

Catch Word # 56 – To Brush Up On

Transcript

Jessie: Hi everybody this is Jessie.

Robin: And Robin.

Jessie: And we're here today with a Catch Word podcast.

Robin: And as you know in the Catch Word podcast, we take one expression, and we break it down, we look at similar expressions and synonyms.

Jessie: And as always if you'd like more information about the phrases and words we talk about in this podcast you can visit our website at Culips.com.

Robin: That's C-U-L-I-P-S.com.

Jessie: And while you're there you can sign up for a Culips membership and our free newsletter.

Robin: And today we have a Catch Word that's a little bit special because we got an email from Italy.

Jessie: Yeah.

Robin: From a German woman who's teaching German and, and English in Italy, in fact.

Jessie: Yeah, she teaches conversation lessons.

Robin: And her name is Bernadette. We'd like to say hi Bernadette.

Jessie: Hello.

Robin: And she wanted us to do an episode about the expression **to brush up on** something.

Jessie: Yeah, **to brush up on** something. And I think that's a great phrase for our Catch Word podcast.

Robin: Absolutely. What does it mean?

- Jessie: Well, **to brush up on** something is to refresh your memory or to relearn something, to study something that you already kind of know, but you need to improve.
- Robin: OK, so you're relearning, you're reviewing something that you learned before.
- Jessie: Right, so you can only **brush up on something** that you already kind of know. You can't **brush up on something** you don't know.
- Robin: Can you give me an example?
- Jessie: Sure, well, I live in Montreal and a lot of people speak French here so before I moved to Montreal, I wanted to **brush up on** my French so that I could talk to people.
- Robin: So you spoke a little bit of French before and you wanted to practice it before you came to Montreal so you'd be able to communicate.
- Jessie: Exactly. I studied French in high school but then a lot of **time went by** and I didn't speak French so I **lost** a lot of it so I needed to **brush up on** my French before I came here.
- Robin: **To brush up**, to review your French before you came here.
- Jessie: Exactly, so you can **brush up on** knowledge or skills or abilities.
- Robin: Absolutely and the perfect example: I was invited to play baseball with a couple of friends and honestly I haven't played in a whole bunch of years, so I think I might go outside and try to **brush up on** some of my pitching by throwing a ball at a wall.
- Jessie: OK, so that's a case of **brushing up on** a skill or an ability. You used to be very good at pitching but now you're a little **rusty**, so you need to **brush up on** your pitching, get better.
- Robin: Absolutely. Any other similar expressions that we can use?
- Jessie: Yeah, there are actually a couple that have almost the exact same meaning.
- Robin: What are they?
- Jessie: Well one is **to bone up on something**.
- Robin: **To bone up on something**.

- Jessie: Right, **to bone up on something** is just like **to brush up on something**. It's to refresh your memory, relearn something, get better at something again after you were already good at it once.
- Robin: OK. And do you want to give an example?
- Jessie: Sure. Let's do a dialogue.
- Robin: Hey, do you want to go to a movie on Tuesday night?
- Jessie: I'd like to but I have to stay home and **bone up on** Canadian history. We have a big test on Wednesday.
- Robin: Oh, I forgot. Oh my goodness, you know what, I should probably study too. I really need to **brush up on** the names of all the past **prime ministers**.
- Jessie: So that was an example of both the terms, **to bone up on something** and **to brush up on something** used talking about studying Canadian history.
- Robin: Absolutely.
- Jessie: Now, the phrase **to bone up on something**, I personally don't use that in my everyday speech, as much as I use **to brush up on something**, but I do hear it on TV and on the radio so it's definitely something that you might **come across** in an everyday life in Canada.
- Robin: Absolutely, I think one expression that I might use that's similar, that I'd use more than **to bone up on** is probably **to polish up on something**.
- Jessie: Right, and that is our third expression: **to polish up on something**. So again, you can use **to polish up on something** in the exact same way as **to brush up on something** and **to bone up on something**.
- Robin: So you can **polish up on** your English-speaking skills by listening to our podcasts for example.
- Jessie: Exactly.
- Robin: When I was a kid I tried playing the **flute** for a semester at school and recently I bought a **flute** so I can **polish up on** my **flute** skills.
- Jessie: Oh, **good for you**. So an important thing to note about the phrases **to brush up on something** and **to bone up on something** is that you have to use the word *on*. You **brush up on something**, you don't **brush up something**.

But the phrase **to polish up on something**, you can use the word *on* but you don't have to. So you could say that you **polished up on** your **flute** skills or you could say that **you polished up** your **flute** skills.

Robin: So let's go over once again the expressions that we looked at for today.

Jessie: Right. So we started with **to brush up on something**.

Robin: **To brush up on something**. The next one was **to bone up on something** and they mean the same thing.

Jessie: And the last one was **to polish up on something** or **to polish up something**. And all of these expressions mean the same thing. They mean to relearn something, to restudy it, to refresh yourself on that subject or that ability.

Robin: To go over, to review, absolutely. I think **that about does it** for today's episode.

Jessie: Yeah, so thanks again to Bernadette in Italy for suggesting **to brush up on something** and if anyone else out there has a suggestion for a word or phrase that you'd like to learn more about, just send us a message through the "contact us" form at our website or you can email us at contact@culips.com. And you can always send us any questions you might have about the English language or anything that you would like to know more about in North American or Canadian culture.

Robin: For now this has been Robin.

Jessie: And Jessie.

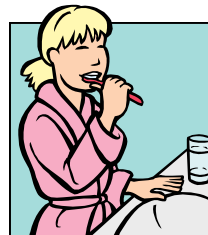
Robin: And we're signing off. Take care everyone.

Jessie: Bye.

Detailed Explanation

To brush up on (something)

When you brush something you make it clean and neat, and refresh its appearance. (Just think of brushing your teeth or hair.) When you **brush up on** something you refresh your skills or knowledge.



The important thing to remember when using this expression is that it can only be used if you already had the knowledge. It cannot be used if you are learning something for the first time. Here are a couple examples of this.

CORRECT

Tonisha: What are you studying?

Jared: French. I am going to France in a month so I wanted to **brush up on** it.

Tonisha: **Brushing up on** your French sounds like a good idea then!

(Jared has studied French before.)

INCORRECT

Nicole: I have to **brush up on** my German.

Howard: Oh, really? Where have you studied German before?

Nicole: ... I haven't.

(Howard assumed that Nicole has studied German before because she used the expression **to brush up on**. In this case, Nicole did not use the expression correctly because she says that she has never studied German before.)

Sometimes you might also say here simply **to brush up**. If what is being **brushed up on** is established there is no reason to repeat it. Here is an example.

Tyler: I haven't been out dancing in ages! I need to practice.

Julia: I am sure you will remember.

Tyler: Well, it's for a wedding, so I need to **brush up**.

Time went by

There are so many time expressions in English! **Time went by** simply means that some time passed. We can use **time went by** or, in the present tense, **time goes by** to talk about 5 minutes or 5 years.



When Jessie uses this expression in this episode, we do not know exactly how much time passed. We can guess that it was more than 5 minutes though! It takes much more time to forget knowledge. We can understand that she is likely talking about some years passing after she studied French.

To lose (your French)

We can use the word **lose** to talk about physical things but we can also use it to talk about things that we forget. **To lose** something in your mind is to forget it. In this episode, Jessie uses the example of **losing** her French. She knew it but then she forgot it. If people have **lost** some skill or knowledge, they would need to **brush up on** it to use it again. Here are a couple examples to show the different usages.

Ray: I have **lost** some of my typing skills since I stopped working at the office.

Tyrone: Yeah, that can happen.

Wendy: When I was in school, I knew so much about Canadian history.

Ivan: Yeah. But after some times passes, we **lose** it.

Wendy: That's exactly what happened to me.

Ben: I **lost** my wallet.

Anna: Don't worry. I will help you find it.

Rusty

Rust is an orange or red substance that can appear on metal when it has been wet or moist for a long time. If something is **rusty** it is often associated with being old. This is the literal meaning of **rusty**.

Rusty, as in this episode, can also be used to talk about having **lost** some ability or knowledge. Again, this ability, knowledge or skill has to have been there before.

Here are some examples with the different usages of **rusty**.

Lucy: Look at that old trunk!

Georgie: It's nice, but it's a little **rusty**.

Yvonne: Go over and talk to him.

Fiona: I would but my Chinese is **rusty**.

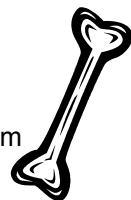
Vanessa: I would love to play hockey this weekend, but I am a bit **rusty**.

Jack: It doesn't matter. Come anyway!

When using **rusty** to talk about having forgotten skills or knowledge, we can talk about the skills or knowledge or about ourselves. We can say, "my math is **rusty**," or use it to describe the person, "I am **rusty** at math."

To bone up on (something)

This expression means exactly the same thing as **to brush up on** something. Jessie mentions that, for her, **to bone up on** something is less popular.



Depending on where you are in the world, this may or may not be true for the English spoken there.

The origin of this expression is not clear. Historically, it may have come from using a bone to polish leather, to make it look new and clean. This may help to create an image to remember this phrase. We can also say simply **to bone up**.

Prime minister

In one of Robin and Jessie's examples, they talk about **boning up on** Canadian history. Robin says he needs to learn the names of our past **prime ministers**. In Canada, and other countries, the highest-ranking political leader is the **prime minister**. We don't have a president like some countries.

Some other English-speaking countries with **prime ministers** include the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.

To come across

To come across something means that you find something by chance. You can **come across** something while walking outside or you can **come across** something by reading a book. Jessie says that she does not **come across** the expression **to bone up** often. Here are a couple more examples with **to come across**.

Carmen: How is all the paperwork going?

Tracy: I haven't **come across** any problems yet.

Lawrence: Yesterday I was out shopping and I **came across** the coolest book.

Kyle: Oh, nice. Did you buy it?

Lawrence: Yes!

To come upon can also have the same meaning as **to come across**.

To polish up on (something)

Sometimes at Culips we talk about similar expressions. Often there are small differences that we explain in detail in our Lipservice. This time **to brush up on**, **to bone up on** and **to polish up on** mean exactly the same thing and are used in the same way.

The one distinction that Jessie made in this episode is important to note. Here are the expressions outlined with the variation for **to polish up on**.

To brush up on something

To brush up (if something is already established)

To bone up on something

To bone up (if something is already established)

To polish up on something

To polish up something
To polish up (if something is already established)

Flute

The **flute** is a musical instrument. Here is a photo of a flute.



Good for you

After Robin talks about his flute lessons, Jessie responds by saying, “**Good for you.**” When someone says **good for you** it has the meaning of congratulations or good work.

This expression can also be used with a sarcastic tone, and so becomes an expression that is not so nice. It is usually used in a sarcastic and negative way when someone is bragging or boasting, which means that they are speaking well about themselves too much.

We can also say, *good for her*, *good for them* or any variation.

Here are a couple examples, to show the difference between sincerity and sarcasm.

Pat: I passed my test!

Kiley: **Good for you.** I know you studied hard.

Don: Wow! I make so much money at my new job! I’m the richest person I know!

Sharon: **Good for you.**

Justin: Did you hear about Jon’s new car?

Oscar: Yeah. **Good for him.**

The first example is sincere because Kiley also says, “I know you studied hard.” The second example is sarcastic because it is often considered rude to talk about making a lot of money. In the last example we are not sure if Oscar is sincere or sarcastic because there is not enough context. He could be sincere or sarcastic by changing the tone of his voice. Usually, the tone of voice determines the intention behind this phrase.

That does it

This expression can be used at the end of something to say that it is finished. Robin uses **that does it** in this episode to mean that it is the end of this episode. Here are a couple more examples with **that does it**.

Hilary: **That does it!** I just finished the last page of the report.

Amber: Alright! Let’s go celebrate now.

Ned: The neighbours keep making so much noise. I can't sleep.

Matthew: **That does it!** I am going to talk to them about it.

Quiz (see the answers at the bottom of this Lipservice)

1. Which is an INCORRECT way to use the expression *to brush up on something*?

- a) I brushed up on my Spanish this weekend.
- b) She brushed up on her writing before the interview.
- c) Jon needs to brush up on his people skills.
- d) They need to brush up on the phone.

2. *Time went by* refers to what?

- a) minutes passing
- b) years passing
- c) minutes or years passing
- d) no time passing

3. Anita: If you don't practice your language skills you might _____ them.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) lose
- b) loosen
- c) hide
- d) find

4. When someone has not used a particular skill recently, we can say that they are _____.

Please fill in the blank.

- a) rusty
- b) rust
- c) old
- d) young

5. Canada doesn't have a president. What kind of political leader do we have?

- a) a minister
- b) a primer
- c) a prime minister
- d) a prime mister

6. Which means *to find something by chance*?

- a) to come across
- b) to come on
- c) to come in
- d) to come up

7. Which other expression means the same as *to brush up on* and *to polish up on*?

- a) to gang up on
- b) to bone up on
- c) to come upon
- d) to dig into

8. In which expression can we remove the *on* and keep the same meaning?

- a) to bone up
- b) to gang up
- c) to brush up
- d) to polish up

Answers: 1.d 2.c 3.a 4.a 5.c 6.a 7. b 8. d