

Catchword #174 – In the nick of time

Episode description

What do you do with your time? In English, you can do a lot with it, like waste it, kill it, or be in the nick of it. Join Andrew and Suzanne as they explain two time-related expressions: in the nick of time and to kill time.

Fun fact

According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, the oldest surviving clock in England is at Salisbury Cathedral and dates from 1386!

Expressions included in the learning materials

- In the nick of time
- To kill time
- To snatch
- To keep yourself busy
- A waste of time



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.

Andrew: Hi, I'm Andrew.

Suzanne: Hi, it's Suzanne.

Andrew: And you are listening to Culips.

Suzanne: Yay!

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Andrew: Suzanne, how are you? How is it going? How is your summer?

Suzanne: Oh, my summer is great. It's nice and warm in Montreal, there is a nice breeze, and, of course, one of my favourite things in the summer is the Montreal Jazz Festival.

Andrew: The Montreal Jazz Festival.

Suzanne: Yeah, the Montreal Jazz Festival, and it's about 2 weeks long.

Andrew: OK.

Suzanne: Musicians come from all over the world and perform at different venues in the downtown area, and also outside on stages. And you can walk around and catch different artists and musicians for free all throughout the 2 weeks.

Andrew: That sounds awesome. And I know the Montreal Jazz Festival is really famous but, unfortunately, I never had a chance to visit it.

Suzanne: Really?

Andrew: Yeah, I know—it's too bad, right?

Suzanne: Oh, that's too bad. It's the one thing in Montreal that I make sure that I do, because it's my favourite event.

Andrew: Are you planning to see any of the headlining acts?

- Suzanne: Yeah, I just got some Rufus Wainwright tickets.
- Andrew: No way. I heard those sold out so quickly. How did you get some?
- Suzanne: I know—I was really lucky. I got some just **in the nick of time**. It was a lucky moment. They had some extras.
- Andrew: Wow, you're really lucky. You're going to have a great time.
- Suzanne: I can't wait.
- Andrew: Well, Suzanne, it's funny that you mentioned that you just bought your Rufus Wainwright tickets **in the nick of time**, because one of our key expressions for today's Catchword episode is **in the nick of time**. Isn't that a coincidence?
- Suzanne: Wow. That's crazy.
- Andrew: Mmhmm. And so today our theme for our Catchword episode is time. Today, we are going to introduce you to two expressions that you can use to talk about time. And so the first one is **in the nick of time**.
- Suzanne: Yeah, and that's when you really accomplish something, or think of something, or make an action just at the last possible moment, but you do make it.
- Andrew: Exactly. So when something happens **in the nick of time**, it occurs right at the very last second that it's possible. So, to go back to your ticket example, you were able to buy these tickets at the very last moment, just before they sold out. And that's when we use this expression **in the nick of time**, at that last instant you bought the tickets.
- Suzanne: Yes, it's like crossing the finish line at the very last second.
- Andrew: Yeah, just before somebody else passes you, you cross the line first and you win the race.
- Suzanne: Do you know why it's called **nick of time**?
- Andrew: Mmm, this is a very good question. And it's actually a little bit complicated, but I did look it up on the internet, I did some research, and this expression is very old. It can be traced back to the late 1500s. So, wow, this expression is really old.
- Suzanne: Wow. Yeah.
- Andrew: And apparently a *nick* back in the old days—this is a word we don't really use anymore except for in this expression—but a *nick* was kind of a notch on a stick that was used to measure time.

- Suzanne: Oh, OK.
- Andrew: And it was also used to keep track of the score of sporting events.
- Suzanne: Interesting.
- Andrew: Yeah, it's got this weird, antiquated, historical element to it. But, yeah, this is a common expression that we still use.
- Suzanne: Yeah, and it's funny because I thought, well, why Nick? Why not Matt or ... you know? I thought it was in reference to someone's name, because we use the word *Nick* as a name.
- Andrew: Yeah, no, it's totally true. But this is one of the things that I love about language, is that we can have this really old word still exist because of the expression. Otherwise this would probably just fall away and not be used, but it was preserved in the expression ***in the nick of time***.
- Suzanne: Nice.
- Andrew: Cool. So I think we should give some examples with this expression. Is that OK with you?
- Suzanne: That sounds great.

- Andrew: Hi, it's Jack. Are you still at the office?
- Suzanne: Yeah, but I'm just about to leave.
- Andrew: I guess I caught you just ***in the nick of time***. Hey, listen, I forgot a very important file on my desk. Can you make a scan of it and email it to me? It'll only take, like, 5 minutes.
- Suzanne: OK, no problem.
- Andrew: That's the best—thank you so much.
- Suzanne: See you tomorrow, Jack.
- Andrew: OK, bye.

- Suzanne: So in this dialogue, Jack left something at his office and he was so happy that when he called his office he found his friend, and his friend was able to take care of this important document for him. He called and reached his friend just before the friend left for the night, so he caught his friend just **in the nick of time**, just at the very last moment.
- Andrew: Yeah, exactly. It sounded like Jack left an important file, maybe he needed it for a meeting first thing in the morning and would have been in trouble without it.
- Suzanne: Yeah.
- Andrew: So, yeah, he called his friend at work, and she was able to help him out. He reached her just **in the nick of time**.
- Suzanne: I would say Jack is really lucky.
- Andrew: He's a lucky guy, yeah. OK, how about we give one more example?
- Suzanne: Sounds good.

- Andrew: What are you doing tonight? Do you want to see a movie?
- Suzanne: Um, yeah, sure. Do you think we can make it for 7:00? I don't want to wait until 10:00.
- Andrew: OK, let me check my app and I'll see if there's any tickets left.
- Suzanne: OK.
- Andrew: Whoa, looks like we're right **in the nick of time!** There's only two seats left.
- Suzanne: Oh, my gosh, buy them quick!
- Andrew: I just did.
- Suzanne: Sweet. OK, you want to meet at the theater at 6:45?
- Andrew: Yeah. Hey, by the way, you're OK with sitting in the front row, right?
- Suzanne: I'll deal with it.

- Andrew: So, in that example, we heard two friends making plans to go watch a movie. And they tried to make the 7:00 movie showing, and actually they did. They were able to buy the last two seats in the movie theatre, the last two tickets available. So they bought these tickets just **in the nick of time**, right before somebody else **snatched** them up. But you know as it goes, those last two seats were in the very front row of the theatre, so ...
- Suzanne: Wah-wah.
- Andrew: Maybe they're not so lucky after all.
- OK. Well, Suzanne, we have one more time-related expression to check out today, and the second expression is **to kill time**.
- Suzanne: Oh, I know that one very well.
- Andrew: Mmm, are you good at **killing time**?
- Suzanne: Yes, I am very good at **killing time**. In fact, whenever I was working in New York City and I would have an audition, say at 1:00 p.m., and then another audition at 3:00 p.m., I would have 2 hours in between my appointments. And this would happen very often, and I got very good at walking around the city, going into a café, and **killing time** in between my appointments.
- Andrew: Aha, so yeah, that would be a perfect example of **killing time**, right? Because when you **kill time**, you do **something to keep you busy** while you wait for something else to happen, so you would **kill time** going to a café and maybe drinking a coffee while you waited for your next audition to start.
- Suzanne: Exactly. So sometimes I would do those little things that aren't really important while I was waiting for the next important task.
- Andrew: Mmm, this reminds me of being a university student. I always hated when my schedule had a short break between classes, like maybe an hour, because then I'd have **an hour to kill**, I'd have to **kill time**. And sure, you can, you know, have a quick coffee, that can be nice, but I always found it annoying. It wasn't enough time to do any real studying, but it was just, like—I don't know—a little bit too long. I always found it annoying; some people might disagree with me, but I just like to go, class, class, class, and then be done.
- Suzanne: I am the same way. I don't like it when I have a lot of things on my list to do, but I only have 20 minutes before I'm meeting a friend, or an hour, and that's not enough time to really tackle a new project or really dive into a new task. And so I have **to kill that 20 minutes** and, you know, grab a crossword puzzle or something, and it's so frustrating.

- Andrew: Yeah. For me, now I just go right to my phone, that's how I **kill time** these days.
- Suzanne: Yeah, **kill some time** on Facebook or something.
- Andrew: There you go. It's **a waste of time**, but it's a good way to **kill time**.
- Suzanne: Yeah.
- Andrew: So, again, just to recap. When you **kill time**, you spend time doing something while you wait for another event, or another meeting, or another action to occur, to start.
- Suzanne: Yeah. And usually that event is the next thing that you need to do, so it could be happening within minutes, within hours, within days.
- Andrew: Yeah. Well, you bring up a good point, and that's because we can say the expression, **to kill time**, but you can also say, oh, I've got **to kill a couple of minutes, or a couple of hours, a couple of days, a couple of years**.
- Suzanne: Oh, my gosh.
- Andrew: Like, maybe a prisoner might say, oh, like, mmm, what did you do for the last 5 years? Oh, I just **killed some time**; I just **killed a couple of years**, you know, like ...
- Suzanne: Yeah, that's true.
- Andrew: If you were in jail, that might be a sentence that you said. So you're absolutely right, that we can use this expression to talk about very short periods of time, but also very long periods of time.
- Suzanne: Hopefully we're not **killing too many years**.
- Andrew: Yeah, no, you don't want to **kill years**. Too much of your life would pass you by.
- Suzanne: Exactly.
- Andrew: Well, I think we're ready for some examples. Let's do the first one.
- Suzanne: OK.

Suzanne: Hello?

Andrew: Hey, what's up? What are you doing right now?

Suzanne: Hey. Uh, I've got no plans. Why?

Andrew: Do you feel like grabbing a coffee? I'm in your neighborhood and I've got **an hour to kill** before I need to go to work.

Suzanne: Huh! Sure, sound good. Should we meet at the corner café in 10 minutes?

Andrew: Yeah, perfect. OK, I'll see you there.

Suzanne: OK.

Suzanne: So in this phone call, a friend had some time before work and it wasn't exactly a long period of time for them to maybe accomplish anything significant, and it wasn't a short amount of time, like 5 minutes. It was about an hour. So they called their friend, because they're in their neighbourhood, and they figured they could use this time to hang out and meet with their friend. In this way, this person could use up that awkward amount of time right before work and enjoy it with their friend; they could **kill the hour** together.

Andrew: Yeah. So in this example, we heard the expression, **to kill an hour**, right?

Suzanne: Yeah.

Andrew: But it's the same meaning as **to kill time**. So you can give a specific amount of time, like an hour, or you can just say: "I've got **time to kill**."

Suzanne: Yeah. And usually you do say, "I have **5 minutes to kill**," or "I have **an hour to kill**." You don't really say: "I want to **kill an hour**."

Andrew: No, exactly, that's a very good point. You always start with the time period first: you have **an amount of time to kill**.

Suzanne: Yes.

Andrew: Yeah, very good point. OK, let's get to the second example.

Suzanne: OK.

Suzanne: Hey, what time does our flight leave tomorrow?

Andrew: We leave Montreal at 9:00, and then we have a 3-hour layover in New York before we leave for Paris.

Suzanne: Mmm, seems like we have **a couple of hours to kill**, then.

Andrew: Yup. Mmm, you'd better bring a good book.

Suzanne: I will. What'll you do?

Andrew: Oh, you know, I'll probably just listen to a podcast, or if we're hungry we could grab some lunch?

Suzanne: Mmm, now you're talking.

Andrew: So in this last example, we heard about the flight plans of a couple. They were flying to Paris the next day, and they were discussing their travel itinerary. And they actually have a 3-hour layover in New York before their connecting flight departs for Paris. And so they were just wondering what they could do to **kill time** because they have **a couple of hours to kill**. So they suggested reading a book, or listening to a podcast, or possibly getting lunch. So it sounds like they have a long travel day, but they have all the details sorted out.

Suzanne: Yeah. It sounds like a fun trip, too.

Andrew: Well, Suzanne, I think that's all the time we have for today.

Suzanne: That was really fun, Andrew. I'm glad we got to really learn and experience these two expressions.

Andrew: Totally. So once again, we looked at two expressions related to time. The first one is **in the nick of time**. And the second one is **to kill time**. And it just occurred to me that it's entirely possible that somebody is listening to this podcast right now while they're **killing time** and, if that's you, we dedicate this episode to you. We hope that you had a good time **killing time** with us.

Suzanne: Totally, Andrew! And we'd love to hear from you. When was the last time you did something just **in the nick of time**, or when was the last time you **killed time**, and what did you do during that time? Maybe you can share that with us on Facebook in the comments. We'd love to hear from you.

Andrew: Yes, we are always very happy when you send us your comments and your feedback. Also, don't forget to visit our website, Culips.com—it is the place where you can listen to all of our previous episodes, and we have hundreds of them. And while you are there, you can learn more about becoming a Culips member and all the goodies and benefits that come along with Culips membership.

That's it for us today, thanks a lot.

Suzanne: Thanks, guys.

Andrew: Talk to you next time. Bye.

Suzanne: Bye.

Detailed Explanations

In the nick of time

The first key expression from this episode, ***in the nick of time***, means at the last possible moment. In other words, if you do something ***in the nick of time***, there was no time to spare—you did it at the very last second you could! So, when you do something ***in the nick of time***, you could not have done it any later.

One example would be getting to a store just before it closes. In that situation, you could say you got to the store ***in the nick of time***, because if you were any later, the store would be closed.

Here's one more example with ***in the nick of time***:

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| Jessie: | How was work today? |
| Adam: | Not bad. It wasn't a fun commute this morning, though. |
| Jessie: | Why not? |
| Adam: | Even though I left with 15 minutes to spare, both my bus and the metro were late. I got to work just <i>in the nick of time</i> —just a minute later and I could have been written up for being late! |

To kill time

To kill time is the second key expression from this episode, and it means to spend time doing an activity while you wait to do something else. The important thing about this expression is that the thing you do while you're waiting, while you're actually **killing time**, is less important than the thing you're waiting for.

For example, it would be very strange to talk about **killing time** at work while you wait to play video games, because work is more important than games. However, it would be quite normal to **kill time** before work starts by playing a game. In other words, **to kill time** means to occupy yourself with something trivial or less important while you wait for a more important event or activity.

Here's one more example with **to kill time**:

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| Henry: | Well, we have an hour before the show. What do you want to do? |
| Siobhan: | Maybe we can find a nice park and kill time by taking a walk? |
| Henry: | Yeah, that sounds nice! |

To snatch

Most simply, **to snatch** means to grab or take something quickly. In this episode, Andrew gives the example of buying tickets quickly before someone else **snatches** them up. By using the verb **to snatch**, Andrew implies that there was no time to lose in buying the tickets.

To snatch isn't just about taking something speedily, though. It also implies eagerness on the part of the person doing the **snatching**, sometimes to the point of impoliteness or rudeness.

This is easiest to understand if you can picture the action. Imagine you are about to offer someone an object, and they don't wait for you to finish speaking but instead grab the object out of your hands. In that case, they **snatched** that object from you! Whether the person intended to be rude or not, taking things quickly, in an impatient manner, can often be perceived as rude.

Here are a couple more examples with **to snatch**:

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| Shelby: | I can't believe how rude that woman was! I hate being a server sometimes! |
| Peter: | Why, what happened? |
| Shelby: | I went over to give the table water and take their order, and this woman snatched a glass of water from my tray. It threw the whole thing off balance, and I nearly dropped the rest of the glasses on her lap. |
| Peter: | Oh no! |
| Shelby: | It gets worse. She then got really mad at me for spilling a little water on her, but it was her fault for snatching that glass! |

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| Kimberly: | Wow, Claude, that's a beautiful sweater. |
| Claude: | Feel it, it's cashmere! I've never had any item of clothing so soft before. |
| Kimberly: | Isn't cashmere really expensive? How did you manage to afford it? |
| Claude: | I just happened to walk by this store that was having a crazy going-out-of-business sale. There were mostly awful things left, but I found this sweater and snatched it! |
| Kimberly: | Great find! |

To keep yourself busy

To keep yourself busy is an idiom that means to stay engaged, active, and find enough things to do.

People usually talk about **keeping busy** in the context of free time. When you have a lot of time when you don't absolutely have to do anything, it's easy to get lazy and do nothing at all. Or, you can **keep yourself busy** with hobbies, meeting friends, and all sorts of other activities.

So, **to keep yourself busy** means to stay active and engaged with people, activities, and projects. Put simply, it's just not being lazy and idle!

Here are a couple more examples with **to keep yourself busy**:

| | |
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| Horace: | Hey, Connie, how's your mom? Didn't she just retire? |
| Connie: | Yeah, she retired a little over a year ago. I was worried she might be bored, but she's keeping herself busy , that's for sure! |
| Horace: | Oh yeah? What's she up to? |
| Connie: | She started a book club, took up swimming, bought a dog, started learning to knit, and even started writing music! |
| Horace: | Wow, she does way more than I do! |

| | |
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| Ricardo: | How was your weekend? |
| Michele: | Not bad—my brother came for a visit. |
| Ricardo: | Sean? How is he? I haven't seen him in years! |
| Michele: | He's doing OK. He actually just got fired from his job, so he's a bit depressed. |
| Ricardo: | I'm sorry to hear that. Being unemployed can be really hard. |
| Michele: | He's trying to keep himself busy with job applications and training for a marathon, but I can tell he's not going to be happy until he finds a new job. |
| Ricardo: | Tell him I said good luck. |

A waste of time

In this episode, Andrew mentions that Facebook is **a waste of time**. So, what exactly is **a waste of time**? **A waste of time** is any use of time or activity that doesn't accomplish anything.

There are two main ways people use **a waste of time**. The first is for activities that people consider pointless. Many people would call watching TV **a waste of time**, because it is a leisure activity with no goal or end result. This is the same reason Andrew calls Facebook **a waste of time**, because it doesn't accomplish anything in the real world. However, what is or is not considered **a waste of time** is also very personal. While some people find things like TV and Facebook to be **a waste of time**, other people find them to be valuable and relaxing activities.

The second way to use **a waste of time** is when talking about a failed attempt at something. If you try to cook dinner but it comes out tasting so bad that you can't eat it, you could say that the time you spent cooking was **a waste of time**. So, when the thing you tried to do wasn't successful, you can say the time you spent doing it was **a waste of time**.

Here are a couple more examples with **a waste of time**:

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| Anne: | Hey, Ron, what are you doing this Friday? |
| Ron: | I'm not sure. I don't usually do much on the weekends. I might watch some CS/ reruns and read about houseplants on Wikipedia. |
| Anne: | That sounds like a total waste of time . You should come to my place—I'm having a little dinner party! |
| Ron: | I guess I could try something a bit different. Thanks for the invitation! |

| | |
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| Hazel: | Hey, Morris, how's it going? |
| Morris: | Oh, pretty well. |
| Hazel: | How was your weekend? |
| Morris: | I spent all of it trying to bake a birthday cake for my girlfriend. She's vegan, so the recipes were all weird. |
| Hazel: | Were you successful in the end? |
| Morris: | Most of the attempts were a total waste of time . I only figured out a good recipe on my fifth try! |

Quiz

1. What is the activity you are always doing when you kill time?

- a) waiting
- b) standing
- c) playing
- d) talking

2. Wasted time is time spent not being:

- a) happy
- b) creative
- c) useful
- d) lazy

3. When you snatch something, you take it:

- a) when it is given to you
- b) promptly
- c) slowly
- d) quickly

4. If you do something in the nick of time, you do it:

- a) ahead of time
- b) at the last possible moment
- c) late
- d) at a leisurely pace

5. When you keep busy, you are NOT being:

- a) industrious
- b) lazy
- c) productive
- d) hard working

Quiz Answers

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

Episode credits

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