

## Catchword #43 – To Wing It

### Transcript

- Maura: Hello everybody! This is your friend Maura!
- Harp: And Harp!
- Maura: And we are here with the Culips ESL Podcast. And which episode are we going to do today?
- Harp: Today we're going to do a Catchword Podcast. And this is where we take an expression and we explain it and we give related expressions.
- Maura: Right, if you want to know more about the expressions in this episode, you can go to our website and check out the Lipservice, where we have more explanations, the transcript, and a quiz.
- Harp: Yeah, and the website is C-U-L-I-P-S.com.
- Maura: So today we're going to do the Catchword episode, and what is the expression we're going to look at today?
- Harp: The expression is... **to wing it**.
- Maura: Yeah it's a funny one: **to wing it**. **To wing it** means to do something with very little or no preparation at all.
- Harp: **To wing it**; it's when you **improvise**.
- Maura: Right, you do something in the moment – you didn't plan it before.
- Harp: Exactly. Should we give an example?
- Maura: Okay, let's give a dialogue example.
- Harp: Okay.
- Maura: Hey Harp, how was work today?
- Harp: It was good. I had a presentation to give.
- Maura: Oh really?

- Harp: Yeah I didn't have any time to prepare for it so I had **to wing it**.
- Maura: Ooh, how did it go?
- Harp: It went really well. I was **on the spot**, I **improvised**, and people really enjoyed it.
- Maura: Yeah, some people don't need to prepare in advance.
- Harp: Yeah, I usually do, but this time I **winged it** and it worked.
- Maura: So in that example, Harp, you had a presentation, you didn't plan it, it was spontaneous - **you winged it**.
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: Alright, great. Let's give another example.
- Harp: Hey Maura, how's school going?
- Maura: Yeah, it's going alright. I had a project this week but I was so busy I couldn't do any research before, so I just had **to wing it** and I did the project with, like, no research.
- Harp: Oh, did it go well?
- Maura: No, unfortunately.
- Harp: Oh no.
- Maura: Right, so when **someone wings something**, sometimes it's a good thing, sometimes it doesn't turn out very well.
- Harp: Yeah, exactly.
- Maura: Okay cool, so, **to wing it** was the first expression.
- Harp: Exactly, and just to explain it again, it's to do something with little or no preparation.
- Maura: Good. So what is another expression that we use that means to do something with little or no preparation?

- Harp: The next expression is **off the cuff**.
- Maura: Right, so this is really similar, except **to wing it** is a verb, but **off the cuff** is not a verb. We say 'to do something **off the cuff**', or 'to say something **off the cuff**.'
- Harp: Exactly, the meaning is the same though.
- Maura: Right, it means you didn't prepare and you do it spontaneously.
- Harp: Yeah.
- Maura: So I have a good example!
- Harp: Oh really.
- Maura: Yeah, just recently I was at a wedding, and one of my friends was giving a speech. But he told me that he actually didn't plan the speech.
- Harp: Oh really!
- Maura: Yeah, he felt a bit nervous because he didn't know what he was going to say.
- Harp: And was it funny? Was it good?
- Maura: Actually I was really impressed. He did it **off the cuff**, and it was really funny and interesting – he didn't need to prepare.
- Harp: Oh that's great. I think that's really common with weddings, because to plan a speech is complicated and sometimes it's funnier to do it **off the cuff**.
- Maura: Yeah, and some people are really good speaking **off the cuff**, they're really natural and it sounds good.
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: So we can also say, like, 'an **off-the-cuff** remark.' That's an expression: an **off-the-cuff** remark, which means that you say something in the moment, without thinking before, and sometimes it can be an embarrassing thing. Sometimes it can be good, but sometimes it's not good.
- Harp: Yeah, so let's give an example for saying something **off the cuff**.
- Maura: Okay, let's give an example dialogue.

- Harp: Okay, good idea.
- Maura: So Harp, did you hear what happened last night?
- Harp: No, what happened?
- Maura: Julie said something **off the cuff** at the party and really impressed the boss.
- Harp: Really? What did she say?
- Maura: Well, she had these new ideas, just in the moment, and he loved them.
- Harp: Wow, good for her!
- Maura: Cool, so that is an example of when saying something **off the cuff** is a good thing.
- Harp: Exactly. Nowadays it's a lot harder to say something **off the cuff** if you're famous, because everything is recorded and the media reports everything.
- Maura: That's really true, you often hear about a politician that said something or a famous actor or actress that said something that, maybe, sounds funny or insults some people.
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: Yeah, there are lots of websites devoted to that kind of stuff.
- Harp: Yeah, so if you're famous you have to be more careful now.
- Maura: Yeah, you gotta be careful of what you say **off the cuff**.
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: You should think before you speak. So we have one more expression.
- Harp: Yeah, the next expression is **on the fly**.
- Maura: **On the fly**. And this is very similar to **to wing it** and **off the cuff**. If you do or say something **on the fly**, it's something that happens in the moment.
- Harp: Yeah, it's a spontaneous thing.

- Maura: Right, so here's one more example, with **on the fly**: Harp, guess what happened in my class yesterday.
- Harp: What happened?
- Maura: My professor lost his notes for the class so he didn't know what he was going to say.
- Harp: So he gave the lecture **on the fly**?
- Maura: Yeah, he just made it up, spontaneously, right there.
- Harp: Wow, was he good?
- Maura: Actually it was a lot more interesting than his classes usually are.
- Harp: So he should do that more often!
- Maura: Yup, **on the fly** works for him.
- Harp: Exactly. So an example in my life is that last summer I was planning to go to Boston for the weekend, but **on the fly** I decided to go to New York.
- Maura: It's fun to make travel decisions **on the fly**.
- Harp: Exactly, it's really fun, and New York was amazing.
- Maura: Yeah, and just to be clear, **on the fly** doesn't mean that you took an airplane.
- Harp: No, it was a road trip; we drove.
- Maura: Right, so you can change your travel plans **on the fly**, and take a bus or a train, whatever!
- Harp: Exactly.
- Maura: Okay, great, so we started with...
- Harp: **to wing it**,
- Maura: and then we also talked about...
- Harp: **off the cuff**,

Maura: and, the third one...

Harp: **on the fly.**

Maura: So, if you want to learn more about these expressions, like we said, go to our website and check out our Lipservice.

Harp: Exactly. And that's all for us today. Bye everyone!

Maura: Bye!

## Detailed Explanation

### To wing it

The main expression in this episode was “to wing it.” “To wing it” means to do something or say something with very little or no preparation; without a plan for exactly what you’re going to do or say.

Harp gave an example of “winging it” when she talked about giving a presentation at work without having time to prepare for it. It went well and Harp’s presentation was a success!

Maura gave another example of “winging it” when she talked about doing a project for school. She was so busy that she didn’t have time to do research, so she had “to wing it.” But Maura wasn’t as lucky as Harp; her project didn’t go very well.

The difference between Harp and Maura’s examples of “winging it” brings us to an important point about the expression “to wing it,” which Maura also pointed out in the podcast. The expression just means to do something with no preparation, it doesn’t tell us anything about whether the person was successful at doing it or not. Harp winged it during her presentation and she did a great job. Maura winged it when she was working on her project and it didn’t go very well.

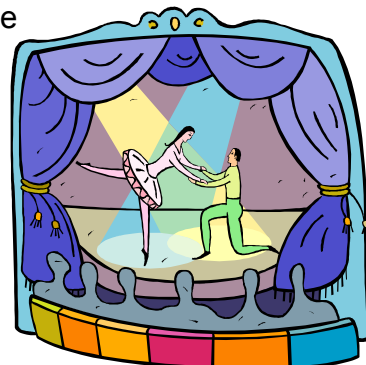
Here are a couple more examples with “to wing it” used to talk about doing something or saying something without preparing or planning in advance.

- In some English classes, the teacher asks each student to give a speech to the class as speaking practice. Sometimes the teacher assigns topics for the speech in advance, but sometimes the topic is a surprise and the students just have to wing it.
- If an actor forgets what he’s supposed to say during a play, he has to wing it. If he does a good job at winging it, the audience won’t even know that anything went wrong!
- Some musicians like to learn how to play every note of a song exactly the same way each time, but others prefer to wing it and play the song a little bit differently every time, without practicing it very much beforehand.

In all of these examples, somebody is “winging it” because they are doing something spontaneously, without preparing. But where does the expression come from, anyways? Does it have something to do with birds? Or maybe with flying? Airplanes?

Nope!

The “wing” used in the expression doesn’t have anything to do with birds or airplanes at all. It’s actually a term that comes from the theatre. In a theatre where live plays or shows are performed, the wings are the areas at each side the stage. The audience cannot see who or what is in the wings, so the actors can stand in the wings waiting for their time to go out onto the stage. If an actor has no time to learn their lines, for example because they’re filling in for someone else who is sick, the actor might only have a little bit of time to practice their lines in the wing before they go out on stage. Or if they really don’t have any time to practice, someone else might stand in the wing and whisper the words to the actor on stage so that he’ll know what to say. These two situations are where the expression “to wing it” originally came from!



### To improvise/Improvisation/Improv

Harp explained that “to wing it” means “to improvise.”

To improvise is to do something spontaneously, without any planning, or to use whatever items you have around you to do a job that needs to get done. Most of us improvise quite a bit in our day-to-day lives. For instance, if you need to write down an important phone number, but you don’t have any note paper handy, you could improvise and write the number on whatever you have nearby, like the back of an envelope, or the cover of a magazine.

If you’re visiting your family and your little niece or nephew asks you to tell them a story, but you don’t know any children’s stories, you could improvise and make one up as you tell it to them.

“Improv” is a special kind of acting that is usually very funny. The word is short for “improvisation.” In an improv show, there is no script. The actors never plan what they’re going to say or do. Usually they get ideas from the audience and make a show based on those, inventing their show during the show itself! For example, an improv actor might tell the audience, “We are now going to show you a love story. Can you give us two characters who should fall in love in our story?” and the audience might yell out things like, “a robot”, “a pirate”, “Tom Cruise”, “a grandmother”, or whatever else they can imagine. The actors then choose two of the audience’s ideas and act out a story.

Here in Montreal, improv shows are pretty popular. You can go and see live shows, and there are different improv groups, called “troupes” that compete to see who can do the best show. You can even take improv classes and learn how to do improv yourself!

There’s a popular American TV show called “Whose Line is it Anyway?” that is all about improv. The show was originally made in England and then moved to the US.



You can watch lots of clips of this show on YouTube.

### Off the cuff

The second expression that Harp and Maura talked about in this podcast was the phrase “off the cuff.”

“Off the cuff” is an adverb that means “spontaneously” or “without planning,” so to do something off the cuff is to do it without planning it or practicing it in advance. To do something off the cuff is a synonym for “to wing it.”



“Off-the-cuff” can also be an adjective when we use it to describe the thing that was done off the cuff, such as an off-the-cuff speech or an off-the-cuff remark. When off-the-cuff is used as an adjective, you should put hyphens between the words to show that it’s all part of one idea.

In this episode, Maura gave an example of her friend giving a speech off the cuff at a wedding, and then Maura and Harp did a dialogue about someone saying something off the cuff at party.

A cuff is a part of a shirt. They’re usually only on dress shirts, or more formal shirts. T-shirts don’t have cuffs. The cuff is the part at the end of the sleeve that is folded back. Sometimes the cuffs are a different colour than the rest of the shirt, and they usually have one or two buttons on them.



So what do shirt cuffs have to do with being spontaneous? Well, the story is that a long time ago, if someone had to give a speech at a dinner and he hadn’t memorized it beforehand, he would write notes to himself on the cuffs of his shirt so that he could look down when he was talking and remember what he wanted to say. I don’t know if anyone ever actually did this, but I don’t think it’s a very good idea. It would ruin your shirt! I’d rather write my notes on a napkin.

### On the Fly

As Harp mentioned in the podcast, the expression “on the fly” is very similar to “off the cuff.” Like off the cuff, it can also be used as an adverb (“Harp changed her plans on the fly”) or an adjective (“She made an on-the-fly decision to change her plans.”)

We’re not really sure what the exact origin of this phrase is, but you could remember its meaning by thinking about a pilot who decides to land at a different airport than she had been planning to, because something went wrong with the plane while she was already flying it. She makes the decision “on the fly,” not in advance.

But remember, this expression doesn't apply only to flying situations. If you were already walking to the grocery store, you could decide on the fly to go to a restaurant instead.

### To be on the spot/to put someone on the spot

Did you hear Harp use the expression "on the spot" during her dialogue with Maura about the presentation she gave at work? Here's part of the dialogue:

**Maura:** Hey Harp, how was work today?

**Harp:** It was good. I had a presentation to give.

**Maura:** Oh really?

**Harp:** Yeah I didn't have any time to prepare for it so I had to wing it.

**Maura:** Ooh, how did it go?

**Harp:** It went really well. I was **on the spot**, I improvised, and people really enjoyed it.

Harp said that she was "on the spot" during her presentation. "To be on the spot" means to be in a stressful situation that you haven't really prepared for, and everyone is focusing on you. Harp didn't have time to prepare for her presentation, so it was a little stressful for her to be up there speaking in front of the people at her office.

To put someone on the spot is to put someone into a situation just like this; to force someone to do something for which they haven't prepared. Harp's boss put her on the spot by asking her to do a presentation without enough time to prepare.

### Off the top of one's head

This expression wasn't used in this episode, but it fits very well with the others, and it can be a very useful expression in everyday life!

To do or say something off the top of your head is to do it or say it without thinking about it very much beforehand. It's as though some thoughts are hidden deep in your head and you have to spend some time thinking to find them, while others are just sitting there on the top of your head and you can grab them easily!



Here are some examples of using the expression "off the top of one's head" in dialogue.

**David:** Hey Stephen, what's your favourite thing about autumn?

**Stephen:** Well, off the top of my head, I'd say I like the way the leaves change colour, but I'm sure I could think of lots of other things I like too.

**Tim:** Did you hear that Julie got a raise at work? She was talking to her boss at a party and she came up with some great ideas off the top of her head for the company. He was really impressed.

**Donna:** Do you know any good Chinese restaurants in town?

**Beth:** I can't think of any off the top of my head, but you could always look in the phone book.

After listening to this podcast and reading this detailed explanation, you now know lots of phrases to use to talk about doing something spontaneously, without much preparation.

Now, if someone puts you on the spot and asks you to tell them some interesting expressions on the fly, you won't have to wing it. You'll be able to think of these expressions right off the top of your head!

**Quiz** (See the answers at the end of this Lipservice.)

1. **When Todd was very young, his mom made him read a story in front of all his relatives at a Christmas party, even though he was very nervous and hadn't practiced reading it. What did Todd's mom do to him?**
  - a. She put him off the top of her head.
  - b. She put him on the fly.
  - c. She put him on the spot.
  - d. She put him under her wing.
  
2. **Paula: So how was the movie you guys went to last night?**  
**Jonah: Actually, we didn't see a movie. We were on our way to the theatre, but we decided on \_\_\_\_\_ to go out dancing instead.**
  - a. a wing
  - b. the cuff
  - c. the fly
  - d. the movie
  
3. **What is the name for the special kind of acting when the actors don't plan what they're going to say or do?**
  - a. improve
  - b. improv
  - c. improvise
  - d. improvement
  
4. **What is an off-the-cuff remark?**
  - a) something said after careful planning and lots of thought
  - b) something said quietly into one's sleeve
  - c) something said that is offensive or hurts someone's feelings
  - d) something said without much thought or planning

5. Where did the expression “to wing it” originally come from?

- a) From a duck farm
- b) From a movie about chickens
- c) From a pilot
- d) From the theatre

6. Which of the following expressions doesn't fit with the others?

- a) To do something off the cuff
- b) To improvise
- c) To practice
- d) To wing it

7. (1) \_\_\_\_ the cuff  
(2) \_\_\_\_ the fly  
(3) \_\_\_\_ the spot  
(4) \_\_\_\_ the top of one's head

Which of the following sets of words correctly completes the expressions above?

- a) (1) on, (2) on, (3) off, (4) off
- b) (1) off, (2) on, (3) on, (4) off
- c) (1) on, (2) off, (3) off, (4) off
- d) (1) off, (2) off, (3) on, (4) on

**Answers:** 1.c 2.c 3.b 4.d 5.d 6.c 7.b