

Real Talk #007 – Crossing into Canada

Episode description

Knowing what to expect when crossing the border into Canada can bring you one step closer to a smooth and hassle-free travel experience. In this episode, Andrew and Morag explain the questions that you're most likely to be asked when crossing the border from the United States into Canada.

Fun fact

Founded in 1901, the Haskell Free Library and Opera House was built on the border that separates Canada from the United States. In fact, the Haskell Free Library and Opera House has entrances on both the American (Derby Line, Vermont) and Canadian (Stanstead, Quebec) sides of the border.

Expressions included in the learning materials

- Where are you coming from?
- What were you doing down there?
- How long were you gone?
- Do you have anything you'd like to declare?
- Can you pull over?



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's Andrew.

Morag: And my name is Morag.

Andrew: And we are back with another Culips episode.

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Andrew: Hey, 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: Yeah, that's right. And in the last Real Talk episode, we talked about crossing the border from Canada into the USA. Well, now our trip is done, and it's time to come home. So today, we are going to teach you some of the key expressions that you need to know when you're crossing the border from the USA back into Canada.

Andrew: That is right. And the questions you're asked by border agents are slightly different, depending on if you're entering or exiting the USA. And so today, we'll look at exiting the USA and entering into Canada.

Morag: During this episode, we are going to listen to a dialogue between a Canadian traveller crossing into Canada and a Canadian border guard. So before we start, we have to tell you that, you know, this dialogue is fictional. And as hard as we might try, it is impossible to predict exactly what you're going to hear when you're crossing the border.

We relied on personal experiences when creating the dialogue though. So you're probably going to hear at least some of these questions during your next crossing into Canada.

Andrew: Mmhmm. It's a very, very realistic dialogue. Believe me.

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: And so after the dialogue, we'll take a close look at the dialogue. We'll go through it with a fine-tooth comb, and we'll look at all of the key expressions one by one.

Morag: Let's take a listen. Here is the dialogue between a Canadian citizen driving across the Canadian border and her interaction with a Canadian border guard.

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Traveller: | Hi. Hey, how are ya? |
| Border agent: | Do you have your passport for me? |
| Traveller: | Yeah. Um, sure. Sure thing. Here it is. |
| Border agent: | And where are you coming from? |
| Traveller: | New York City. |
| Border agent: | What were you doing down there? |
| Traveller: | I was at a conference, and then I visited my friend. |
| Border agent: | So you were gone for how long? |
| Traveller: | One week, just about a week. |
| Border agent: | OK. Did you do any shopping while you were there? |
| Traveller: | A little bit. |
| Border agent: | OK. How much did you spend? |
| Traveller: | About \$100. |
| Border agent: | \$100? Do you have anything you want to declare? |
| Traveller: | No, sir. |
| Border agent: | All right. Have a good day. |

Andrew: So in that dialogue, we heard an interaction between a Canadian citizen who is crossing the Canadian border and a Canadian border agent.

We're going to give you the chance to listen to this dialogue again at the end of the episode. But for now, let's just take a close look at the dialogue and examine the key expressions.

So the first key expression that we heard was a question that the border agent asked the traveller. And the question was ***where are you coming from?***

Morag: ***Where are you coming from?***

Andrew: This is a pretty straightforward question, and one that I think you'll always be asked when crossing the border to go back home.

Morag: Definitely, in one phrasing or another, you will always be asked where you visited or where you are coming from.

Andrew: Now this is interesting, in one phrasing or another. What are some other ways we could ask this question?

Morag: "Where did you visit?"

Andrew: Mmhmm. "Where did you visit?"

Morag: Mmhmm. "Where have you been?"

Andrew: "Where have you been?" Yeah, there's lots of different ways that you can hear this question, but they're all essentially the same way of asking information about where you were, where you were visiting.

Morag: What your initial destination was.

Andrew: Let's check out key expression number two. Morag, do you want to tell us what it is?

Morag: Sure. The second key expression is ***what were you doing down there? What were you doing down there?***

Andrew: ***What were you doing down there?*** Yes, and Canadians often talk about the States as being down there because it's to the south of Canada. So *down there* just means in the USA.

Morag: Mmhmm. And this is another question that you will 100 percent hear. A border guard is always going to ask what the purpose of your visit was.

- Andrew: Again, this is a question, very routine, very standard. And it's just a way for the border guard to know what you were up to during your trip.
- Morag: Mmhmm.
- Andrew: So again, "**What were you doing down there?**" "What were you doing on your trip?" "What was the purpose of your trip?" You're very, very likely to hear a question like this.
- Morag: Mmhmm.
- Andrew: How about our third expression? ***How long were you gone? How long were you gone?*** Ooh, I like this one. It's got a rhyme to it.
- Morag: It does have a nice cadence—***how long were you gone?*** Yeah.
- Andrew: Sounds like a sad, old country song or something.
- Morag: Hey, I think you're right. Yeah, it's another very important question that you need to be prepared to answer when crossing the border.
- Andrew: Yes. The border agents will ask you how long you were in the other country. So you need to have an answer prepared.
- Morag: Mmhmm.
- Andrew: And in the dialogue, our traveller had been gone for 1 week.
- Morag: And you don't usually have to be totally 100 percent precise. Like, I think you heard my version of that traveller being slightly nervous, as I usually am talking to border guards. Umm ...
- Andrew: Hmm, it's intimidating.
- Morag: Yeah. They're kind of scary. So you know, you can say about a month if you were gone for that long. You don't have to say 32 days exactly.
- Andrew: Right. It can be approximate.
- Morag: Mmhmm, mmhmm.

Andrew: A lot of Canadians take very quick trips down to the USA to go shopping because often things are cheaper in the USA. Prices are lower, and so sometimes you can get a great deal.

And if you are in the States just for a very small amount of time, sometimes you have to pay a certain tax, a duty, on the things that you purchased. So this is always a question the border agents will ask you because they want to make sure that you pay the duty tax on anything that you should be paying the duty tax on.

Morag: Yeah. That's right, Andrew. I'd say that the last three questions that we talk about ... So the second one, ***what were you doing down there?***, trying to see if you were just shopping or business or pleasure; ***how long were you gone?***, the same expression we were just talking about, and then the next one, which we'll get to in a second, those are all a part of the border guards trying to figure out if you owe them money.

Andrew: It always comes down to money.

Morag: It's one of the main things though. There's different limitations on the amount of stuff you can bring back, depending on how long you've been gone.

Andrew: How 'bout we look at our last expression. And it is ***do you have anything you'd like to declare?***

Morag: Mmhmm. ***Do you have anything you'd like to declare?***

Andrew: This is a question that the border agent asks. And *declare*, what does *declare* mean in this question?

Morag: In this question it means anything, any object actually, that you would like to let the country know that you have.

Andrew: Yes. So it could be something that you purchased that you know you need to pay duty tax on.

Morag: Mmhmm.

Andrew: It could also be something like maybe a weapon or some sort of livestock, or fruits or vegetables.

Morag: This question is designed to get you, the person crossing the border, to talk about any difficult or potentially problematic things you might be bringing before they have to just search you and find them.

If you somehow legally have something, then you ... That maybe other people wouldn't be able to have, like livestock or fruit, or something that you're bringing across the border, you can declare it. And then they can just deal with it upfront in a normal kind of manner, as opposed to trying to search you for it, I guess.

It's kind of odd, but it's just ... You know, it's like, "Hey, do you have anything weird?"

Andrew: Yes. I would guess that 97 percent of the time, when the agents are asking this question, what they really mean is, "Do you need to pay duty?"

Morag: Yes.

Andrew: "Is there something that you need to pay duty on?"

Morag: Yeah.

Andrew: Like I said, Canadians will cross the border to take advantage of cheaper prices in the States. And sometimes, this means buying large amounts of groceries or cigarettes, or alcohol even. And there are limits on how much you can take back with you tax-free.

So yeah, the agent just wants to make sure that you are abiding by the law and paying your duty, if you need to pay a duty.

Morag: Mmhmm. It's somewhat like asking, "Are you trying to sneak anything through?"

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. That's exactly it.

Morag: "Are you trying get away with something?" OK, no. OK, OK, fine. Yeah, yeah.

Andrew: So make sure to declare.

Morag: Yes.

Andrew: Good. Well, it's my favourite part of a Real Talk episode. It is quiz time. And so everybody listening out there, please put on your thinking caps because, in today's dialogue, we heard a Canadian border agent ask a Canadian traveller several questions before letting her go back home to her house in Canada.

Could you think of some other questions that you might hear when crossing into your home country? We're gonna give you about 30 seconds, and then Morag and I will talk briefly about some other potential questions you may hear when crossing the border.

OK. Morag, time's up. What's an expression that you thought of?

Morag: Well, sometimes no matter if you've declared everything or not, the border guards will want to take a look in your car. So occasionally, you will hear the question, "Can I take a look in your trunk," or "Can you pop your trunk?"

Andrew: Yes, this has happened to me several times. So I would say there's a high possibility that you might be asked this question.

Morag: I think you just might be kind of shady, Andrew, because it never happened to me.

Andrew: Well, the question that I thought of was, "Can you pull over up there?"

Morag: Hmm.

Andrew: "Can you pull over up there?" And again, I've had to pull over at the border a couple of times. So that's why I thought of this question. So yeah, I'm getting my trunk popped. I'm getting pulled over. Maybe I just look a little sketchy. Who knows?

Morag: Yeah. Ah, I don't know.

Andrew: Morag, I think that's all we have time for today.

Morag: I think you're probably right. But before we go, I really want to remind all of our listeners to visit Culips.com and consider becoming Culips members. Culips membership is perfect for people who are really serious about studying their English with Culips.

Andrew: I agree. You'll get transcripts, detailed explanations of key expressions, and interesting vocabulary, plus quizzes for each episode.

Morag: Yeah, so it's fun and informative. So you guys should check out Culips.com today, and learn more about becoming a member.

Andrew: Stay tuned for the dialogue. We'll be playing it one more time. But as for us, we're outta here. Thanks for listening, and we'll be back soon with another new episode for ya.

Morag: Goodbye everybody.

Andrew: Bye.

Traveller: Hi. Hey, how are ya?

Border agent: Do you have your passport for me?

Traveller: Yeah. Um, sure. Sure thing. Here it is.

Border agent: And **where are you coming from?**

Traveller: New York City.

Border agent: **What were you doing down there?**

Traveller: I was at a conference, and then I visited my friend.

Border agent: So **you were gone for how long?**

Traveller: One week, just about a week.

Border agent: OK. Did you do any shopping while you were there?

Traveller: A little bit.

Border agent: OK. How much did you spend?

Traveller: About \$100.

Border agent: \$100? **Do you have anything you want to declare?**

Traveller: No, sir.

Border agent: All right. Have a good day.

Detailed Explanations

Where are you coming from?

After a border agent asks for your passport, and any other relevant identification or documents, they will often ask, “**Where are you coming from?**” There are a number of ways you might hear the question ***where are you coming from?***, such as:

- “Where did you visit?”
- “Where were you staying?”
- “Where did you go on your trip?”

All of the above questions are asking the same thing: what part of the United States did you visit on your trip? In other words, when a border agent uses the question ***where are you coming from?***, they want to know where you have been in the United States.

When a border guard asks for information about where you went on your trip, they are asking for the names of specific places you visited. It’s important to be clear and concise. If you visited just one city, it’s OK to simply say, “New York City” or “Boston.” If you visited more than one place, a good rule of thumb is to give the border guard a one-sentence overview of your trip. So if you went on a road trip around California, you could say, “I went on a road trip around California.”

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 trip.

Here’s one more example with ***where are you coming from?***:

Seung-hyun is returning to Canada after visiting America’s Pacific Northwest. Seung-hyun visited Seattle for 2 days and then Portland for 3 days.

Guard: **Where are you coming from?**

Seung-hyun: I was just in Portland, but I was in Seattle for a couple days before that.

What were you doing down there?

What were you doing down there? is another key question that you are likely to hear when crossing into Canada. While the question might sound vague, the guard is asking what the reason or purpose for your trip was—vacation or business.

Border guards ask this question because there are different requirements for entering the United States for business than for vacation. If the reason for your trip was to do a job or make money, be sure to let the guard know, both when crossing into the United States and when crossing back into Canada. It is important to have any relevant visas or documents (the same ones that you needed to enter the United States in the first place) with you to show the guard when returning to Canada.

However, if you were simply on vacation, you don't have to worry. All you have to say is, "I was on vacation."

There are a number of ways you might hear the question ***what were you doing down there?***, such as:

- "What was the purpose of your trip?"
- "Was your trip for business or pleasure?"
- "What was the reason for your visit?"
- "What was the reason you were visiting America?"

Border guards almost always ask about the reason for your visit. It is important to be prepared, and respond politely and succinctly.

Here are a couple more examples with ***what were you doing down there?***:

Sasha is returning to Canada after visiting his sister, who is attending university in Maine.

Guard: **What were you doing down there?**

Sasha: I was on vacation, visiting my sister.

Sofia is returning to Canada after going on a business trip to Florida.

Guard: **What were you doing down there?**

Sofia: I went to Florida for business. Here's my visa for the trip.

How long were you gone?

Another key question that you will often be asked at the border is **how long were you gone?** When a border guard asks you this question, they want to hear exactly how long you were out of the country. In other words, how many days, weeks, or months were you in the United States?

There are a number of ways you might hear the question **how long were you gone?**, such as:

- “How long was your stay?”
- “What was the duration of your trip?”
- “How much time did you spend in the country?”
- “How long was your visit?”

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 were in the United States. For instance, if you spent 1-week in New Jersey, an appropriate answer would be, “My trip was 1 week.”

Here are a couple more examples with **how long were you gone?**:

Adam took a long road trip around the United States. He was gone for 2 months.

Guard: **How long were you gone?**

Adam: I was out of the country for 2 months.

Akari went to Los Angeles for a 6-day vacation.

Guard: **How long were you gone?**

Akari: Six days.

Do you have anything you'd like to declare?

One of the last questions that you're likely to be asked when crossing the border back into Canada is ***do you have anything you'd like to declare?*** You might be asked just one question about the items you need to declare, or the guard might ask you a series of questions. It is important that you declare, or tell the border guard about all the items or goods that you acquired or bought outside of Canada, such as food, clothing, jewellery, alcohol, and tobacco.

There are a number of ways you might hear the question ***do you have anything you'd like to declare?***, such as:

- "Anything to declare?"
- "What is the value of the items you have to declare?"
- "What have you purchased that you're bringing back into Canada?"
- "What is the dollar value of the items you purchased while in the United States?"

There are different rules about how much, in dollars, you are allowed to bring back with you (tax-exempt). The amount that you are allowed to bring back depends on how much time you spent in America.

For example, Canadians who have been in the United States for less than 24 hours are not exempt from paying taxes on their purchases, including alcohol and tobacco products. However, Canadians who have been gone for 48 hours or more are allowed to bring back items worth a total of \$800.

If you purchase too much, you will have to pay extra taxes on the items that you bought! It's also a good idea to know ahead of time what you are allowed to spend (the Government of Canada website has this information) and the value of the items you're bringing back.

Here's one more example with ***do you have anything you'd like to declare?***:

Jessie is a Canadian citizen who was in the United States for 36 hours. She is allowed to bring a maximum of \$200 worth of items with her back into Canada.

Guard: **Do you have anything you'd like to declare?**

Jessie: I purchased \$150 worth of clothing.

Guard: Is there anything else? Any alcohol or tobacco?

Jessie: No, I didn't buy any alcohol or tobacco.

Can you pull over?

It is important to know what to do if you hear the question **can you pull over?** In the context of border crossing, *to pull over* means to bring a vehicle to the side of the road. When a border guard asks, “**Can you pull over?**,” they are telling you to move your car out of the line and into a different area for further questioning or inspection.

There are a number of ways you might hear the question **can you pull over?**, such as:

- “I’m going to need you to pull over.”
- “Please pull your car over into [somewhere].”
- “Pull up into [somewhere].”
- “Pull your car into [somewhere].”

Although **can you pull over?** is phrased as a question, if a border guard says anything to you that includes the phrase *pull over*, *pull up*, or *pull into*, they are giving you instructions, not asking a question. In other words, if you hear **can you pull over?**, you are being told to move your car to another area, not continue on your way.

If you’re not sure where you’re supposed to pull over, you can always ask the guard, “Where should I pull over?” or “Where should I go?”

When you are asked to pull over, it’s usually because the border guard either needs to search your vehicle or get more details about your visit. Both situations are relatively common, so don’t be too worried if you’re asked to pull over!

Here’s one more example with **can you pull over?**:

Hattie is returning to Canada after a trip to Chicago. Hattie is not prepared, and does not know the dollar amount of the gifts that she purchased.

Guard: Do you have anything to declare?

Hattie: Um, let me think.

Guard: **Can you pull over?**

Hattie: All right. Where should I pull over?

Guard: The small parking lot to your left. Wait there for someone to come speak to you.

Quiz

- 1. If a border guard asks, “Do you have anything you’d like to declare?”, they are asking about _____.**
 - a) the amount of alcohol that you’re bringing back into Canada
 - b) the amount of tobacco that you’re bringing back into Canada
 - c) the items you purchased that you’re bringing back into Canada
 - d) all of the above

- 2. Mary is returning to Canada after a trip to the United States. She responds to a question from the border guard with, “5 days.” Which of the following questions was she most likely asked?**
 - a) “Where are you coming from?”
 - b) “What were you doing down there?”
 - c) “How long were you gone?”
 - d) “Do you have anything you’d like to declare?”

- 3. Andel is returning to Canada after a trip to the United States. He responds to a question from the border guard with, “I was on vacation, visiting my cousin.” Which of the following questions was he most likely asked?**
 - a) “Where are you coming from?”
 - b) “What were you doing down there?”
 - c) “How long were you gone?”
 - d) “Do you have anything you’d like to declare?”

- 4. Which of the following is another way of asking, “Where are coming from?”**
 - a) “Where did you visit?”
 - b) “What was the reason for your visit?”
 - c) “How long was your visit?”
 - d) “How much time did you spend in the country?”

- 5. True or false: If the border guard asks you to pull over, they are giving you permission to cross into Canada.**
 - a) true
 - b) false

Quiz Answers

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

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