

Catch Word #180 – I'm just spitballing here

Episode description

When you have a problem that needs solving, sometimes you have to toss a few ideas around in order to get the ball rolling and figure out how to solve it. In today's Catch Word episode, Andrew and Morag explain two expressions that will help you talk about generating and evaluating ideas: to spitball and to toss an idea around.

Expressions included in the learning materials

- To spitball
- To toss an idea around
- A shot in the dark
- To get the ball rolling
- To brainstorm



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: Hey, everybody. My name is Andrew.

Morag: And mine's Morag.

Andrew: And we are back with another Culips episode.

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Andrew: Hey, Morag. How's it goin' with you?

Morag: Hmm, pretty well, Andrew. How about you?

Andrew: I'm doing OK.

Morag: Oh.

Andrew: But I just finished eating some really spicy noodles, and my mouth is on fire. So I hope I'm not sniffing too much into the microphone during this episode.

Morag: Hmm, I ... Should be fine. Although I'm really jealous of those spicy noodles. I have not eaten anything yet.

Andrew: Well, I recommend spicy noodles for breakfast or lunch or dinner. Always delicious.

Morag: Mmm.

Andrew: Well, I think we should jump right into today's episode. We are going to do a Catch Word episode. And this is where we introduce, define, explain, and teach you how to use a couple of related English idioms or expressions.

And today our expressions are related to **brainstorming**. OK, these are expressions you can use when you're trying to think of ideas or judge how good an idea is. And, Morag, maybe you could just quickly touch on this expression, **brainstorming**. Because I really like this expression, **brainstorming**. What does **brainstorming** mean?

- Morag: **Brainstorming** means just coming up with as many ideas and possibilities as you can. So just to generate as many ideas as possible. And then when you have that metaphorical storm of ideas, all this stuff that you've created with your brain, then you can look at it and sort of see what's best. But **brainstorming** is the activity of generating all those ideas.
- Andrew: Hmm, perfect. Yeah, you're generating ideas. I like that. So the two expressions we'll look at today are related to **brainstorming**. Just before we get started, I wanna let everybody know that the transcript and learning materials for this episode, as well as every other Culips episode, they are available to download on our website for all Culips members.
- Morag: Using the learning materials is definitely the best way to study with Culips, so head on over to Culips.com and learn about becoming a member.
- Andrew: Today's first expression is a verb, and it is to spitball, to spitball.
- Morag: To spitball, to spitball.
- Andrew: Yeah, spitball. S-p-i-t-b-a-l-l. Ugh, spitballs are kinda gross, aren't they?
- Morag: This is a bit of a gross one, yeah.
- Andrew: Yeah, if you stop to think about it. Because a spitball reminds me of high school, actually. Because what a spitball is, is you take a little piece of paper and you roll it into a ball. And then you put the piece of paper into your mouth to get it covered in spit. And then you stick that into a straw, and you can shoot the ball, right? This is a spitball.
- But today our expression is a little bit different because we are talking about the verb, to spitball. So when you spitball, you try to think of good ideas to a problem. Maybe you are in a meeting with other people, and you just put out every idea that comes into your head. You're **spitballing**. You're sharing as many ideas as possible, just to see if any good ones are thought of.
- Morag: The important thing about spitball, I think, is that there's no guarantee of quality to the idea. It's just like, well, it's ... What about this one?
- Andrew: Hmm, yeah.
- Morag: You know, it's just kind of like throwing something out. It's an attempt and maybe a **shot in the dark**, even, but designed to get things moving.
- Andrew: Right. You personally don't care about whether the idea is a good idea or a bad idea. You are just putting your ideas out there just **to get the ball rolling** and to get things started, to try and come up with some good ideas.

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: One thing I wanted to mention is that we almost always use this expression in the set phrase, “I’m just **spitballing** here. I’m just **spitballing** here.” I guess you could use it in other ways, right?

Morag: I was trying to think about that and the only thing I could come up with was, “I might just be **spitballing** here.” So it’s basically exactly the same thing, yeah.

Andrew: Right. So almost always. There might be a slight variation to this, but yeah.

Morag: Mmhmm. Nah, not often.

Andrew: Well, should we give some examples with this expression, to spitball?

Morag: Let’s hop into it.

Coworker 1: OK, guys, management wants us to develop a new sales strategy by the end of the week. That means we’re on a tight deadline. Does anybody have any ideas?

Coworker 2: OK, I’m just **spitballing** here, but what about a social media advertising campaign? It could be very effective.

Coworker 1: Ooo, I like it. I like it. This is great.

Morag: In this example, the marketing department of a big company has been asked to develop a new sales strategy. So we heard them holding a business meeting **to brainstorm** and come up with some ideas. One of the team members suggests a social media advertising campaign.

She says, “I’m just **spitballing** here,” before she introduces the idea so that everyone knows that she’s casually introducing the concept to everybody. It’s a sudden and impulsive idea. It’s one that just comes off the top of her head, not something she’s been thinking about for a long time.

Andrew: Yes, OK. Very good. Let’s move on to the second example.

Student 1: Spring break is coming up. What should we do?

Student 2: Hmm, I’m not sure. OK, how about this. I’m just **spitballing** here, but what about Toronto? It could be a cool chance to spend some time in the big city.

Student 1: Toronto? In March? If we’re gonna go somewhere for spring break, it better be someplace warm!

Andrew: In this example, two university students are talking about their upcoming vacation, spring break. They're trying to decide where they should go. One of the students suggests Toronto by saying, "I'm just **spitballing** here, but what if we go to Toronto?"

So, again, because he warns his listener that he is **spitballing**, we know that the idea is off the cuff, that it's impulsive, and was made without a lot of prior thought.

Let's move on to expression number 2. Morag, could you let us all know about expression number 2?

Morag: I can. Expression number 2 is **to toss an idea around, to toss an idea around**, which is a phrasal verb. Is there a back and forth part of this?

Andrew: Yeah. So when you **toss an idea around**, you are considering an idea with maybe multiple people. You are talking with multiple people. Is this a good idea? Is this a bad idea? What do you think about this? What do you think about that? You're weighing your options.

Morag: Hmm.

Andrew: You are trying to decide which is the best idea.

Morag: Yeah.

Andrew: And ... Yeah. I think you usually do this with multiple people, right? You don't **toss an idea around** by yourself.

Morag: I don't think you tend to, but you probably could. My gut feeling was that it was with other people. But you could probably say that you were just **tossing an idea around** if you would think about it for a little bit, and then put it aside and think about a different concept, or like a different part of it. You know, it's like looking at different sides.

Andrew: Yes, I agree. Now that you've mentioned that—

Morag: Yeah.

Andrew: It does make sense, you know. For example, if your friend asked you, "Oh, next year, what are you gonna do? Are you gonna go travelling or are you gonna get a job?"

Morag: Hmm.

Andrew: You could say, "Oh, I'm not sure. I'm **tossing a couple of ideas around**." You know, you're trying to make a decision.

Morag: Yeah, I'm **tossin' an idea or two around**, you know. If it's by yourself, you're not constantly thinking about it.

Andrew: So, yeah, absolutely. When you **toss an idea around**, you're just trying to determine or decide if that idea is good and worth pursuing, or if it's bad and shouldn't be followed.

As we've mentioned, you can do this with a group of people in a meeting setting, or even just personally, trying to make a decision. You can **toss an idea around**.

We should also mention that there's a few different ways to use this expression. You can actually substitute the word toss for kick. So you can kick an idea around, or you can even throw an idea around. And these all mean the same thing, toss, kick, throw an idea. They're used interchangeably.

Morag: For some reason in English, being physically violent towards ideas is the way that you figure out if they're OK.

Andrew: I think probably **toss an idea around** is most common.

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: But personally I like to say kick an idea around. It sounds a little more casual, a little more my style.

Morag: I think I might say knocking an idea around.

Andrew: Oh yeah, you could knock an idea around too, yeah.

Morag: That one I think is probably more UK.

Andrew: Mmhmm.

Morag: Sounds, well, like ... Well, like knocking something around and knocking something about is a little bit more, uh ... But a little bit less Canadian, but yeah.

Andrew: Totally valid still.

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: It's a good expression.

Morag: Yeah.

Andrew: All right, so whether you're knockin' an idea, **tossing an idea** or kicking it, it's all good. And I think it's time for a couple of examples. So let's get right to them.

Friend 1: Mary and I are thinking about moving out of the city to settle down in a small town.

Friend 2: Oh really? Even though I'd be sad to see you guys go, I think that's a great decision. Do you know where you'll go?

Friend 1: We've been **tossing a few ideas around**, but we haven't made a choice yet.

Morag: So in this example, we hear a man talking to his friend about wanting to leave the city for a quieter life in the country, or in a smaller place. He says that he and his wife haven't made a decision yet about where they want to move, but that they're still **tossing a few ideas around**.

So in other words, they're thinking about several options about where they might want to go and haven't chosen anything at this point.

Andrew: Morag, it's our final example. Let's go.

Friend 1: Oh, man, sometimes when I watch the news I get so depressed.

Friend 2: Ugh, I know. Me too. It just seems like there's so many problems, but no solutions.

Friend 1: I know. There's so many people who **toss ideas around** about how to solve our problems, but there's not enough people who take any steps to actually do something.

Andrew: In our final example, two friends discuss watching the news and how depressed it makes them feel. They're both sad that so many people **toss ideas around** about how to fix the world's problems, but no one offers any real solutions.

And we see this a lot on the news, right? And especially on my social media feeds.

Morag: Mine too.

Andrew: Yeah. So in the world there's a lot of politicians, a lot of experts, a lot of so-called know-it-alls, who talk about doing great things. They put forth ideas about how to solve problems. But at the end of the day, not too many problems actually get solved. They **toss the ideas around** but don't act on them.

Morag: Meh, yeah. And then sometimes it's just way more complicated.

Andrew: Yeah, **tossing the idea around** is the easy part, right?

Morag: Right?

Andrew: Yeah.

Morag: Yeah, and I'd like to do this. Then it's like, well, here are all the reasons why that's very difficult. And you're like, "Aw, darn it."

Andrew: Yeah, it's just the way it goes, I guess, yeah.

That is about it for us today. I want to thank everybody for listening. And if you have any comments or questions, or even suggestions for future episodes, drop us a line, help us **brainstorm**. We'd really love it if you got in touch with us. So send us a message, and you can do that via our Facebook page at Facebook.com/CulipsPodcast. Or if you want to, you can email me directly, Andrew@Culips.com.

Morag: And you guys can always also reach us through our website, which is Culips.com.

Andrew: We'll be back soon with another Culips episode, so stay tuned.

Morag: Talk to you soon. Goodbye.

Andrew: Bye.

Detailed Explanations

To spitball

To spitball is a verb that means to offer spontaneous ideas or suggestions in a conversation. In other words, when you **spitball**, you propose ideas that are unplanned, that you have just thought of. So, you are not **spitballing** if your suggestions are well thought out or were discussed previously. The important part about **to spitball** is that the ideas being offered are new.

As we mentioned in this episode, **to spitball** is most commonly used in the set phrase “I’m just **spitballing** here, but [something].” This phrase is a way of letting people know that the ideas you are about to offer may not be helpful because they are spontaneous and unplanned.

Here’s one more example with **to spitball**:

Sam:	What do you want to make for our dinner party on Friday?
Heather:	I’m just spitballing here, but do you think we could all go out to a restaurant instead?
Sam:	Hmm, that might work! Let’s see if we can get a reservation somewhere.

To toss an idea around

To toss an idea around is a phrasal verb construction that means to judge whether an idea is good or not.

This expression is most often used to refer to discussing an idea with another person or a group of people. When you **toss an idea around**, by yourself or with other people, you are trying to come to a conclusion about whether the idea is worthwhile.

Here’s one more example with **to toss an idea around**:

Jennie:	Your birthday is coming up soon, right? What do you have planned?
Peter:	I might go on a camping trip. My friends and I have been tossing the idea around , but we’re still not sure if everyone is going to be able to come.
Jennie:	I hope it works out. Camping for your birthday sounds like a lot of fun!

A shot in the dark

Imagine you've been asked a question to which you don't know the answer. If you try to guess the answer, despite not having any clue what it might be, you are taking **a shot in the dark**.

Put in the simplest way, **a shot in the dark** is a random guess. So, **a shot in the dark** is different from an informed guess—one where you have at least some idea what the answer might be. A real **shot in the dark** is a guess that's made without any evidence or information.

It's common to say this expression before making a guess you're very unsure about. So, the next time you're making a guess and have no idea if it's right or not, you can say, "This is **a shot in the dark**, but" and then make the guess. When you do this, you're letting the person you're speaking with know that your answer is likely to be incorrect.

Here are a couple more examples with **a shot in the dark**:

Carl:	Thank you so much for letting me stay in your apartment while I'm visiting. It's one of the most beautiful homes I've been in. I can't believe how big it is!
Paula:	I know, I love it! But do you wanna know the best part? Guess how much I pay for the rent.
Carl:	I have no idea. I don't know anything about how much apartments cost in this city.
Paula:	Come on! Just take a guess, a shot in the dark .
Carl:	OK—\$2000 a month?
Paula:	Not even close! I only pay \$800.
Carl:	Wow, lucky!

Jacob:	I can't believe my litter sister just got into medical school. She's going to be a student forever!
Rachel:	Oh yeah? What is it, something like 5 years?
Jacob:	Wow, your guess was a shot in the dark . It's more like 10 or 15 years!

To get the ball rolling

To get the ball rolling is an expression that means to start something or to begin a process.

This expression is easy to picture. Imagine that the activity or project that needs to get started is a ball. When you make a ball roll, it will keep rolling by itself. So, when you **get the ball rolling**, you are making a start and putting an activity or plan into motion.

In this episode, Andrew uses the term **to get the ball rolling** to explain the term **to spitball**. He says that when you **spitball**, you're "putting your ideas out there **just to get the ball rolling**." In other words, you're offering ideas in order to get a discussion started.

People often use **to get the ball rolling** when talking about an activity that hasn't been started yet. For example, imagine someone asked you about a task that you need to start working on. If you haven't started on the task yet, but plan to start shortly, you could respond by saying, "I haven't started yet, but I want **to get the ball rolling** soon." In other words, you're saying that you're planning to start working on that task soon.

Here are a couple more examples with **to get the ball rolling**:

Ursula:	Do you still want to go on a road trip this spring?
Dave:	Yeah! I think we should drive all around the Maritimes. It would be fun!
Ursula:	I agree, but if we want to make it happen, we need to get the ball rolling on planning the trip. We need to figure out how much money we'll need to save and where we'll be staying when we're on the road.
Dave:	Good point! Let's get the ball rolling with a planning session this weekend.
Ursula:	Sounds good.

Catherine:	Hey, Ron, how is the apartment hunt coming?
Ron:	Oh, man, I've been so busy lately that I haven't even started looking for a new apartment yet.
Catherine:	Yikes! Weren't you planning on moving in a month?
Ron:	Yeah, that was the idea.
Catherine:	You should really get the ball rolling !

To brainstorm

To brainstorm is a verb that means to quickly generate a lot of ideas. You have probably **brainstormed** without knowing it. Have you ever started solving problem by first trying to come up with as many potential solutions as possible? This is called **brainstorming**!

However, **brainstorming** doesn't just have to be about solving a problem. You can brainstorm anything, such as potential names for a pet, cities you'd like to visit, or recipes you want to cook. Brainstorming is simply the act of coming up with as many ideas as you can about a certain topic.

Similar to the expression "to toss an idea around," **to brainstorm** is most often used to talk about a group of people all coming up with ideas together. However, there's nothing stopping you from **brainstorming** by yourself!

Here's one more example with **to brainstorm**:

Adrian:	Oh, man, I have no idea what to get Mom for her birthday.
Hannah:	Neither do I! I was hoping you might be able to give me a gift suggestion, but I guess not.
Adrian:	Well, we both need to figure out something to get her! Why don't we sit down and brainstorm gift ideas for her? Maybe between the two of us we can come up with at least one good idea.

Quiz

1. **If someone tells you to get the ball rolling on an activity, they're telling you to _____ that activity.**
 - a) start work on
 - b) give up on
 - c) try harder at
 - d) keep working on

2. **When you take a shot in the dark, you are making a(n) _____ guess.**
 - a) likely
 - b) educated
 - c) misinformed
 - d) random

3. **True or false: It is only correct to talk about tossing an idea around if you're discussing the idea with other people.**
 - a) true
 - b) false

4. **What do you call the activity of trying to come up with as many ideas or suggestions as possible?**
 - a) tossing ideas around
 - b) spitballing
 - c) contemplating
 - d) brainstorming

5. **Which of the following is the common set phrase that uses the expression to spitball?**
 - a) I might spitball later, but...
 - b) I'm just spitballing here, but...
 - c) This may spitball, but...
 - d) I could look like a spitball, but...

Quiz Answers

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

Episode credits

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