

Real Talk #006 – Crossing into the USA

Episode description

Crossing the border and responding to border agent questions can be stressful, especially when you have to do it in English! Join Andrew and Morag as they explain and discuss the questions you're most likely to be asked when crossing the border from Canada into the United States.

Fun fact

The border between Canada and the United States is approximately 8,891 kilometres, making it the world's longest international border between two countries. It stretches across 8 provinces and territories (Canada) and 13 states (United States).

Expressions included in the learning materials

- Passport
- Where are you going?
- What's the purpose of your trip?
- How long is your stay?
- Where are you staying?



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.

Morag: And I'm Morag.

Andrew: And you are listening to Culips.

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Andrew: Welcome back to another Real Talk episode. Real Talk is the series where we take a close look at expressions that are very important for everyday life in an English-speaking country.

Morag: That's right, Andrew, and today, we are going to look at a situation that is fairly common for Canadians, and that is crossing the border into the USA, or the United States of America.

Andrew: Yes. It's something I do myself, you know, a couple of times a year. And actually more than 40 million trips are made by Canadians to the USA every year, so this is quite a huge number of trips that are being made.

Morag: You're right. That is a lot. If you're a tourist in Canada, it is likely that you would probably visit the US during your vacation. It's just ... It's so close. So knowing a little bit of what to expect at the border crossing is a pretty good idea.

Andrew: Yeah. I got a quick question for you, Morag.

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: When you go to the USA, do you usually cross the border by land, air, or sea?

Morag: Land is my most common, at least since I've been living in Montreal. If I've gone down to Vermont or New York or Maine, it's always been in a car. How 'bout you?

Andrew: Well, I've done all three actually.

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: But I agree with you that crossing in a car is very, very common. And so because of that, during this episode, we're going to listen to a dialogue between a Canadian crossing into the USA and an American border agent. And this will be in the context of a land crossing, of somebody driving their car from Canada to the USA.

And in the next Real Talk episode, we're gonna check out the opposite situation, OK? So today is a Canadian going into the USA. Next episode will be this Canadian going back into Canada, so stay tuned for that episode as well.

But for today's episode, we're just focusing on crossing the border into the USA. So I have to warn everybody that, obviously, this dialogue is fictional, and it's impossible to predict exactly what you'll hear when crossing the border. But this dialogue is based on our own personal experiences, and it reflects the way that border crossings usual go for us.

Morag: After the dialogue, we'll put it under the microscope, and examine and explain all the key vocabulary and expressions a little bit more closely.

Andrew: Yes, so let's take a listen. Here it is, today's dialogue, which is a conversation between a Canadian citizen driving across the American border and her interaction with an American border agent.

Canadian: Hi there. How are you?

Border agent: **Passport.**

Canadian: Um, oh yeah, of course. Here you go.

Border agent: **Where are you going?**

Canadian: To New York City.

Border agent: And **what's the purpose of your trip?**

Canadian: I am attending a conference there.

Border agent: Hmm, what conference?

Canadian: It's the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. I'm a grad student who studies American history.

Border agent: And **how long is your stay?**

Canadian:	One week.
Border agent:	One week for a conference?
Canadian:	I'm going to visit my friend in Philadelphia for 2 days after the conference.
Border agent:	OK. Where are you staying in New York?
Canadian:	The Hilton in Midtown, wherever that is.
Border agent:	OK. Go ahead.

Morag: So in this dialogue, we heard an interaction between a Canadian citizen who's crossing into the US and the American border agent. So you'll get a chance to listen to this dialogue again at the end of the episode, but for now, we'll take a closer look at the dialogue, and examine the key expressions contained in it.

Andrew: Yeah, so the first key expression, the first question that we heard the border agent ask the traveller was not even really a proper grammatical sentence. It was just **passport**.

Morag: That is usually the way it goes. And that I suppose is actually the question, "Can I have or can I see your **passport?**" But often they will just say, "**Passport.**"

Andrew: Yes, and the reason why, in my opinion anyways, they might ask this question in a way that sounds a little bit rude is that you're expected to have your documents ready by the time you get to the border agent. So if you pull up in your car and you're just there, you don't have your **passport** ready, you don't have your ID ready to show the agent, they're gonna be a little frustrated with you. So you'll hear them sort of just bark out that command, "**Passport.**"

Morag: Mhmm. Well, they see so many people in a day. Gotta keep the line moving. Yeah.

Andrew: Yeah. So pro tip—always have your **passport** or your ID, your documents, ready to show the agent right away, and that'll start things off well.

So expression two is the question **where are you going?**

Morag: This is one that you will always get asked when crossing into the United States. They want to know your destination. I don't think that there's a wrong answer. It's just one of those things, I guess.

- Andrew: I agree with you. I don't think there's a real wrong answer. Obviously, if you said something crazy, ridiculous like, "Oh, I'm going to a biker gang meetup." Then maybe you'll have some problems. But as long as you're honest and you're not breaking the law, then you should be able to go anywhere you want.
- Morag: Mmhmm, you could even say, "I'm doing a tour around a couple of States." It's OK. It's whatever you're really doing.
- Andrew: The next expression, and this is one that you will also hear almost every time when crossing the border, is ***what's the purpose of your trip?*** OK? ***What's the purpose of your trip?***
- And with this expression, this question, the agent is just asking, "Why do you want to come into my country?" "What are you doing?" "Do you have business?" "Are you just doing some sightseeing?" Again, this is a question that if you're having a legitimate, legal vacation or a visit, you should have no problems with.
- Morag: Absolutely. I had a friend who worked as a border guard for a while.
- Andrew: Mmhmm.
- Morag: And a lot of these questions, especially this one, are just designed to make you uncomfortable if you are doing something wrong. So as long as you're not, you're great.
- Andrew: Totally. So what is our next key expression, Morag?
- Morag: Our next key expression is ***how long is your stay?***
- Andrew: Yup.
- Morag: So how long are you going to remain?
- Andrew: Sure. Because I know for Canadian citizens, we can stay for up to 6 months in the USA.
- Morag: Mmhmm.
- Andrew: But it's going to be different for every country. Maybe you need a visa to visit. I don't know. The situation is different for everyone, right? But if I'm a Canadian citizen and I get asked, "**How long is your stay?**" And I answer, "One year." Well, then the border agent is gonna wanna see my special visa for that situation. So this is just to make sure that no rules are being broken and that you are, yeah, following the law.

- Morag: Mmhmm. But if you're just doing some travelling and sightseeing, it should be just fine.
- Andrew: Yeah, nobody's gonna travel around for 1 year. That's too long a trip.
- Morag: Right? It'd be interesting, but yeah.
- Andrew: Hmm, yeah. So the last expression, uh, which is another question, is **where are you staying?** OK? So the agent asks, "**Where are you staying in New York?**" And again, he just wants to get the details, make sure that you are an honest person and have your plan sorted out. Even, I think if you don't have a place to stay, it's probably OK, but it's always good to have this information on hand, your hotel reservation or your accommodation information, so that you can share it with the border guard if need be.
- Morag: I think that's a good piece of advice, Andrew. Just have all of your information available and ready to share. They're usually nice people. They're just doing a very important job.
- Andrew: Yes. And so really why I wanted to do this episode is because I've been travelling a lot this year. And I was thinking, "Oh man! What if my first language wasn't English, and I had to communicate with a kind of scary border agent in English? I would want to be prepared." So this, like we said, might not be exactly what you hear when you cross the border, but it's a little primer. Maybe it'll give you some help about what to expect when you cross into the USA.
- Morag: Definitely 'cause I think you will 100 percent hear at least a couple of the key expressions that we've talked about in this episode.
- Andrew: Mmhmm, and so I wanna do a fun little quiz right now.
- Morag: Ooh!
- Andrew: OK. So this is for all the listeners out there. It's brainstorm time. In today's dialogue, we heard the American border agent ask a Canadian several questions before letting her enter the USA. But like we mentioned, there are many different types of questions the agent could've asked. Can you think of some other questions you could potentially hear when crossing into the USA? We'll give you half a minute, and then Morag and I will talk briefly about some other potential questions.
- OK. Time's up. Morag, what did you think of? What are some other questions you might hear when crossing the border?
- Morag: Well, one that I heard the last time I crossed the border into the US was, "Do you have any fruit on you?"

Andrew: Ooh. "Do you have any fruit on you?" I like that one.

Morag: Yeah, it's because of not wanting to transfer pests from one country to the other. I'm not entirely sure what that was about, but I had a mango taken away from me.

Andrew: Oh, you didn't eat it?

Morag: I would've had to eat it, like, in 30 seconds.

Andrew: Hmm.

Morag: It was so ...

Andrew: Oh excuses.

Morag: Oh! Real bad. Yeah.

Andrew: I think that border agent was just hungry.

Morag: Maybe. It was ... No, so sad. Did you think of any questions, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah. Well, a question that I've been asked before is to give the border agents the phone number of the person that I'm staying with.

Morag: Hmm.

Andrew: So I was asked, "**Where are you staying?** Who are staying with?" I mentioned I was staying with a friend, and so the border agent asked me, "Can you give me the number of the person you're staying with?"

Morag: Hmm.

Andrew: Yeah.

Morag: Interesting.

Andrew: So that's a question I've heard before.

Morag: Yeah. Another one is they will occasionally ask if you have any weapons, any guns, ammunition, anything like that.

- Andrew: I've actually heard this question a couple of times, and it was when I was crossing in the Prairies. So I was going in between Saskatchewan and the Dakotas, or Alberta and Montana, the area of North America where people are more likely to hunt. And I think they want to ask you this question just if you're a hunter, "Oh, did you forget you might have your rifle in the back of your truck?" Something like this.
- Morag: I have also in more metropolitan areas just heard them be very, very straight up and asked, "Do you have guns, weapons, or drugs?"
- Morag: It's just ...
- Andrew: Right.
- Morag: Very direct, you know?
- Andrew: Yeah, the obvious answer to that is, "No."
- Morag: Yes.
- Andrew: Either if you do or you don't, you answer, "No."
- Morag: Yeah, no. All right.
- Andrew: Good. Uh, one more that I've heard before is, "Can you pop your trunk for a sec?"
- Morag: Hmm.
- Andrew: So sometimes they just wanna check in your trunk to make sure you don't have anything illegal. So yeah, that's another question. *Pop the trunk* means open the trunk for me. I've been asked that question before.
- Morag: Absolutely. Yeah, that's reasonably standard if they wanna take a look, which isn't usually a terribly bad sign. They're just ... They just check people sometimes. Yeah.
- Andrew: Just doing their job, that's right.
- Well, Morag, I think that brings us to the end of today's Real Talk episode.
- Morag: I think you're right, Andrew. Before we go, I wanna remind all our listeners to visit Culips.com—that is C-U-L-I-P-S.com—and consider becoming a Culips member. A Culips membership is awesome for people who are really serious about studying their English.
- Andrew: Totally. And Culips members get access to our learning materials, which are designed to help you improve your English skills and level up. You'll get

transcripts, detailed explanations, and quizzes for each and every one of our episodes. And we have over 350 episodes available, so you'll get lots and lots and lots of study material.

Morag: Yeah, I think the learning materials are the best way to study while listening to Culips. So again, I just urge everybody to check out Culips.com today, and learn more about becoming a member.

Andrew: That's it for now. We'll be back soon with another episode.

Morag: Bye everybody.

Andrew: Buh-bye.

Canadian: Hi there. How are you?

Border agent: **Passport.**

Canadian: Um, oh yeah, of course. Here you go.

Border agent: **Where are you going?**

Canadian: To New York City.

Border agent: And **what's the purpose of your trip?**

Canadian: I am attending a conference there.

Border agent: Hmm, what conference?

Canadian: It's the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. I'm a grad student who studies American history.

Border agent: And **how long is your stay?**

Canadian: One week.

Border agent: One week for a conference?

Canadian: I'm going to visit my friend in Philadelphia for 2 days after the conference.

Border agent: OK. **Where are you staying in New York?**

Canadian: The Hilton in Midtown, wherever that is.

Border agent: OK. Go ahead.

Detailed Explanations

Passport

The first expression in this episode is **passport**. When you cross the border from Canada into the United States, the first thing you must do is show the border agent your **passport**, and any other relevant identification or documents. While you are very likely to hear the guard simply say “**passport**” as a way to ask to see your **passport**, there are many other ways you might hear this request, such as:

- “Can I see your **passport**?”
- “**Passport**, please.”
- “Show me your **passport**.”
- “Give me your **passport**.”

No matter what the phrasing, one of the first interactions that you will have with the border guard will involve them requesting your **passport**. In other words, you can bet that any initial statement or question with the word **passport** is the guard asking to see your **passport**.

Although the border agent might just say “**passport**,” they are actually asking for any documentation you need to enter the United States. Before you head to the border, make sure that you have all the documents that everyone in your group needs to enter the United States. So if you or someone in your group needs a visa or waiver to enter the United States, have it ready to show the guard along with your **passports**. It is also important that you are courteous and polite during all interactions.

US and Canadian border guards will often ask a lot of quick questions in a professional manner about your reason for crossing the border. They ask these questions because they want to discover any lies or suspicious behaviour. All the key questions in this episode are asked in order to make sure that you have your story straight, that you are confident, and that you aren’t trying to lie. So the most important thing you can do to prepare to cross the border is to be able to tell the guard, clearly and accurately, basic information about your planned visit.

Here’s one more example with **passport**:

Jan is crossing the border from Canada into the United States.

Guard: Pass me your **passport**.

Jan: Here you go, sir.

Where are you going?

Where are you going? is often one of the first quick questions that you're likely to hear when talking to a border guard. There are a number of other ways the guard might ask this question, such as:

- "Where are you headed?"
- "Where are you heading today?"
- "What's your destination?"
- "Where are you off to?"

All of the above questions mean the same thing: where are you planning to go?

When the border guard asks, "**where are you going?**," they are asking for the names of the specific places that you are planning to visit. If you are just going to one city, it is OK to say, "New York City" or "Los Angeles." It is important to be specific but concise. So it is not OK to say "America," "the West Coast," or "California."

If you are planning to visit many different places around the country, you need to tell them your basic plan, or the places that you are certain that you will visit. You don't want to tell the guard every possible part of your trip; they don't want to hear whether or not you might stop at a gas station in New Jersey. For instance, it would be inappropriate to say, "I'm going to New York to see immediate family, and before I do this, I will probably stop to get lunch at McDonald's and then fill up on gas." A more appropriate answer would be, "I'm going to New York to visit my immediate family."

It is important to be clear and succinct when speaking with border agents. You need to have a simple and plain answer prepared for where you plan to go, especially the first destination on your list.

Here's one more example with **where are you going?**:

Sally is planning a road trip around the United States. She doesn't know exactly where she wants to go, but she plans to travel to the West Coast and make her way over to Texas.

Guard: **Where are you going?**

Sally: I'm starting on a road trip down the West Coast and over to Texas. I'm hoping to make it to Portland tonight and stay a day or two.

What's the purpose of your trip?

Another key question that you will often be asked at the border is ***what's the purpose of your trip?*** While this might sound like a vague question, the border guard is really asking what the reason for your trip is—vacation or business. Border guards ask this question because there are different requirements for entering the United States for business than for vacation. If you are going to do a job or make money, be sure to let the guard know, and bring any relevant visas or documents that you might need.

There are a number of other ways that the border agent might ask the question ***what's the purpose of your trip?***, such as:

- “Purpose of your trip?”
- “What is the reason for your visit?”
- “Is this trip for business or pleasure?”
- “Why are you coming to America?”
- “What is the reason you wish to enter the United States?”

However it's phrased, you will almost always be asked a question about why you want to enter the United States.

Luckily, if you are entering the United States to go on a planned vacation, or to visit a friend or family member, all of the questions listed above can be answered by saying, “For a vacation,” “I’m going on a vacation,” or “I’m on vacation and planning to visit someone.”

Here are a couple more examples with ***what's the purpose of your trip?***:

Minsuh is planning to drive down to Florida to visit her best friend.

Guard: **What's the purpose of your trip?**

Minsuh: I'm on vacation and planning to visit my best friend.

Samuel lives in Canada, but works just across the border in the United States. He commutes every day for work.

Guard: **Purpose of your trip?**

Samuel: For business. Here are my papers.

How long is your stay?

How long is your stay? is another key question that you'll often hear at the border. When the border agent asks this question, they want you to tell them exactly how long you plan to stay in the United States. In other words, how many days, weeks, or months are you planning to be in the United States?

There are a number of other ways you might hear the question **how long is your stay?**, such as:

- "How long do you intend to stay in the United States?"
- "What is the duration of your trip?"
- "How long will your trip last?"
- "How much time do you plan to spend in the country?"
- "How long do you plan to stay?"

No matter how it's phrased, when you are asked about the length of your visit, the border guard wants you to respond with a span of time. The guard wants you to specify exactly how long you plan to be in the United States. For instance, if you are planning a 2-week vacation in Maine, an appropriate answer would be, "For 2 weeks."

If you are unsure of the exact amount of time you will be staying in the United States, it is appropriate to give a short range. For example, if you are visiting the United States to help a sick family member, it may be hard to predict how long your family member will remain ill. So an appropriate answer would be, "It will probably be about 8 to 10 days."

As discussed in this episode, the length of time that you plan to remain in the United States is important, as there are certain restrictions regarding length of stay. With a special form, Canadians are only permitted to stay for 6 months per year in the United States.

Here's one more example with **how long is your stay?**:

Josh is going to visit his sister in Chicago for 12 days.

Guard: **How long is your stay?**

Josh: Just under 2 weeks.

Where are you staying?

One of the last questions that you're likely to be asked is **where are you staying?** This key question almost always involves the verb *stay*. Some variations of **where are you staying?** are:

- "Where do you plan to stay?"
- "Where will you be staying?"
- "What hotel will you be staying in?"
- "Will you be staying in a hotel?"
- "Will you be staying with friends and/or family?"
- "What is the address of the place you're staying?"

However, if you've already mentioned that you are planning to visit a friend or family member, you may be asked a more specific version of **where are you staying?** For example:

- "Who are you staying with, and what is their address?"
- "Are you staying with your sister or at another location?"

When the guard asks any of the above questions, they want you to answer with a specific location, such as an address or hotel name. It's not OK to simply say the name of a city or an area within a city. Make sure you have the address and telephone number of every location you're planning to stay ready to give to the border guard.

Here's one more example with **where are you staying?**:

Yuto is planning to visit Pittsburgh for 10 days. He will be staying at the Ace Hotel for the first 5 days and then with his friend for the remaining 5 days.

Guard: **Where are you staying?**

Yuto: First, I'm staying at the Ace Hotel for 5 days. It's on 120 South Whitfield. Then I'll be staying with my friend until I come back. She lives at 112 Washington Place.

Quiz

- 1. Linda is travelling to the United States. The guard asks her a question, and she answers, "Baltimore." Which of the following questions was she most likely asked?**
 - a) Where are you going?
 - b) What's the purpose of your trip?
 - c) How long is your stay?
 - d) Where are you staying?

- 2. What does the border agent want when they say, "Passport"?**
 - a) to be told your passport number
 - b) to see your passport
 - c) to see only your visa
 - d) to be told your travel plans

- 3. Vasily is travelling to the United States. The guard asks him a question, and he answers, "3 days." Which of the following questions was he most likely asked?**
 - a) Where are you going?
 - b) What's the purpose of your trip?
 - c) How long is your stay?
 - d) Where are you staying?

- 4. Mindy is travelling to the United States. The guard asks her a question, and she answers, "My sister's house. She lives at 123 Pasadena in Los Angeles." Which of the following questions was she most likely asked?**
 - a) Where are you going?
 - b) What's the purpose of your trip?
 - c) How long is your stay?
 - d) Where are you staying?

- 5. True or false: When speaking with a border agent, it is important to give as many details as possible, including all the stores where you plan to purchase items.**
 - a) true
 - b) false

Quiz Answers

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

Episode credits

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