

Catch Word #135 – Like water off a duck’s back

Informal Contractions in this Episode

Informal contractions are unofficial short forms of other words, and they’re usually only used in casual conversation. For example, when a native English speaker talks casually, they might say *gonna* instead of *going to*, or *whaddya* instead of *what do you*. Even though informal contractions are usually only used in spoken English, we include them in the Culips written transcripts to help you get used to how they’re used and what they sound like.

These are the informal contractions used in today’s episode, along with their meanings:

- **gonna**: going to
- **gotta**: got to
- **wanna**: want to

Transcript

Maura: Hello everyone. It’s Maura.

Harp: And Harp.

Maura: And we are here with another Culips English Podcast for you.

Harp: Yes. Check out our website, Culips.com, that’s C-U-L-I-P-S.com, because there you can sign up and become a member. When you’re a member, you have access to the Learning Materials.

Maura: And the Learning Materials are great. So if you’re not a member, you should think about becoming one. When you are a member, you get access to the transcripts for all of our episodes, more detailed explanations of the expressions we use in our episodes, and even quizzes to test yourself after you’ve listened.

Harp: Yes. And if you’re on Facebook, come on over and say hello. And we’re **getting the hang of Twitter**, so you can check us out there as well.

Maura: That’s right. So if you’re online, you can communicate with us. And we love hearing from you and we love getting ideas from you, so don’t be afraid to ask us a question or suggest an idea for an episode. Now, Harp, how was your weekend?

Harp: It was really lovely.

Maura: And why was it so lovely?

- Harp: I got out of the city. I went up north and I went to a spa.
- Maura: Oh, that's so nice. I've only done that once, but I had such a great time.
- Harp: Yeah. It was actually one of the first times I've done it. And the first time I went in the city. This time I went up north and it was in the woods. It was beautiful. And in the spa you have the hot baths and the cold—the hot and the cold. It was really nice.
- Maura: I feel more relaxed just hearing about it.
- Harp: Next time we should go together.
- Maura: Yeah. We should. OK, now let's get started with today's episode. And today's episode is a Catch Word episode, and that is where we look at different expressions, we give you synonyms, we give you explanations and examples of how you can use them.
- Harp: Yes. And today we're going to look at expressions that are about not **letting criticism or something negative get to you**.
- Maura: That's right. So these expressions are used to mean you don't want something to be important to you, you don't want to let something negative affect you.
- Harp: Yeah. You don't want to let it bother you. Should we get started?
- Maura: Let's do it. So, the first expression today is **like water off a duck's back**.
- Harp: **Like water off a duck's back**.
- Maura: So something is described as being **like water off a duck's back**. This is a longer expression, and of course when native speakers say it, they don't say it slowly like I'm doing right now. They say it much faster. Harp, give an example.
- Harp: **Water off a duck's back**.
- Maura: That's right. So this expression, **like water off a duck's back**, means that you're not letting something have an effect on you, and of course this is usually something negative, because if something is positive, you wanna feel positive.
- Harp: Yeah. **Like water off a duck's back** is when someone says something negative to you or if they criticise you, you don't let it bother you, you don't let it affect you.
- Maura: That's right. It's like something happens that's negative and you make it feel

less important, you tell yourself that something is not really important and you don't let it bother you. You don't **let it get to you**.

Harp: Should we talk about a possible origin for this expression? Because personally, I think it's kind of funny: **like water off a duck's back**.

Maura: You're right. People listening might be asking themselves: "What do ducks have to do with something negative happening?" When a duck gets wet, the water does not go between the feathers and get the duck wet; it doesn't affect the duck. It just rolls off the back of the duck and goes back into the pond or the water where the duck is. The same idea is true for negative comments or criticism. The person doesn't let the negative comment affect them or touch them. They pretend it's not important, they don't think about it, they don't let it bother them.

Harp: Yes. This expression means that you don't let something negative affect you. If it's someone giving you negative criticism, you don't let it affect you. That's what it means.

Maura: All right. Now let's give a couple examples with **like water off a duck's back**.

Harp: Let's do it.

Harp: I'm really upset.

Maura: Why? What happened?

Harp: Well, you heard the way the boss yelled at me in the meeting, just because I didn't meet one deadline.

Maura: Well, you can't take that personally. The boss is getting mad at everybody. You gotta be more like Sheila. She always gets in trouble for not meeting deadlines, and for her, it's just **like water off a duck's back**. She never seems to care.

Harp: Yeah. I gotta not take it personally and not let it affect me.

Maura: Yeah. The boss has probably already forgotten about it himself.

Harp: Yeah. I just gotta make sure that the project's really well done.

Maura: In this example, one person was really upset about getting in trouble with her boss, about not meeting deadlines, and they talked about another colleague, Sheila, who didn't get upset. She treated the boss's comments **like water off a duck's back**. They didn't bother her and she didn't get upset.

- Harp: Yeah. She didn't **let the boss get to her**. She didn't let his negative comments and his yelling at her get her upset.
- Maura: And that is important. Sometimes you should listen to criticism. This is actually called **constructive criticism**, when someone is just trying to give you advice so you can improve yourself and be better. That's important, but it's also important that if someone is saying something negative to you, you don't take it too personally, either.
- Harp: Yeah. It's important to not be too sensitive when people are trying to give you **constructive criticism**, or even when they're just criticizing. It's important to just not let it affect you too much.
- Maura: Yeah. OK, let's give one more example.

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| Harp: | How was your weekend? |
| Maura: | You know, it was actually all right. My mom visited, and as usual, she was nagging me about my apartment and keeping it cleaner. And this time it was just like water off a duck's back . I didn't let it get to me and we didn't have an argument. |
| Harp: | That's really good. She doesn't live there, and she only visits, like, twice a year. |
| Maura: | Exactly. So, everything's fine and I'm gonna keep cleaning my apartment the way I always have, which is not to her standards, obviously. |

- Maura: And there was an example where someone was not letting something bother them. In this case, it was negative comments by her own mother telling her to clean her apartment.
- Harp: Yeah. She wasn't living to her mother's standards. Maybe her mom was very clean and dusted all the time, while the girl in the example was more laid back and relaxed about cleaning. And this time she didn't let her mom's **nagging** bother her.
- Maura: Right. She just acted **like it was water off a duck's back**, and so the negative things that her mom was saying didn't bother her.
- Harp: Let's move on to the next expression.
- Maura: All right. The next expression is **to brush something off**.
- Harp: Yes. **To brush something off**.

- Maura: And when you **brush something off**, you make something seem not important, you don't really care about it, and you don't give it much time.
- Harp: It's something negative, but you don't let it affect you.
- Maura: And we should also say, this expression can be used in a few different ways that are more negative. We'll talk about that in our Learning Materials. For today's episode, we're just going to look at **to brush something off** related to not really caring about some negative comments or something bad that happened.
- Harp: Yeah. And if you visualize having a small piece of fluff on your shirt, and you just brush it off, it's not important, it's not a big stain, you don't need to change your shirt. That's like this; you don't let something negative affect you.
- Maura: Right. You just take that little piece of fluff on your shirt and you brush it off. It goes it away and you don't think about it anymore. All right, let's give you one example **right off the bat**.

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| Harp: | How was school today? |
| Maura: | It was OK, but in my calculus class, my teacher made me go to the front and do a problem on the board. And I really didn't know what I was doing, and people in the class were laughing at me, which kind of sucked , but, you know, I'm just gonna brush it off and study more to do well on my test. |
| Harp: | Yeah. If you study hard, you're going to start doing much better. |
| Maura: | I hope so. |
| Harp: | You gotta put your nose to the grindstone . |

- Maura: So in that example, we had a student who got embarrassed in front of her classmates. But she didn't want to let it bother her, she didn't want that moment to be something important, she didn't want it to affect her, so she said that she was **brushing it off**.
- Harp: Yeah. She wasn't gonna focus on the negative. She was just gonna try to study and do better in the class.
- Maura: That's probably the best idea.
- Harp: Not very nice of those students.
- Maura: No, it's not. But, you know, people always say kids can be mean.
- Harp: They definitely can be.

Maura: OK. Let's give another example with ***to brush something off***.

Maura: So did you hear the rumour that Sharon was dating the boss?

Harp: Yeah. I did hear it from a couple of different people.

Maura: I know. It's really been going around. So I kind of brought it up to her this morning and she **brushed it off**. What do you think that means?

Harp: I think it confirms the rumour.

Maura: That's totally inappropriate, though.

Harp: Very inappropriate.

Maura: In the example, two colleagues were talking about another colleague, Sharon, who was rumoured to be dating the boss. And when she was confronted with this information, she **brushed it off**. So she acted like it wasn't important, and she rejected the idea, and this might have been suspicious.

Harp: Yes. It seemed suspicious.

Maura: All right. Now, let's look at our last expression that also means to treat something like it's not important and to not take it seriously, especially something negative.

Harp: Yes. Our last expression is ***to laugh it off***.

Maura: That's right. ***To laugh something off***.

Harp: And again, this expression is talking about when someone says something negative or does something negative to you, and you don't let it affect you or bother you.

Maura: Right. In a way, you laugh about it. So you're not taking it seriously and you're just laughing like it's not true, you don't believe it. And you don't let it bother you.

Harp: Yeah. Because when you laugh about something, it's not serious, it's not bothering you. You find it funny. You don't let it affect you.

Maura: That's right. I think this is a good way to deal with negative things, too. They say that laughter is the best medicine.

Harp: Yeah. You're not letting them **get under your skin**. You're not letting them affect you.

Maura: Let's give you now a couple examples with **to laugh something off**.

Harp: Did you hear about Johnny falling in front of his whole class?

Maura: Yeah, I did. I heard they were making fun of him after and imitating how he fell.

Harp: Yeah. They were. But you know, he was pretty **cool**. He just **laughed it off**. He didn't let them bother him.

Maura: That's the way you gotta be. You can't let other people bother you like that.

Harp: He was very **cool**.

Maura: In that example, Johnny could have been embarrassed when he fell, he could have felt bad, or he could have felt stupid, but instead, he just **laughed it off**, which meant that he didn't take other people making fun of him seriously. It wasn't important to him, and he just laughed about it.

Harp: Yeah. He didn't make it a big deal. He didn't **let them get to him**.

Maura: That's right. OK, let's give you now one last example with **to laugh something off**.

Maura: So how was your meeting today?

Harp: It was OK, but, you know, my colleagues were all super negative about my idea for the project.

Maura: Oh. That's annoying. But you know, you should just **laugh it off**, because last time they didn't like your idea and look whose idea got chosen—yours, not theirs.

Harp: That's true, I'm not gonna let them bother me.

Maura: Nope. **Don't sweat it**.

Harp: I think I have a really good idea.

Maura: In that example, we had someone whose colleagues were pretty mean to her and they gave her a lot of negative comments, they didn't like her idea. She could have let that bother her, but she **laughed it off**. So she didn't take what they were saying seriously, she didn't let it bother her, and she just decided to feel proud of her idea anyways.

- Harp: Yeah. She didn't let their negativity get her down and she decided to keep on going with her idea because she thought it was a good idea.
- Maura: Now, let's go over the expressions we looked at today one more time.
- Harp: All right. We started with ***it's like water off a duck's back***.
- Maura: Right. And then we looked at the expression ***to brush something off***.
- Harp: And then we finished with ***to laugh it off***.
- Maura: That's right. And all these expressions can be used if something negative happens and you don't want to let it bother you.
- Harp: Yeah. If someone criticizes you or they say something negative, you decide to not let it affect you, not let it bother you, and not take it seriously.
- Maura: That's right. So, as always, don't forget to go to our website, Culips.com, that's C-U-L-I-P-S.com. And of course it's only on our website where you can become a member so check that out if you've only been listening to us on iTunes.
- Harp: Yes. Becoming a member is **cool**. And remember we're also on Facebook and on Twitter, so come on over and say hi and leave us a question.
- Maura: We'll talk to you soon. Bye.
- Harp: Bye everyone.

Detailed Explanation

To get the hang of something

To get the hang of something means to finally learn something after practicing it for a while. When you are learning something new and start to fully understand or grasp it, then you are **getting the hang of it**.

The origin of this phrase is unclear, but it probably comes from handling tools. As early as the 14th century, the handles of tools were often called hanks. Grasping a tool correctly meant getting a good grip on the hank. It's possible that this evolved into *getting the hank of something*, which literally meant grasping the handle of something, which then turned into **getting the hang of something**. Since a hank was something used to grasp something, people may have started using *hank* to refer to grasping an idea or activity, not just a tool. After a while, when the word *hank* became less common, people started using the word *hang* instead.

Here's another example with **to get the hang of something**:

Joseph: How are your violin lessons going?

Lalo: Not so good. I had no idea when I started that it'd be so much work.

Joseph: The violin is a tricky instrument. But you'll **get the hang of it** soon.

Lalo: Yeah, I'm already a lot better than I was at the beginning.

To let something get to you

To let something get to you means to allow yourself to be affected or bothered by something. If you think about something literally getting to you, like a package in the mail, it means that it comes to you and becomes part of your life. When **something gets to you** in the way this expression is used in this episode, it's kind of the same. **Something getting to you** means that it reaches you and affects you. You will often hear people saying **don't let it get to you** when they are trying to tell you not to let something affect you.

Here's another example with **to let something get to you**:

Miyuki: Why did the teacher keep you after class tonight?

Damon: I hadn't done my homework, so he told me that I'd have to do extra work. He seemed pretty upset.

Miyuki: Don't **let it get to you**. He's here to help you learn, so when you do something that might prevent that, he gets upset. It's for your own good. Don't take it personally.

Damon: Yeah, I've never looked at it that way. Thank you!

Like water off a duck's back

When something is **like water off a duck's back**, it means that a person can let go or dismiss it very easily, without any apparent effort or effect. This expression is related to ducks' feathers. Ducks' feathers are very oily, so that when a duck is swimming, its skin doesn't get wet. When there is water on a duck's back, it just rolls off very easily without the duck even noticing that it was ever wet. So, when an insult or criticism rolls off you **like water off a duck's back**, you just let it go and it doesn't affect you, the same way that a duck lets water roll right off of it. The criticism cannot get through to you, the same way that water cannot get through a duck's feathers.

Here's another example with **like water off a duck's back**:

Heesu: I'm so nervous about this presentation. I wish I were doing it next week instead.

Cala: Don't worry, we all have to do a presentation. Remember when Sarah presented last week? People actually started giggling at one point because she was so nervous. But she didn't even react. It was **like water off a duck's back** to her.

Heesu: You're right. I should follow her example. I can do it.

Constructive criticism

Constructive criticism is negative feedback that is straightforward and honest, but very helpful. This expression is often used when someone is giving negative feedback to someone, but in a way that is helpful for their improvement. If someone needs to improve on something, **constructive criticism** tells them that they need to improve, but also offers advice on how to improve or what areas they need to work on. **Constructive criticism** is different than regular criticism because regular criticism just lets someone know they are doing something wrong, without giving them advice on how to correct it.

Here's another example with **constructive criticism**:

Arek: Have you read my paper?

Antonio: I read it last night. I'd suggest rewriting the last paragraph though. It was a little confusing.

Arek: OK.

Antonio: I'm sorry. Did that bother you?

Arek: No, not at all. I appreciate **constructive criticism**.

To nag

To nag means to irritate or annoy someone by criticizing them or complaining about them. If someone keeps reminding you about something you haven't done yet, you could say they are **nagging** you. This expression is only used when this reminding or fault-finding happens very often. If someone criticizes you about something once, it isn't really **nagging**. But if they keep doing it and are irritating you, then it can be considered **nagging**.

Here's another example with **to nag**:

Farhad: Has Cheryl cleaned the kitchen yet?

Tanja: Not yet. I asked her for the second time today, and she keeps saying that she'll do it later.

Farhad: She should probably clean it soon. The other roommates are getting upset.

Tanja: Yeah, I know. I don't want **to nag** her about it though.

Farhad: I can help her if you want.

Tanja: No, that's OK. It's her turn to do it. I'll go ask her again.

To brush something off

To brush something off means to dismiss it or put it out of your mind. People **brush off** criticism and insults if they are unwelcome or unkind. **To brush something off** can also have negative uses. **To brush someone off** means to dismiss or reject them. This expression comes from the act of physically brushing something off of you, like lint or dirt. It is attached to you, but brushing it off gets rid of it.

Here's another example with **to brush something off**:

Jack: I don't know why, but what Sam said about my shirt yesterday is still bothering me.

Sabrina: Yeah, I don't know why he said he didn't like it. That wasn't very nice of him at all. Sometimes he gets in a really bad mood and takes it out on other people. Don't take it personally.

Jack: Yeah, I should forget about it.

Sabrina: You need **to brush it off**. He didn't mean it.

Right off the bat

Right off the bat means right from the beginning, or immediately after something starts. It can also be said as *straight off the bat*. This expression comes from baseball. When a batter hits the ball and then starts running to first base, they are running right off the bat, or right when the ball has left the bat. When you do something **right off the bat**, you are doing it right away.

Here's another example with **right off the bat**:

Pedro: Are you still taking swimming lessons?

Tella: Yes, but I'm not sure I like them.

Pedro: It's normal to not like swimming **right off the bat**. It can be scary being in water when you don't know how to swim.

Tella: I'm going to keep going and see if it gets any better.

To suck

To suck means to be bad. This is a very casual expression, so it should never be used formally, as it can be seen as rude to some. Especially among younger people, the expression **that sucks** is often used instead of expressions like *that's too bad*, *I don't like that*, or *that's bad*. It can be used in a variety of situations to express dislike or displeasure about something.

The origins of this expression are unclear, but it may be a shortened form of the insult *go suck on an egg*. Because sucking on a raw egg would not be a very nice experience, something that **sucks** may be equally unpleasant. Another possible origin is a sailing term. Ships that are not well constructed can be sucked backwards by heaving waves, so those ships are said to suck. There are a whole bunch of potential origins for this expression, but it's important to remember that all the origins come from something that is not very nice or is rude. It's better to just use this expression among your good friends.

Here's another example with **to suck**:

Herbert: How was the movie last night?

Franck: Not very good. I didn't realize it was a foreign film, so it had subtitles. I forgot to bring my glasses, so I had no idea what was going on.

Herbert: That **sucks**!

Franck: Yeah. My date offered to read the subtitles to me, but I knew that would bother the other people in the theatre.

To put your nose to the grindstone

To put your nose to the grindstone means to work constantly without giving up. This expression is also sometimes said as **to keep your nose to the grindstone**. In a previous Culips episode, called *Working Like a Dog*, we explain this expression in more detail. If you haven't heard it, you should check it out!

Here's another example with **to put your nose to the grindstone**:

Jefferson: I feel like I can't possibly study anymore. I've already studied all day.

Carla: **Put your nose to the grindstone** and keep studying. It's better if you study right up until the exam, then the information is fresh in your mind.

Jefferson: You're right. Let's go get a coffee so I can stay awake!

To laugh something off

To laugh something off means to laugh and something and to not take it seriously.

Laughing something off is very similar to brushing something off, except that instead of just letting something go, you also find humour in it and take it lightly.

Here's another example with **to laugh something off**.

Hanna: How was your date last night?

Aldo: Interesting. We were eating at a fancy restaurant, and I was so nervous that I didn't realize I was holding the menu upside down!

Hanna: Oh no! Did your date notice?

Aldo: Yes, but she was very nice about it. I was able **to just laugh it off**. It definitely makes a funny story!

To get under your skin

To get under your skin means to affect you in a way that is irritating or difficult to ignore or forget. This was originally a negative term, but it has recently also been used to mean positive things too, like when you have a crush on someone and can't think about anything else but them.

This expression was also used in one of our previous episodes, called *Get Under Someone's Skin*. Check it out for a more detailed explanation of this expression.

Here's another example with **to get under your skin**:

Francesco: Is that new professor any good?

Camilla: Yes, but he has these weird habits that are starting **to get under my skin**.

Francesco: What do you mean?

Camilla: Well, he always faces the blackboard when he's writing and he talks really quietly, so I can hardly ever hear what he's trying to teach us.

Francesco: Oh, that is very irritating.

Cool

To be **cool** means to be extremely calm or unaffected by something. This expression comes from the fact that people who are angry or embarrassed get hot or red-faced. If you've ever been really embarrassed or angry, you may have felt yourself getting very warm or feeling your cheeks flush. Being **cool** is the opposite of being angry or embarrassed. It means that you do not let something bother you.

Here's another example with **cool**:

Aura: I'm so sorry if I embarrassed you today.

Naomi: That's OK. You didn't realize that my crush on Todd was a secret.

Aura: Still, I shouldn't have said anything about it in front of everyone. You handled it so well though.

Naomi: Yeah, it helps to be **cool** in those situations, so nobody thinks it bothers you.

Not to sweat something

Not to sweat something means not to worry or not to take something seriously. This expression comes from the fact that sweating is associated with nervousness and worry, so telling someone **not to sweat something** is like telling them not to let it affect them to the point where they sweat.

Here's another example with ***not to sweat something***:

Ada: Do you know whether your brother is done with the book I lent him yet?

Tania: He hasn't finished it yet. I'm sorry. I know you need it back. He's just had such a bad headache lately that it's been difficult for him to read.

Ada: That's all right. Tell him **not to sweat it**. I don't need it back for a few more weeks.

Quiz

1. What does the expression *to get the hang of something* mean?
 - a) to never take things seriously or let something bother you
 - b) to start to succeed at something after you've been practicing it for a while
 - c) to want to ride in an airplane
 - d) to never make anyone angry

2. Which of the following is an example of constructive criticism?
 - a) You don't skate very well.
 - b) You should find another hobby other than skating.
 - c) You wobble on your skates, but if you tie the laces tighter it might help straighten you out.
 - d) You're very good at skating.

3. Where does the expression *like water off a duck's back* come from?
 - a) the fact that ducks have very oily feathers so their skin doesn't get wet
 - b) the fact that birds fly south for the winter
 - c) the way that bathtubs drain water
 - d) the fact that ducks hide during rainstorms

4. What does *to nag* mean?
 - a) to never listen to your parents when they ask you to do something
 - b) to get good at horseback riding by practicing every day
 - c) to get in trouble at school a lot
 - d) to annoy someone by repeating a request or criticism over and over

5. Where does the expression *right off the bat* come from?
 - a) the way that baseball players run to the first base immediately after hitting the ball
 - b) the fact that baseball games get cancelled when it rains
 - c) the fact that bats (the animals) hang upside down
 - d) the way that people cook things in frying pans

6. What does *to brush something off* mean?

- a) to avoid getting in trouble by hiding
- b) to let something go or not let it bother you
- c) to embarrass someone else in front of other people
- d) to forget how to do something you used to do a lot

7. Where does the expression *don't sweat it* come from?

- a) the fact that rain gets people wet as if they're sweating
- b) the fact that sweatshirts are often worn by angry people
- c) the fact that people who are worried or embarrassed get sweaty
- d) the fact that people who practice things a lot get better at them quicker

Answers:

1.b 2.c 3.a 4.d 5.a 6.b 7.c