew this over**. That's another way we say it, **chew this over**, think this over, right? And it just means thinking about something carefully and deeply for a period of time. I kind of think of, like, an old farmer, maybe working in the fields, chewing on some gum or tobacco or something. It's just kind of the slow chewing motion.

Kassy: I was thinking the same thing, except with a piece of hay or a piece of grass.

Andrew: Right. So, yeah, or even, like, an animal, like a horse or a cow, that's kind of chewing slowly on grass for a long time. Yeah, I think this is the imagery behind this expression.

Andrew: Well, why don't we take a listen to some conversational examples now with our second expression, **to chew on**.

Real estate agent: I don't want to pressure you too much, but there are other buyers who are interested in this home. I'm afraid if we don't make an offer quickly, then we'll lose it.

Customer: Well, that's a lot **to chew on**. Hmm, let me **talk it over** with my partner and I'll get back to you soon.

Real estate agent: OK, absolutely. Just let me know what you decide as soon as you can.

Andrew: So in this example, we heard a conversation between a real estate agent and his customer. And the real estate agent encouraged his customer to buy a house that he's trying to sell quickly. All right, this is what salespeople do, right? They pressure you and they say buy, buy, buy quickly.

Kassy: This is your last chance.

Andrew: This is your last chance, somebody else is going to get it if you don't. But this customer, you know, buying a house, that's a big decision. So she said, wow, that's a lot **to chew on**. OK, it's a lot **to chew on**. That's a lot to think about. And so she decided to have a discussion with her partner before making the serious commitment to buy the house. So this is actually a really common way that people use this expression. They say that's a lot **to chew on**. That's a great chunk to memorize. That's a lot **to chew on**. Just means that that is a lot of information to think about and I need to consider it before I can make a decision. Okie dokie. Shall we take a listen to example #2?

Kassy: Let's get to it.

Friend 1: Have you ever wondered what life would be like without the invention of electricity? **Chew on that** for a sec. Crazy, right?

Friend 2: Yeah, that's totally wild to think about. We wouldn't have any of life's modern conveniences.

Friend 1: Summer would be so hot without air conditioning and winter would be freezing without heat.

Friend 2: Right? Sure glad we don't have to live like that.

Kassy: In this example, two friends are having a kind of crazy, wild conversation, right? They're wondering what life would be like without electricity.

Andrew: Very deep.

Kassy: Yeah. The first friend says **chew on that** for a sec. For a sec being for a second. So, **chew on that** for a bit. Think about that, what would life be like without electricity?

Andrew: And that's actually interesting. **Chew on that** for a sec. A sec means a second. But often when we say a sec, it means longer than a second. It means, like, a moment, right? Or, Kassy, could I call you back in a sec? I'm busy right now. Maybe I would call you back tomorrow if I said that to you.

Kassy: Or at least 3 or 4 minutes later.

Andrew: Yeah, it wouldn't be right away. So when the speaker said **chew on that** for a sec, it actually means think deeply about that for a second. Like actually think, take some time to consider what life would be like without electricity. And I think we use this expression a lot in this kind of context, when we're reflecting or hypothesizing about what the future may hold or what the past could have been like.

Kassy: You might use this phrase when you tell your friend or a colleague some information that really excites you or you think is gonna blow their mind and you say, like, really think about that. **Chew on that** for a sec. Don't just say, ah, yeah, cool. Like, really think deeply about it.

Andrew: Yeah, don't just **gloss over it**, don't just skip the thing that I'm telling you, think about what I'm telling you before moving on. Yes, exactly.

Andrew: And, Kassy, one more expression that comes to mind that's related **to racking your brain** and **chewing on something** is think over, to think something over, another great phrasal verb which has a very similar meaning to think on. It means to think about something deeply and repeatedly, to think over. So before making a decision, you wanna think over all of the information that you have so that you can make a wise decision. So, listeners, you may also hear this expression in the wild when you're watching Netflix or YouTube or listening to Culips, even. So just keep your ears open for think over as well. It's a very closely related expression.

Kassy: OK, well, I think we should wrap things up for this episode. Andrew, can you recap what we've learned today?

Andrew: So today, we learned two expressions that are about thinking. The first was **to rack your brain**. This means thinking very deeply to try and solve a problem or to remember a memory that's very weak in your brain. And the second expression we looked at was **to chew on**. And **to chew on** is to think about something very deeply before making a decision or before moving on to a different thought.

Andrew: Thank you for listening today, everyone. We sure hope that you learned a lot with us. Remember that the study guide for this episode is available on our website, Culips.com. It is custom made by us to help you get the most out of your English study. It includes a transcript, detailed vocabulary explanations, definitions, and examples of some of the key vocabulary that you heard us use here today. There's also a quiz and some prompts that you can use for writing or speaking practice. And we'd highly recommend that you check it out.

Andrew: You can follow us on social media. We are on YouTube and Twitter and Facebook and Instagram. Just search for the Culips English Podcast and you'll be able to find us.

Andrew: And, finally, if you want to get in touch with us, maybe send us a note and suggest a topic for an upcoming episode or ask us a question, something like that, you can send us an email. Our address is contact@Culips.com.

Andrew: Take care, everyone, and we'll catch you in the next Culips episode. Goodbye.

Kassy: See you later.

Detailed Explanations

To rack your brain

Phrasal verb

To rack your brain means to try very hard to remember something or solve a problem. It is sometimes written as **wrack your brain**.

As Andrew and Kassy explain in this episode, there are two situations when you might use this phrase. The first is when a memory is fuzzy and not clear. You end up putting a lot of effort into remembering the information you need. The second is when you're trying to think of a solution to a problem; you **rack your brain** to find the answer.

When you use this phrase, remember to change the pronouns. You **rack your brain**. He **racks his brain**. I **rack my brain**. And so on.

Here are a couple more examples with **to rack your brain**:

Ayesha: Mr. Fletcher was so mean today! He asked me so many questions, I think my brain overloaded.

Miriam: You did so well with your presentation, too! I don't know why he was interrogating you about everything.

Ayesha: That's exactly what it felt like! An interrogation. Like I was some bad guy. I was **racking my brain** trying to come up with some of those answers. I knew the answers, but being up there was too much and I just couldn't remember!

Miriam: That's really rough. But, hey, at least it's done! I'm not looking forward to doing my presentation tomorrow.

Ioan: You OK, buddy? You look like you're **racking your brain** over something.

Warren: Ugh. I ran into someone on my way here and he definitely knew me. And I know him, I think. But I just can't remember his name.

Ioan: Yikes. I hate when that happens. Well, maybe it'll come to you later.

Warren: Won't help me much then. I'll probably never see him again.

To chew on [something]

Phrasal verb

To chew on [something] means to think about something carefully for a long time. It is most often used when the person thinking has to make a decision or give an answer. You can also say **to chew [something] over**, **to think [something] over**, or **to mull [something] over**. As Kassy and Andrew explain, the time used to think could be a few seconds, a few days, or even longer.

Another version of the phrase is **to chew on that**. This is often a challenge or used when you want someone to think about something that might not be pleasant for them.

Here are a couple more examples with **to chew on [something]**:

Zahra: So, Ismail has asked if he can go to camp this summer with Darius. I took a look, and it costs a bit more than we can afford right now.

Aamir: Then the answer is no.

Zahra: He's got his heart set on going, though. Can't we make some room in the budget?

Aamir: Tell him we can't afford it. Let him **chew on that** for a while—he has to learn that we're not made of money.

Keaton: Have you heard back about the job you interviewed for?

Paola: Yeah. They offered me the job, but at a lower salary than I'd hoped for.

Keaton: That's unfortunate. What are you going to do?

Paola: I've been **chewing on it** for a day now and I still haven't made a decision. They've given me until the end of the week to accept, so I've got a bit of time.

Keaton: Have you made lists of the pros and cons? I find that helpful.

Paola: I have, and the lists are the exact same length. I just need to decide, I guess.

Keaton: Good luck with that. If I can help, let me know.

To throw out ideas

Idiom

To throw out ideas means to suggest an idea or solution for everyone to consider. This expression is usually used in casual way. The idea being suggested isn't necessarily the best idea or answer. **Put it out there** and **throw it out there** are other ways to say this phrase.

Here are a couple more examples with **to throw out ideas**:

Hector: All right, so it looks like we're partners on this project. What is it again?

Lachlan: We have to build a structure out of a material that isn't made for building.

Hector: Cool, cool, cool. Any ideas?

Lachlan: Well, let me just **throw out this idea**: How about if we make an igloo out of butter? Would that work?

Hector: I like it! But wouldn't it melt in the heat? And how much does butter cost, anyways?

Lachlan: I have no idea. My mom does all the groceries.

Kye: I heard you're on the planning team for the holiday party. That's a big opportunity for you. Congratulations!

Sonoko: Thanks, I think. Our first meeting was today and we're having trouble with the guest list. The guest list! If we're having trouble with that, how are we going to decide on everything else?

Kye: It's that bad?

Sonoko: They **threw out ideas** of who to invite to the party. I added a few I thought would work. They took a few names off the list. None of us can agree. And there's a limited amount of space in the venue.

Kye: At least you have a venue!

Sonoko: The venue was decided for us, since it was donated by the sponsors. I'd much rather we had the party somewhere with a larger capacity so that we could have everyone!

Draining Adjective

When you use **draining** as an adjective instead of a verb, it means tiring. Something **draining** leaves you worn out, but not sleepy.

There are three common ways to use **draining**:

- Physically **draining** means you've overworked your body's muscles.
- Emotionally **draining** means you've been dealing with a lot of emotions and can't handle any more problems.
- Mentally **draining** means you've been using your brain too much and you need to do something that requires less thinking.

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

Niamh: Oh, wow, I am so drained right now.

Thurston: Why? What did you do?

Niamh: I spent the whole day arguing with customers about stupid little details. Not mistakes! Oh no—details. That they approved. Before I sent their project to the next stage. Now I'm the one getting yelled at. It's so frustrating.

Thurston: Yeah, that sounds **draining**, all right. Here, I'll order dinner. You pick a movie.

Niamh: That would be awesome. Thanks, love.

Kimberly: And now we get a little break while the kids are at recess.

Sorcha: How are you so upbeat right now?

Kimberly: What do you mean?

Sorcha: Don't you find teaching preschool really **draining**? I know I do.

Kimberly: Not at all! I love working with these kids. It makes me more energetic, not less.

Sorcha: You're weird.

Kimberly: Maybe you're just not cut out to be a teacher.

To talk [something] over

Phrasal verb

To talk [something] over means to discuss something with someone. Usually you want to get advice or find out the person's opinion before you make a decision. This expression means you'll have a long, serious discussion rather than a quick, casual chat.

Here are a couple more examples with **to talk [something] over**:

Eric: How did the meeting go? Did you manage to get the deadline changed?

Ciaran: Not yet. We **talked the deadline over** for a bit, but it looks like marketing needs to check something in their schedules. I don't know the specifics, but I've told them we need more time.

Eric: That's something, I guess.

Marco: I've got a friend coming over after dinner. We'll stay out on the porch, though, so we won't bother you while you work.

Sakura: OK, not a problem. Is everything OK?

Marco: Yeah, John just needs **to talk some problems over** and get some advice.

Sakura: Oh dear, I hope it's nothing too serious.

Marco: I don't know all the details yet, but I'm sure he can fix it with some work.

To gloss over [something]

Phrasal verb

To gloss over [something] means to treat or describe something as if it's not important. The thing can be very important or serious, or even an embarrassing mistake. When someone **glosses over [something]**, they want everyone else to ignore or not talk about it.

Here are a couple more examples with **to gloss over [something]**:

Saskia: So then I told him that if he wants to flirt, he'll have to find someone who is actually interested.

Daniela: Wait! Wait! You **glossed over the best part!**

Saskia: What do you mean?

Daniela: You grabbed his shirt and you were all tough-looking. Like, this short girl just glaring up at this big football player dude. It was amazing!

Polly: I left the party early. I just couldn't take all the socializing and upper class "how's the stock market" attitude.

Elena: You **just glossed over the fact that you broke a crystal serving dish**, didn't you?

Polly: No one needs to know. No one ever needs to know.

Quiz

- 1. What does it mean when someone needs to talk something over with their partner?**
 - a) she wants to discuss something with her partner
 - b) she needs to speak louder so that her partner can hear her
 - c) she has to talk out loud
 - d) she will make a decision on her own

- 2. Which of the following adjectives means that something is exhausting?**
 - a) annoying
 - b) confusing
 - c) boring
 - d) draining

- 3. What does it mean when you tell someone to chew on it before giving an answer?**
 - a) they should eat a meal before answering
 - b) they should think about it for a bit
 - c) they should have a piece of gum
 - d) they shouldn't think about it at all

- 4. A group of people are brainstorming solutions to a problem. During the meeting, they _____.**
 - a) throw out their garbage
 - b) throw a baseball around
 - c) throw out ideas that might work
 - d) throw up ideas that might work

- 5. Andrew mentions two situations where you might rack your brain. The first is when a memory is fuzzy and not clear. What is the second?**
 - a) when you want to punish yourself for not remembering someone's name
 - b) when you're trying to forget someone's name
 - c) when you want to eat a rack of lamb
 - d) when you're trying to think of a solution to a problem

Writing and Discussion Questions

- 1. Describe a time when you had to rack your brain to remember a name or find a solution to a problem.**
- 2. Throw out a few ideas of when you might use the six terms defined in this study guide.**
- 3. What activity or situation leaves you feeling drained, and why do you think it is draining?**
- 4. Describe a time when you had to chew on an idea, offer, or suggestion before giving an answer.**
- 5. People often gloss over their errors out of embarrassment, but that's not always the case. Have you ever caught someone glossing over a big problem that needed to be fixed? If so, what was it and how did you handle it?**

Quiz Answers

1.a 2.d 3.b 4.c 5.d

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