

## Catch Word #237 – Left to your own devices

### Episode description

Are you the type of person who likes a high degree of personal freedom while working? Or do you need a more structured environment to succeed? In this Catch Word episode, Andrew and Jeremy explore two key expressions you can use when talking about your freedom to do things.

### Fun fact

A word that is similar to freedom is liberty. Did you know that the Statue of Liberty was given to the United States by the people of France?

### Expressions included in the study guide

- Left to your own devices
- To fend for [oneself]
- No holds barred
- To get to the bottom of [something]
- To not hold [one's] breath
- Shady



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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:** Hi everyone, it's Andrew here. How's it going? I hope everything is OK in your world.

In this Catch Word episode, Jeremy and I teach you two idiomatic English expressions about freedom and by learning them, you'll be able to make your English sound more natural when speaking and also make English more understandable when listening to movies or TV or even having conversations with English speakers.

But before we get to that, I just wanted to thank you for pressing play on this episode. What you're doing right now is what you need to keep doing to get awesome at English. By spending lots of time listening, reading, and watching content in English, you'll get closer and closer to reaching your goals with the language. So, congrats for tuning in today and make sure to keep up the good work. I know it's not always easy, but you're doing a great job.

If one of your goals for 2021 is to improve your English, then I highly recommend becoming a Culips member. Studying English becomes easy when you're a Culips Member because we give you all the tools you need, and you can find them in one place. Just log onto to your Culips Member dashboard and you'll be able to get the transcripts, study guides, and quizzes for all our episodes. It's really awesome and it's something I wish I had for my own language study, to be honest with you.

OK, let's get started with the episode now. Enjoy and happy English learning!

**Andrew:** Hello, everyone. I'm Andrew.

**Jeremy:** And I'm Jeremy.

**Andrew:** And this is the Culips English Podcast.

**Andrew:** Hello there, everyone. Welcome back to Culips. Today we have a Catch Word episode for you. If you don't know what Catch Word is, well, let me explain. It is the series where we teach you awesome English vocabulary, like idioms, phrasal verbs, or expressions that will help improve your English listening and speaking. And today, I'm joined by my cohost, Jeremy. Hey there, Jeremy.

**Jeremy:** Hey, Andrew. So today we are going to talk about two expressions that relate to freedom, we could say.

**Andrew:** Yeah, freedom and having no limits or controls or rules imposed on you. So I like these expressions. I am a fan of freedom. So I think this will be a fun one.

**Jeremy:** So Andrew, what is our first expression for today?

**Andrew:** Our first expression is left **to your own devices**. **Left to your own devices**. Jeremy, I think we need to break this one down for our listeners, because it's a little bit confusing. So if you are left to do something, it means you are remaining, you are alone, like other people have left you behind and you are the only one remaining.

**Jeremy:** If someone left you alone or I left the room and left Andrew alone, we could use the word in both those ways.

**Andrew:** Exactly. So left, first of all, we have the sense of being alone. Other people have gone, they've left and we are alone. And now what does it mean, **your own devices**? I think a lot of listeners, when they hear this word device, their mind is immediately going to go to technology and think of a smartphone or a tablet computer, something like this. But that's not what device means in this context.

**Jeremy:** Yes, it does not mean technology-related devices. This expression is actually connected to an older meaning of the word device or devices. And the older meaning was more similar to wishes or preferences. So things that someone will want to do. And specifically this expression kind of means if we leave this person alone, they will do whatever they want. And we often use the expression when that person is going to do something sort of mischievous, and that means something that we might not want them to do. For example, I could say if I **leave my son to his own devices**, my son is 3 years old right now, he will eat all the cookies on the table. If we leave him alone, he will just do whatever he wants and we don't want him to do that.

**Andrew:** Right. So this is where it relates to freedom, right? If you are **left to your own devices**, then you have the freedom to do whatever you want. Nobody is going to stop you. However, like you mentioned, Jeremy, there is a nuance here and usually when we use this expression to say that somebody is **left up to their own devices**, it means that they're going to do something that is, maybe it's not bad, maybe it's not negative, but it's not exactly what we would prefer, as the speaker.

**Jeremy:** So let's listen to an example conversation now.

**Andrew:** Let's do it.

**Friend 1:** Wow, this curry is delicious.

**Friend 2:** Yeah? Glad you like it.

**Friend 1:** Where did you learn to cook like this?

**Friend 2:** Well, I was **left to my own devices** when I was a kid. My parents were always at work, so I had **to fend for myself**. I got tired of eating TV dinners, so I learned how to cook.

**Friend 1:** Good for you.

**Friend 2:** Next time you come over for dinner, I'll make my signature dish for you, chicken parmesan.

**Friend 1:** I can't wait.

**Andrew:** So we just heard an example where two friends were eating dinner together and one of the friends is a very good cook. And he mentions that he learned how to cook because he was **left to his own devices** when he was a kid, meaning he was left alone often, and he had **to fend for himself**. **To fend for yourself** as an expression that means you have to take care of yourself. You are responsible for your own survival.

**Jeremy:** Just a note about fend. I think this fend is the same as in defend, to defend yourself or fend off, to fend off, you know, coyotes who are attacking your camp or something.

**Andrew:** Yes, this is a great phrasal verb, to fend off, which means to defend against an attack, right? Exactly. But we often use it when we're talking about wild animals, like coyotes attacking some deers or something like this.

**Jeremy:** Or our sheep, if we are shepherds.

**Andrew:** Yes, our sheep, that is true. So, Jeremy, I think this is a very common way to use this expression to talk about kids who are at home. Often they're **left to their own devices** because their parents are at work. So in my head, I'm thinking of, you know, maybe a 12- or 13-year-old kid who's old enough to stay at home, but is still a kid. We can **leave those kinds of kids up to their own devices** once they reach that age.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, I think, also, the reason for that is because you only use this expression with someone who normally requires supervision, like a child, or a dog, or a sheep, for example. **Left to their own devices**, they would eat all the plants. We could say the sheep, if I'm talking about sheep, **left to their own devices**, they would eat all of my flowers. So I have to put up a fence or tie them up over here. So perhaps that's why this expression is used in that context a lot.

**Andrew:** OK, so with that being said, let's take a listen to another example conversation.

**Friend 1:** So, is Paul coming out tonight?

**Friend 2:** Yeah, I think so. But he sounded kind of grumpy about it.

**Friend 1:** Why, because he wanted to go golfing again?

**Friend 2:** Yeah, probably. I swear, if he was **left to his own devices**, he'd go golfing every day.

**Friend 1:** I don't doubt that for a minute.

**Jeremy:** So in this example, we heard two friends talking about another friend, Paul. Paul really likes golfing and if he were **left to his own devices**, meaning if he were left to do whatever he wanted to do, he would go golfing every day. Now, we just talked about how this expression is usually used when the person requires supervision, like a child or like an animal that requires supervision. Supervision, meaning they need to be cared for, taken care of, watched over by someone else. So, Andrew, do you think that applies in this situation, too, with Paul not coming out to hang out with his friends?

**Andrew:** Yes, I think it applies because here, even though Paul is grown, adult man who doesn't really need supervision, I think the nuance here is that his behaviour is antisocial. And if his friends didn't really convince him to come out, then he would just have no friends and he would go golfing every time that he could. So although here we don't see a very clear parent-child relationship or dog owner, pet dog relationship, the nuance is that the friends know best, and that they are caring for their friend by convincing him to come out and socialize with them.

**Jeremy:** Yeah, I definitely have had friends like this in the past, where I felt like I had to drag them out of their house to come out and spend time with us.

**Andrew:** Yeah, because **left to their own devices** sometimes, some people would just stay inside forever. I know some people like this, too.

**Jeremy:** All right, so what's our second expression for this episode today?

**Andrew:** Our second expression is a fun one, which is an expression that originally comes from wrestling, actually. It is **no holds barred, no holds barred**. So, again, I think we need to break down this expression before we talk about the meaning because these are some interesting usages of these words. So why don't we talk about holds first. What is a hold in regard to wrestling?

**Jeremy:** Well, I did have some experience wrestling in middle school. We had a wrestling team at my school. And I remember that there were certain kinds of holds, meaning ways of grabbing the other person that were not allowed. For example, grabbing them around the neck. A choke hold, for example, was not allowed because it was too dangerous and it gave too much of an advantage to the other person. So that hold was not allowed.

**Andrew:** Yeah, I am not an expert in martial arts or wrestling by any means. But I know that this word hold can be applied to many different kinds of martial arts, to judo, to jujitsu to wrestling. And it just means like you said, Jeremy, it is a kind of manoeuvre or a position in the fight. So when we talk about a wrestling hold, it's just a wrestling manoeuvre.

**Jeremy:** And I think it's important to note that the word in this phrase is holds. So it is in the plural form. And when we look at the verb barred, this is the past tense of the verb to bar. This is not related to the bar where you go drinking or the bar that is made out of metal. This is a verb, which means to limit, we could say, right?

**Andrew:** Yeah, to limit or to restrict or to exclude.

**Jeremy:** Exclude, like the expression with this verb that comes to mind is barring any changes to our schedule, we will do this tomorrow. So it's saying, as long as there are not any changes, or excluding any changes in our schedule, we will leave tomorrow or whatever.

**Andrew:** Exactly. It's not a really frequent word, to be honest with you. It's not very frequent, but it is used in this idiomatic expression. And I think, maybe in more professional and legal documents, you would see this word used more often. So if you are, you know, working with a lawyer or reading a contract, I think it would pop up more often. But in everyday conversation, outside of this idiomatic expression, you won't see it used too frequently.

**Jeremy:** So to put everything together, if we say **no holds barred**, if there is a wrestling match where there are **no holds barred**, they're saying the wrestlers can do anything they want. They can try to choke each other or do all kinds of holds that would normally be illegal. There are no holds excluded from this fight.

**Andrew:** Right. So, like, in the Olympics, there are a set of rules that you have to follow and some holds are barred. Some holds are restricted and against the rules, because they are very dangerous or unfair. However, in a **no holds barred** wrestling match, it is free, you can do whatever you want, the rules are removed.

**Andrew:** So this was the origin of the expression, to talk about these free fights. However, now we can use it to talk about anything where the restrictions have been removed. So, for example, you might watch on TV a **no holds barred** interview with a politician. So this means that, you know, usually when you hear politicians talk on TV, they just have their talking points that they want to say and they go over those and they feel very artificial and ungenuine when they are doing the interview. However, **no holds barred** interview means no topic is excluded from the conversation and the reporter will ask many tough, difficult questions to the politician. So that's just an example of how we can use **no holds barred** now to talk about different things other than fighting or wrestling.

**Jeremy:** So, with that, let's look at our first example dialogue.

**Andrew:** Let's do it.

**Friend 1:** Did you hear what happened at city hall?

**Friend 2:** Yeah, about the mayor's corruption scandal, right?

**Friend 1:** Yeah, doesn't it make you mad?

**Friend 2:** Oh, I'm livid. I hope there's a **no holds barred** investigation that will **get to the bottom of everything**.

**Friend 1:** Yeah, me too. But I'm **not gonna hold my breath**.

**Andrew:** In this example, we just heard two friends talking about a corruption scandal at city hall. And so, often in politics, there is corruption and the politicians are doing **shady** things in **shady** ways. And this happens at all levels of government in many, many countries. And so these two friends are very angry. One of the friends says that he is livid, and livid means extremely angry. And so that friend hopes that a **no holds barred** investigation will take a look and **get to the bottom of everything**. **Get to the bottom** means to learn about all of the minute and fine details of the scandal. So to learn all of the information.

**Jeremy:** And to uncover the truth.

**Andrew:** And to uncover the truth. Absolutely. The other friend replies, I hope that happens too. But I'm **not going to hold my breath**, which is another idiomatic expression, which means I don't think it will happen. I'm **not going to hold my breath**, I'm not going to hope for it, because the possibility of it becoming reality is quite small, in his opinion.

**Jeremy:** Literally, if you were to hold your breath for something that never came, you would die. So we say this expression to mean I really don't believe it's going to happen.

**Andrew:** Yeah, I don't believe it's gonna happen. I'm **not going to hold my breath**. Exactly.



**Jeremy:** So should we listen to one more example conversation before we let everybody go?

**Andrew:** Let's do it.

**Friend 1:** I'm here today with legendary pop singer Jammy J. Jammy, could you tell us a little bit about what it was like to record your latest album?

**Friend 2:** Yeah. So I spent a year in the studio preparing for this album. And it was just a **no holds barred**, creative, productive, amazing studio session.

**Friend 1:** So you had time to experiment and test out new ideas?

**Friend 2:** That's exactly right. During that year, I was able to shape the sound of the new record and demo over 50 songs.

**Friend 1:** Wow, that's amazing. So my next question for you is ...

**Jeremy:** In this example, we hear a reporter talking to a legendary pop singer, someone who is very famous for making very popular music, Jammy J.

**Andrew:** Jammy J. I like it.

**Jeremy:** And Jammy J says that his time in the studio was a **no holds barred** studio session. This means that there were no rules, that he did everything and tried everything that he could think of.

**Andrew:** It means that he was very experimental in the studio, that he tried many new ideas out and just really imposed no restrictions or limits on the type of album that he wanted to make. So, often, you'll hear creative people and artists say that their work **is no holds barred**, because they are not imposing any limits or restrictions on their creativity and the art that they are making.

Everyone, that brings us to the end of today's episode. We hope that you enjoyed it and we hope that you learned a lot with us. Thank you for listening.

To summarize what we looked at today, we learned two expressions about freedom and having no limits or controls imposed. The first expression we looked at was **left to your own devices** and the second one was **no holds barred**.

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We'll be back soon with another brand-new episode and we'll talk to you then. Goodbye.

**Jeremy:** Bye, everyone.

## Detailed Explanations

### Left to your own devices

#### Idiom

The first expression of this episode is **left to your own devices**. Jeremy says that if he were to **leave his 3-year-old son to his own devices**, his son would eat all the cookies on the table. When you are **left to your own devices**, you are left alone with the freedom to do what you want. As our hosts mention, when someone or something that normally needs supervision is **left to their own devices**, they might do something bad or naughty. However, it is possible to do good things when **left to your own devices**. When your boss **leaves you to your own devices**, it's best to do some good work.

Here are a couple more examples with **left to your own devices**:

**Akiko:** How was your first day teaching?

**Ben:** It was interesting.

**Akiko:** Were the students well behaved?

**Ben:** Kind of. In front of me, they were. But at one point, I left the classroom and it was a mess when I returned.

**Akiko:** **Left to their own devices**, young students will do a lot of crazy things. You should never leave the classroom.

**Ben:** I know that now.

**Naomi:** Have you finished the Johnson project already?

**George:** Yeah. I finished it on the weekend.

**Naomi:** How come you got it done so quickly?

**George:** The boss gave me a little more freedom this time. When I'm **left to my own devices**, I feel like I get more work done.

## To fend for [oneself]

### Idiom

In the first example dialogue, one friend talks about how his mother worked a lot when he was a kid, so he often had **to fend for himself**. **To fend for oneself** is to be responsible for one's own safety. As our hosts explain, to fend something off is to defend yourself from danger. For example, an adult living on the streets has **to fend for himself**. He is in charge of finding food and shelter because no one else will do it for him.

Here are a couple more examples with **to fend for [oneself]**:

**John:** I met your friend Peter. I really like him. He's nice.

**Beth:** I know, right?

**John:** He's got a really positive outlook on life.

**Beth:** Yeah. It's surprising, considering his childhood.

**John:** What do you mean?

**Beth:** He had it rough. His parents were never around so he had **to fend for himself** a lot.

**John:** Wow. I didn't know that.

**Dara:** What do you do for a living?

**Heath:** I'm a professional survivalist.

**Dara:** A survivalist? What is that?

**Heath:** I got out into the woods with people, and I teach them to survive in the wild.

**Dara:** That's an interesting set of skills to develop.

**Heath:** That's why I do it. I find it's very important for people to know how **to fend for themselves**. And they are skills that can be transferred to normal daily life.

## No holds barred

### Idiom

The second featured expression in this episode is **no holds barred**. This expression comes from the world of wrestling, where **no holds barred** means there aren't any forbidden manoeuvres. In everyday life, you can use **no holds barred** when you talk about an environment where you are not subject to normal rules. For example, a **no holds barred** political debate doesn't have the same rules of etiquette you would usually expect.

**No holds barred** can also be applied to a creative setting. In one of the example dialogues, the singer says he had a **no holds barred** recording session. That means he didn't stick to the normal rules of recording and was looser with his creativity.

Here are a couple more examples with **no holds barred**:

**Carl:** How did your meeting with our supplier go?

**Winnie:** It was pretty rough.

**Carl:** Really? How come?

**Winnie:** Before even sitting down, they were demanding discounts on the lighting equipment. That's when I knew we were going to have **no holds barred** negotiations.

**Carl:** That's playing dirty.

**Dana:** Did you watch the Prime Minister's sit-down interview on television last night?

**Jiwon:** No. What happened?

**Dana:** The two interviewers drilled him with all kinds of questions. It was a serious, **no holds barred** interview.

**Jiwon:** Too bad I missed it. Do you think I can find it online?

## To get to the bottom of [something] Idiom

In one of the example dialogues, one friend hopes for an investigation **to get to the bottom of a political scandal**. **To get to the bottom of [something]** is to discover the whole truth of something. Unlike with surface knowledge, if you go through something from top to bottom, you will know the complete truth.

**To get to the bottom of [something]** also means to find the root cause of something. Think of burying an item underground to keep it secret. To find the item, someone would need to dig **to get to the bottom of the hole** you made. In that sense, we say investigators need to keep digging **to get to the bottom of things**.

Here are a couple more examples with **to get to the bottom of [something]**:

**Pete:** I see you fixed your car.

**Jess:** Yeah. It was annoying, but I had to.

**Pete:** Can you remind me what happened?

**Jess:** It was just parked on the street and someone bumped into it.

**Pete:** That sucks. Did you ever **get to the bottom of who did it**?

**Jess:** No. There are no security cameras in that area.

**Fred:** Are you OK?

**Phil:** Not really. I wake up sore every morning, whether I did physical activity or not.

**Fred:** That's not good. Did you go to the doctor?

**Phil:** No. I'm not a fan of going to the doctor.

**Fred:** I suggest you do. You need **to get to the bottom of this situation**. It might be serious.

## To not hold [one's] breath

### Idiom

In one of the example dialogues, two friends talk about a political investigation. However, one of them doesn't believe the investigation is going to happen, so he says he's **not going to hold his breath**. **To not hold one's breath** is to not wait for something to happen. If you hold your breath for something that's never going to happen, you'll end up dying. The most common form of this expression is to say **don't hold your breath**.

Here are a couple more examples with **to not hold [one's] breath**:

**Olivia:** I'm excited about the upcoming hockey season.

**Stan:** Why do you say that?

**Olivia:** I think Toronto has a really good team this year. This is the season they're going to win the championship. I have a good feeling about it.

**Stan:** **Don't hold your breath**. They haven't won since 1967. They have no chance. Montreal, however ...

**Pedro:** Did you just buy \$100 in lottery tickets?

**Mark:** Yes, I did.

**Pedro:** That's insane. Why would you spend that much money on the lottery?

**Mark:** My parents gave me \$100 for my birthday, so I figured I'd buy some tickets.

**Pedro:** How much is the jackpot this week?

**Mark:** I think it's about \$50 million.

**Pedro:** Do you actually think you're going to win?

**Mark:** It would be nice. But, no, I'm **not holding my breath**. It's just for fun.

## Shady Adjective

After one of the example dialogues, Andrew mentions corrupt politicians doing **shady** things. **Shady** means that their actions are possibly illegal. Think of the black market, where business transactions are done illegally. In that sense, the illegal activity is done in the shade as opposed to in the daylight where everyone can see what is being done.

**Shady** doesn't always mean illegal. A **shady** person is someone you wouldn't trust because you feel they might be dishonest. A deceitful person would develop the reputation of being **shady**.

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

**Phil:** You looked stressed out. What's the matter?

**Quentin:** The police are coming over in 30 minutes.

**Phil:** What? Why?

**Quentin:** I didn't want to tell you this, but my uncle has possibly been involved in some **shady** dealings with his business.

**Phil:** And?

**Quentin:** And investigators are coming to ask me questions.

**Phil:** Did you do anything wrong?

**Quentin:** No, and I don't know anything about his business. It's just that I get super stressed out when I have to talk to the police.

**Anders:** Do you know Pierre? He's Sheila's friend.

**Violet:** Yeah. Why?

**Anders:** He came to my shop and started talking about a business opportunity.

**Violet:** I would stay far away from him. I've heard he's a **shady** character.

**Anders:** Got it. Thanks for the heads-up.



## Quiz

**1. What does a no holds barred wrestling match mean?**

- a) you can go to the bar afterwards
- b) you can't quit when you want
- c) you can't choke someone
- d) you can do whatever manoeuvre you want

**2. Is a shady person someone you should easily trust?**

- a) yes
- b) no

**3. What does it mean to not hold one's breath?**

- a) you are not putting your head under water when swimming
- b) you are waiting for someone
- c) you are not waiting for something to happen
- d) you are trying to practice a breathing technique

**4. Which of the following is a good example of getting to the bottom of [something]?**

- a) an adoptee finally finding her biological parents after a long search
- b) a man looking into a mirror
- c) a woman coming across a beautiful bird while walking
- d) a sports team winning a game

**5. What does it mean to be left to your own devices?**

- a) you have someone looking over your shoulder
- b) you have the freedom to do what you want
- c) you use your own electronic devices at work
- d) you left your phone at home

## Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Are you the type of person who likes to be left to your own devices or do you need someone looking over your work?
2. Tell about a time you got to the bottom of a mysterious situation.
3. How well would you be able to fend for yourself on a deserted island?
4. Are you a good judge of character? Can you immediately tell if someone is shady or not?
5. Tell about a time when someone told you to not hold your breath.

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## Quiz Answers

1. d   2. b   3. c   4. a   5. b

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### Episode credits

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