

Real Talk #61 – Asking for a recommendation letter

Episode description

Have you ever had to ask for a recommendation letter? In this episode, Andrew and Kassy teach you many useful expressions that are helpful not only in that situation but also in many other everyday scenarios. This episode is designed to improve your vocabulary and boost your confidence in English. You don't want to miss it!

Fun fact

Did you know that recommendation letters have been around for a long time? In ancient Rome, people used recommendation letters to obtain jobs or positions of influence. During the Renaissance era, students began using these letters for admission to universities or higher education institutions. Even today, the purpose of recommendation letters remains the same, providing a personal endorsement of someone's skills and character, just as it did hundreds of years ago.

Expressions included in the study guide

- Are you available to talk one on one?
- Undecided
- To major in [something]
- What extracurriculars are you involved in?
- Is there a deadline?
- With a fine-tooth comb



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. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Real Talk episode number 61. Asking for a recommendation letter. Featuring, Andrew and Kassy. Hello, Culips listeners. Welcome back to our Real Talk series. And in today's episode, we'll teach you how to ask for a recommendation letter for university. Today, helping me with this lesson is my cohost, Kassy. Hey, Kassy. How's it going?

Kassy: Hey, Andrew, doing great. And hello, listeners.

Andrew: OK, Kassy, well, I'm glad that you are here to help me with this episode today, because I think you have a lot of experience being on the writer's side of writing a recommendation letter. But then I guess that also means that you have a lot of experience being asked to write recommendation letters. Is that correct? Do I have that right?

Kassy: Yeah, for sure. Especially during this time of year, because it is prime college application time for the western area like the UK and the States.

Andrew: Exactly. And so maybe just for our listeners who don't know about why you would be writing recommendation letters, could you just briefly give us a little context in your background about, you know why you have to do this kind of thing?

Kassy: Yeah, sure. So, filling out university applications is always stressful. But usually you have to write essays, you have to gather a bunch of paperwork, you have to write your school resume. And you also need to have at least two or three recommendation letters from teachers or counselors so that schools can get feedback not just from you, but from your mentors to show that what you actually are doing in class is truthful. And you're not just padding your resume with fake data.

Andrew: I like that, padding your resume. That's what we say, when you kind of lie when you're writing your resume, right? And you just put in some false information. Yeah, so a lot of universities, especially in English speaking countries, I think, well, America comes to mind. But also, I know, this is true in Canada, and I'm assuming for other English-speaking countries, as well. When you apply to university, the universities take a holistic look at who you are as a person, they're not only looking at your grades. Of course, that's a big part of it, but they also want to know about the things that you mentioned, Kassy about your volunteer activities, maybe the school clubs or sports teams that you played on. And they also want somebody to vouch for you. And that's a great expression there, "to vouch" for someone means to recommend someone. So, that's what we're going to talk about today, we're not going to talk about how to write a recommendation letter, that's a problem for Kassy on her own. But we will explain to you all and teach you how to ask for a recommendation letter.

Kassy: All right. Today, we said that we're going to learn how to ask for a recommendation letter and what kinds of questions you should expect in return. We'll listen to an example dialogue between a student and her teacher. And after listening, we'll pull out the key phrases and vocabulary and talk about them together. Sounds good, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah, let's do it.

Ruth: Hey, Mr. Johnson. **Are you available to talk one on one** for a few minutes later today?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah, of course. Stop by my room as soon as school lets out.

Ruth: OK, sounds great. I'll see you later.

Mr. Johnson: Hey, Ruth, come on in. What can I do for you?

Ruth: Well, Mr. Johnson, I was wondering if you could write me a recommendation letter for university?

Mr. Johnson: Yeah, I'd be happy to. Here, sit down and let's chat for a few minutes. I just want to ask you a couple of questions so that I can write a good letter.

Ruth: OK. Thank you so much for doing this for me.

Mr. Johnson: No problem. OK, so first question. Do you have a major in mind yet or are you still **undecided**?

Ruth: Well, I'm planning **to major in** engineering, but I haven't picked a specific track yet.

Mr. Johnson: OK, well, you can put engineering on your application and pick a more specific field of study after you start university.

Ruth: Yeah, that's what I've heard.

Mr. Johnson: OK, next question. I know you're on the volleyball team, but **what other extracurriculars are you involved in?**

Ruth: Well, I'm also planning to be on the track and field team in the spring. I'm secretary for the student council. I'm in the national honor society, and I volunteer at an animal shelter about once a month.

Mr. Johnson: Excellent. OK. I'll be sure to reference these in my letter. Now, lastly, could you tell me a little bit about why you're interested in engineering? I'll talk about your aptitude in your math and science classes. But what about engineering interests you?

Ruth: I want to become an engineer because I like to solve problems, and I want to do a job that helps the environment and our society.

Mr. Johnson: All right, a very good goal. Well, Ruth, thank you for answering my questions. I have plenty of material to work with. Now one final thing, **is there a deadline for this letter?**

Ruth: Yeah, I need to submit my application by January 5th. So, at least a week before that would be nice. Thank you so much!

Mr. Johnson: All right. I'll try to have it for you before Christmas break. Good luck with the applications.

Andrew: OK, so we just heard an example conversation, where two characters, a teacher named Mr. Johnson, who was voiced by me, and a student, a high-school senior, I believe, named Ruth, who was voiced by Kassy, had a conversation. And in that conversation, Ruth asked Mr. Johnson, who was her high school teacher, to write a reference letter for her that she could use for her university application. And so now that we've listened to that conversation, Kassy and I are going to go back through **it with a fine-tooth comb**, and we're going to break down and explain all of the key vocabulary and expressions that the two characters used, so that you can understand it perfectly and that you can also use these kinds of expressions and vocabulary in a similar situation in your own life if you encounter it in the future. So, Kassy, let's start at the very tippy top, it's a good place to start. And the conversation kicked off by Ruth asking her teacher, Mr. Johnson, to meet and she wanted to ask him something. So, she said, "Hi, Mr. Johnson, are you available to talk one on one for a few minutes later today?" And I think this is a pretty good way to approach the situation, right? Like, you need to have a few minutes to kind of explain yourself, when you're asking for a recommendation, especially in this kind of situation, like Kassy, I know you and I are both teachers, so we know how busy the classroom is, but maybe some of our listeners don't. But you know, if a student asked me for a recommendation letter during a busy time, while I was teaching, it might be a little bit complicated to answer and give that student the attention that they want at that time.

Kassy: Yeah, I'd be so frazzled, I'd be like, oh, ask me later.

Andrew: Yeah. So, anytime you want to take somebody aside and have a kind of individual meeting with them, right, a private meeting in a different context than the one that you're currently in. You could ask the question like that, "Are you available to chat one on one? Or are you available to talk one on one?" Something like that.

Kassy: Yeah, I use this phrase a lot with friends, with family members, with a coworker, with my boss, you can use it in any setting where you want to talk with just you and one other person.

Andrew: And I usually hate this, though, when somebody asked me that, because I always fear it's going to be bad news.

Kassy: I always have the fear that it might take longer than just a few minutes.

Andrew: Oh, that's another fear as well, yes. All right. So, continuing through this conversation then, the teacher says, "Stop by my room as soon as school lets out." So, I think probably most listeners can understand "stop by my room", which means just come to my office or come to my classroom. But what does it mean for school to be "let out"?

Kassy: That means the school day has just finished and all the kids are let free out of the building.

Andrew: Exactly. Freedom. Kassy, I still remember the time that my high school final bell rang at, I'm not sure if it still rings at this time. This is many, many years later, but 3:24pm was when school let out for me.

Kassy: Yours is later, ours was 2:30.

Andrew: 2:30?

Kassy: Yeah.

Andrew: To this day, if I look at my watch, and it's 3:24pm I kind of smile and I go, all those kids are getting out of school, how happy they must be. All right. So then, a few hours later, after school is finished, Ruth goes to Mr. Johnson's classroom to ask him the big question if she can get a recommendation letter from him. And Kassy, why don't you break it down. When Ruth arrives at the classroom, Mr. Johnson asks her a question, what does he ask exactly?

Kassy: He said, "What can I do for you?" And I really like this phrase.

Andrew: Yeah, could you say it quickly because I feel like we really smush our words together and ask this question really quickly when we say it in a natural way.

Kassy: Yeah. Hey, Andrew, what can I do for you today?

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. It's really smushed together. What can I do for you? What can I do for you? My Canadian accent really comes out when I ask that question, I think. But what can I do for you today? Is just another way to ask, "What's up?" or "What do you need?" "What can I help you with?" That kind of question, right?

Kassy: Since this is a student teacher relationship, you know, the student's a lot younger than the teacher. So, teachers, we usually talk more casually with their students, you're a lot more likely to hear this kind of phrase, rather than, "How can I help you?"

Andrew: Yeah, that's true. And that's actually a good point. Guys, you wouldn't want to use this kind of question maybe if your boss asked you to meet one on one. And then you're like, "Yeah, sure, boss, what can I do for you?" You know, like, it's not really the

most professional expression, maybe in a more professional situation, you would want to say something like, "Oh, how can I help you? Or what would you like to talk with me about?" Some question like that would be more appropriate.

Kassy: After Mr. Johnson asked, "What can I do for you?" Ruth replied with, "I was wondering if you could write me a recommendation letter?" We've learned this phrase in the past, I was wondering if blah, blah. And this is the perfect phrase that you can use when you have anything that you want someone to do for you. I was wondering if you could blah, blah. It's a polite way of asking for help on a task.

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. And if you want to be even more polite, and I do agree, Kassy, that this is already a pretty polite structure. But if you want to take it even over the top and make it even more polite, than you could add the word "just" in there. "I was just wondering if you could write me a recommendation letter. I was just wondering if you could water my plants while I'm away for the weekend. I was just wondering if you could feed my cat while I'm gone." Something like that. When you're asking somebody for a favor, and you want to be really polite, and really kind, right? Because you want them to say, "Oh, yeah, no problem." Well, then you could use that kind of question structure, like you mentioned.

Kassy: And then after that, Mr. Johnson says, you know, "I gotta ask you a couple of questions." And she says, "Sure, no problem. Thank you for helping me." And the questions begin, what was the first question, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah, so let's just put ourselves in this situation. The teacher is writing the recommendation letter. And probably he knows some information about his student, probably he knows about her performance in his class. But depending on the relationship, and how many students he has, and how big the school is, all of those kinds of things. Well, then that could influence actually how well he knows the student. So, in this case, it seems like he's got a pretty good understanding of Ruth, of the student, for her performance in his class, but he doesn't really know too much about her life outside of the

class, it seems like. So, that means that he doesn't have too much information that he can use to write the recommendation letter, right? So, he needs to ask her some questions, so that he can learn about her goals for the future about her life experiences that she can bring to the university as a student. And so, he asks her these questions so that he can get some info that he can use to write the reference letter. So, he starts things off by asking her if she has a major in mind, or if she's still undecided. And I feel like anybody who's interested in going to university or college in the States, especially in the States needs to know this word, "undecided" or "undeclared", both of them are OK. Kassy, could you explain for us what undecided or undeclared means?

Kassy: Yeah, I know, in most other countries, you have to pick a major specifically before you even get into university, and you can't really deviate from it. But in the States, the first year is mostly just general education requirements. So, you don't have to pick your major right away. So, a lot of students go into university undecided. They have not chosen their future major what they want to do, they just go into university and during the first year, they take their gen-ed requirements, maybe an art class, a music class and English class. And then halfway through the year they'll, you know, focus more on what they want to study. I want to go engineering track or I want to go pre-med, or I want to go history.

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. So, I think this is also the same in Canada, at least it was when I attended university that I picked my general department, my general faculty, like I was humanities, I was a humanities student. But I didn't have to choose my major. So, I was a part of the School of Humanities. But I didn't declare my major until later. Is that the same as you, Kassy? Did you start as an undeclared student?

Kassy: I was a little weird. I was, yeah, undecided the first year. And then the second year, I was actually actuarial science for a semester and hated it, quickly dropped out and moved to physics.

Andrew: So, in response to that question, then Ruth answers that she wants to major in engineering, she's planning to major in engineering, but that she hasn't picked a specific track yet. I guess another way to say it Kassy, would be a specification, right? There's lots of different kinds of engineering, engineering is a very big field so you can specialize in like civil engineering, or aviation engineering, or tons of different types of engineering. And to be honest, I'm not really an expert on the differences between them all, but I'm sure Ruth is. So, that's just what it means that she hasn't really picked her exact focus of study yet. But she's planning to do it in the future. And in response to that, the teacher says, "Oh, yeah, OK, that's no problem, you can do that later, you can pick a more specific field of study, after you start university." And that's a great expression to know as well, "Field of study." And it's just like what I mentioned, right? There are many different subjects that you can study at university, and there are many specializations within those subjects. And that's what we call a field of study. Essentially, it's just the narrow focus of the thing that you study.

Kassy: The next question that Mr. Johnson asked was, again, a very important question for college applications and recommendation letters. And that was, "What other extracurriculars are you involved in?"

Andrew: A very good question. What other extracurriculars are you involved in? And I think this is 100% going to be asked, and OK, this is a hard word to pronounce. I think even for some native speakers, but let's slowly pronounce it and then we'll explain the meaning as well. Maybe Kassy, I'll say it first and then you could say it after me, extracurriculars.

Kassy: Extracurriculars.

Andrew: And now at a fast speed, extracurriculars.

Kassy: Extracurriculars.

Andrew: It's a mouthful, isn't it?

Kassy: It's a lot of letters, too.

Andrew: So, OK, "extra" means like, in addition to, right? In addition to. And I think many listeners will know, "curriculum." Curriculum is like, the things that you study, like, you know, maybe the textbook that you study could be called your curriculum. So, extra, in addition to. Curriculum, curriculars, right? So, when we put it all together, then "extra curriculars" means things that you learn or activities that you do, or maybe even things that you study outside of the regular schooling that you get at school.

Kassy: Yeah, extracurriculars could be the sports, that you're involved in, the clubs, that you're involved in, the volunteering that you do, maybe even a part-time job or some sort of hobby that, you know, really sets you apart from the rest of your peers.

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. And in Ruth's case here, she has many extracurriculars, doesn't she? She said that she's on the track and field team. She's a secretary for the student council. She said she's on the honors society, the national honors society. And Kassy, that sounds pretty American to me, national honors society. Could you explain that? I'm not even sure exactly what it is.

Kassy: Yeah, it's a society where the students who can be accepted into it have to have a certain grade point average. And they also have to volunteer a certain number of hours each year that they're in it.

Andrew: Kassy, I bet you are in the National Honor Society, weren't you?

Kassy: How'd you guess, Andrew?

Andrew: Nice, very good. I was on the honor roll occasionally. Not every semester but many semesters. We had the honor roll which was where the top students would get recognized with a little mention in the school newsletter, which I think nobody read but it made my parents happy at least. So, what else what other extracurricular? Oh, she also volunteers at an animal shelter about once a month. So, many extracurriculars that Ruth is a part of. And we can see it's sports, it's academics, it's volunteer work. All of these things can account for extracurriculars.

Kassy: Yeah, I don't know about every country, but I know that the US, probably Canada really put a big emphasis on extracurriculars. You could have really high grades in high school and high standardized test scores but if you don't have enough extracurriculars, they might not accept your application.

Andrew: Which I mean, there could be good and bad things about that. And maybe we could save this conversation for a different episode. But my general feeling is that universities in the west are really looking for well-rounded individuals who have experience doing a lot of different things, as opposed to somebody who's really hyper focused on just getting grades. But, Kassy, let's save this for a different episode, because I think it could be an interesting conversation. All right, moving along. So, as we get towards the end of the conversation, the teacher asks one final question, and he asks, "Could you tell me a little bit about why you're interested in engineering?" He just wants to get an understanding of what makes the student want to follow that kind of path in life. And Kassy, this style of question is one that you'll hear so often, in an interview, in a job interview, right? Or any situation like this, where you have to talk about yourself. Could you tell me a little bit about your experience at your previous company? Could you tell me a little bit about your time that you volunteered abroad? Could you tell me about bla bla bla? A really, really common question style.

Kassy: Could you tell me your strengths and weaknesses?

Andrew: Yeah, could you tell me your strengths and weaknesses, classic job interview question. And finally, the final question that the teacher asks the student is, is there a deadline for this letter? And, Kassy, I have a question for you because you have experience, well, how many reference letters do you think you've written in your career as a teacher?

Kassy: Honestly, I've tripled my count this year. I think I've written maybe 15 or 20 this year alone. I wrote a lot.

Andrew: All right. So, I want to know, in your opinion, is this a little bit rude to not say that there is a deadline? Because I think if I were the student asking to have a reference letter written, this would be one of the first things I would mention to the teacher just so he knows about the timeline. Or do you think it's OK, because they're just high school students and that kind of information could be easily ignored or forgotten about?

Kassy: I prefer deadlines because I'm busy and I prioritize everything that I do. So, if you tell me, you need your recommendation letter in a week, I'll do it. It's a little rude, but it's fine. I'll get it done. But if you tell me your deadline isn't for a month or two, I'll probably wait a month or two, and do it closer to the deadline.

Andrew: Fair enough. All right. So, the student answers that there is indeed a deadline. And she mentions that the application due date is by January the 5th. And she would like to get the reference letter, at least a week before that so she has enough time to submit the reference letter. And the teacher says, "OK, yeah, I'll try and have it to you before the Christmas break." And I think that is like a really common sentence style that you'll hear as well, "I'll try to have it to you." Or, "I'll try to get it to you." Saying like, I'll do my best, but please don't kill me if I'm a little bit late.

Kassy: Yeah, that's teacher speak, for, "It might be late, but I'm sorry in advance."

Andrew: Just before we wrap up here, Kassy, is there anything else that listeners should know? Because I think perhaps, we'll have a lot of younger students maybe listening to this episode who are interested in applying to university in an English-speaking country and they need a reference letter from their teacher. What kinds of advice or tips could you give for anybody in this situation?

Kassy: My biggest advice would be to pick a teacher who is one, who teaches the class most similar to what you want to major in. So, if you want to go science track, you should pick your science teacher. Or if you want to go humanities track, you might want to pick your social studies or English teacher to write your recommendation letter. And then also you don't have to pick the class that you did the best in, but you should pick a class where you worked hard, and you had good rapport with your teacher. If you don't talk in that class at all, then your teacher doesn't know you and they have nothing to write about. This has happened to me once or twice, I get a student who has said maybe two sentences in my class and I don't know what their personality is, I don't know what their interests are. So, really pick a teacher that you feel closest to, or they know what you're involved in and what you're like.

Andrew: I teach at a university, so I don't have students come to me asking for reference letters very often, it does happen from time to time, but I'm more like one a year or one every two years. Whereas Kassy, you're 15 or 20 a semester, that's wild. But I would say that final tip is one of the best tips that you could give for any student, whether it's at a high school level or the university level. And that is: get to know your teachers, be friendly with your teachers. And I think it goes a long way. You don't have to be super vocal during class, but just, you know, maybe chat for a few moments after class or ask a question after class, something like that, to get to know your teacher, I think that can be really beneficial for all students. So, great tip there.

And that brings us to the end of today's episode, everyone. Now, I do want to say that there is a part two coming up sometime in the near future. The next Real Talk episode that

Kassy and I are going to make is also about reference letters. But now it won't be in the context of a high-school situation, it will be in the context of a professional situation where you need to get a reference letter from a boss or a previous employer to use in your future job application package. So, we'll be talking about that next time. But yeah, for now, we're going to wrap things up and Kassy, why don't we just summarize a little bit about what we covered today?

Kassy: Today, we learned a bunch of great expressions such as, "Are you available to talk one on one?" or "Do you have a major in mind?" And in answer to that, "I'm planning to major in blah blah," or "I'm undecided. I haven't chosen a major."

Andrew: We also learned the expressions, "What extracurriculars are you involved in?" "Is there a deadline?" And could you tell me a little bit more about why you're interested in something? So, it's the end. Thank you for listening, everybody. We hope you learned a lot with us today. So, that's it for us for now, but we'll be back soon with another brand-new episode, and we'll talk to you all then. Goodbye!

Kassy: See ya!

Andrew: That brings us to the end of this lesson. Talk to you next time. Bye!

Detailed Explanations

Are you available to talk one on one?

Expression

At the beginning of the example conversation, Ruth, a student, greets her teacher and asks if he can spare some time to talk to her later. She asks, “Are you available to talk one on one for a few minutes later today?” This question, **Are you available to talk one on one?** is a polite way to ask for a private conversation and to find out about the other person's availability. It shows your recognition of the other person's busy schedule and your respect for their time.

You can use this expression in different contexts, both formal and informal. For instance, if you need to discuss a work-related issue with a colleague, you might say, “Are you available to talk one on one?” To be more specific, you can add details to this question, like, “Are you available to talk one on one about the new marketing plan?”

It's important to note that the person you're asking this question could either say yes, as in the example dialog, or they could say no. In the latter case, make sure you show understanding and respect. You could suggest scheduling the conversation for a more convenient time or ask them to let you know when they're available.

There are many alternatives for this expression, such as “Do you mind if we talk privately?” (usually used to talk about a serious issue) or “Can we chat one on one?” (more informal and casual). You can use these two alternatives with friends in casual settings.

Here are a couple more examples with **Are you available to talk one on one?**:

Fred: Hey, I really liked that idea you mentioned in our meeting. **Are you available to talk one on one** about it after lunch?

Josie: Sure! I'll meet you at your office then.

Fred: Perfect, please come by around 1:00 pm.

Randy: Hey, Alice, I'm planning a birthday party for Tony, and I need your help. **Are you available to chat one on one?**

Alice: I'm a little busy right now, but how about we meet up for coffee tomorrow morning? We can discuss the party details and brainstorm some ideas together.

Randy: Sure, that works for me. Talk to you then!

Undecided Adjective

In the example conversation, the teacher says to Ruth that, in order to write a good recommendation letter, he needs to ask her a few questions. His first question is, “Do you have a major in mind yet, or are you still undecided?”

A major is the main subject that a student chooses to specialize in while studying at university. Andrew and Kassy explain that you don’t have to choose a major right away, and mention that a lot of students, including themselves, go into university undecided, and choose their major later.

To be **undecided** means to be uncertain about something, not to know what you’re going to do. Andrew mentions the synonym “undeclared”, which is usually used in the context of choosing academic majors or career paths. The word “undecided” is more commonly used in a wide range of contexts where someone struggles to make a choice or a decision, whether in their personal or professional life.

For example, if your friend can’t decide whether to buy a house or an apartment, they are undecided about their choice. They might need more information or time to weigh the pros and cons of each option. It means they’re uncertain and not sure which one is better, so they hesitate to make a decision.

Here are a couple more examples with **undecided**:

Charlotte: So, Dan, what are you going to do about that job offer?

Dan: I’m still undecided. I mean, it’s tough. I’d have to move to another city, and I don’t know anyone there. At the same time, it’s a great opportunity. I need more time to think about it.

Steve: What are your plans for New Year’s Eve?

Lucy: We’re still undecided. Possibly either going to a restaurant or having a home-cooked dinner with some friends. What about you?

Steve: I’m staying at my parents’ cottage this year; they’re throwing a huge party. Should be fun!

To major in [something] Expression

In the example conversation, Mr. Johnson asks Ruth if she has chosen her major yet, and she responds by saying, “I’m planning to major in engineering, but I haven’t picked a specific track yet.”

We talked about the noun “a major” earlier, and the verb “to major” means to study something as the main subject at university or college. When a student **majors in [something]**, such as psychology, physics, or computer science, they focus on the subject they’ve chosen and specialize in it.

In the example conversation, Ruth mentions her plan to major in engineering, which means that engineering will be her main field of study. However, she hasn’t chosen a specification yet. The teacher says to her that she can pick a more specific field of study later, after she starts university.

The phrase “to major in [something]” can also be useful when talking about your educational background in professional settings, for example, at a job interview. You might say something like, “I majored in Public Relations.” Sometimes people change their major, and in that case, one might say, “Originally, I was majoring in history, but I switched to sociology in my third year of college.”

It’s important to note that we use this expression in the present tense when we are students, such as “I am majoring in mathematics.” However, once we graduate, we use it in the past tense, for example, “I majored in mathematics.” Here are a couple more examples with **to major in [something]**:

Sean: How’s job hunting going?

Trisha: It’s more challenging than I thought it would be!

Sean: What did you major in again?

Trisha: Computer science. You’d think it opens all doors in the tech world, but finding the right place isn’t that easy.

Connor: Wow, you have so many books!

Emma: Yeah. I’m **majoring in literature**, and I really enjoy reading and writing. What about you, what’s your major?

Connor: Environmental science. Trying to save the planet, you know.

What extracurriculars are you involved in?

Expression

After discussing Ruth's future major, Mr. Johnson mentions that he knows about her being on the volleyball team. He asks what other extracurriculars she's involved in.

Extracurriculars are activities students do outside of regular school, such as sports, clubs, arts, etc. Ruth is involved in several extracurriculars: she's on the track and field team, she's a secretary on the student council, a member of the National Honor Society, and volunteers at an animal shelter.

As Andrew and Kassy explain, participating in extracurricular activities is important for getting into college. Admissions officers want students who not only do well academically but are also well-rounded, have diverse interests, and are good at working with others. Therefore, even if a student has high grades, without enough extracurriculars, they might not be accepted.

The question **What extracurriculars are you involved in?** is commonly asked in educational or professional settings, such as during college admissions interviews or job interviews. You can replace “extracurriculars” in this question with other words based on the situation. For instance, you can ask someone “What organizations are you involved in?” or “What projects are you involved in?”

To answer the question “What extracurriculars are you involved in?”, you could say, “I play on the soccer team and am part of the school's art club.” Similar questions include “What do you do in your free time?” or “Are you a member of any clubs or sports teams?” Here are a couple more examples with **what extracurriculars are you involved in?**:

Ben: Has your son started to look at colleges?

Kathy: He's always dreamed of going to Harvard, just like J.F. Kennedy.

Ben: The competition is very high there! **What extracurriculars is he involved in?**

Kathy: He's part of the school's debate team, Model UN, the chess club, and he also plays the saxophone in the school band.

Ben: Impressive! I think he has a good chance of getting in.

Linda: Could you please tell me a bit more about your previous job? **What projects were you involved in?**

Jim: I helped create a new training program for welcoming new employees.

Is there a deadline?

Expression

Towards the end of the example conversation, the teacher asks his final question: “Is there a deadline for this letter?”

A deadline is the last date for finishing something. **Is there a deadline?** is a common way to ask if there’s a specific time by which a task should be completed. As Andrew explains, it’s a little rude to not mention the deadline when you ask someone to do something as a favor. It’s important for the person to be aware of how much time they have to complete the task. Similarly, when given a job, it’s a good idea to find out what the due date and the timeframe is, and that’s another situation this question can be useful for.

“Is there a deadline” can be used in many contexts: academic, professional, and personal. For example, a student could ask their teacher, “Is there a deadline for this assignment?” Additionally, if you’re in a situation where you know there’s a deadline for something, and you want to clarify the exact date, you could ask “When is the deadline?”

We often use the noun “deadline” with the verbs “to set”, “to meet”, “to miss” and “to extend.” When we set a deadline, we decide when something needs to be done. Meeting a deadline means finishing the task on time. If we miss a deadline, it means we didn’t finish on time, and if we extend a deadline, we give more time to complete the task.

Here are a couple more examples with **is there a deadline?**:

Mike: I need those reports by Friday. Do you think you can get them done by then?

Jess: Will do! **Is there a deadline for the presentation too?**

Mike: Yes, we need it ready by Monday. Thanks!

Mindy: Hey, Luke, have you started working on the history assignment?

Luke: Not yet. **When is the deadline for that?**

Mindy: In two weeks.

Luke: Oh, great! We have plenty of time then.

With a fine-tooth comb

Idiom

After the example conversation, Andrew and Kassy break it down and explain all the key vocabulary used in it. To segue into that part of the episode, Andrew says, “Kassie and I are going to go through it with a fine-tooth comb.”

With a fine-tooth comb means thoroughly, in every small detail. When we go through or go over something with a fine-tooth comb, we examine it very carefully without leaving anything unnoticed. A comb is a tool we use to tidy our hair. Teeth are the lines of the comb, and “fine” in this case means that the teeth are close together, with small spaces between them.

This expression originates from when people would run a fine-tooth comb through hair to remove lice. Since these creatures are small and hard to find, it has to be done with great attention and care. Similarly, when used figuratively, this idiom means to analyze something slowly and thoroughly.

The idiomatic expression “with a fine-tooth comb” is used in many different contexts when talking about inspecting every little detail of something. For instance, when police investigate a crime, they go over all the details of the crime scene with a fine-tooth comb. This means that they look at everything with great attention, trying not to miss anything.

Here are a couple more examples with **with a fine-tooth comb**:

Clara: Are you ready for your exam tomorrow?

Will: I think so. I’ve been preparing for weeks. I’m a bit nervous, though.

Clara: Just remember to proofread it before handing it in. **Go over everything with a fine-tooth comb** and make sure there are no typos or silly mistakes.

Will: Sure, I will! Thank you.

Paul: I think we found our perfect house! We’re going to sign the papers tomorrow.

Kelly: Did you check everything there? You don’t want to buy a house and then discover some major issues with it.

Paul: Don’t worry, **we went through it with a fine-tooth comb**, inspected every corner. It’s all good.

Quiz

- 1. Which of the following questions would NOT be appropriate in a situation where you want to have a private conversation with someone?**
 - a) Are you available to talk one on one?
 - b) What can I do for you?
 - c) Can we chat one on one?
 - d) Do you mind if we talk privately?

- 2. What does it mean if someone says that they're majoring in history?**
 - a) History is their main focus of study.
 - b) They really like history.
 - c) They're good at history.
 - d) They spend a lot of time reading history books.

- 3. Extracurriculars refer to _____.**
 - a) Extra time you spend at work or university.
 - b) The most challenging subjects.
 - c) Activities that are not part of your school program.
 - d) People that volunteer at universities.

- 4. True or false? If there's a deadline for a task, it means that it must be completed by a certain time.**
 - a) True.
 - b) False.

- 5. If your boss asks you to go through a document with a fine-tooth comb, it means that _____.**
 - a) Your boss wants you to take a quick look at the document.
 - b) Your boss wants you to sign the document.
 - c) Your boss thinks you need a haircut.
 - d) Your boss wants you to read it very carefully.

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever asked someone to write you a recommendation letter? Please share more details.
2. How do you approach making decisions when you find yourself undecided about something?
3. What did you major in? What influenced your decision to major in that particular field?
4. Can you share some of the extracurricular activities you were involved in as a student?
5. Think of a time when you went through something with a fine-tooth comb. What was it?

Quiz Answers

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

Episode credits

Hosts: Andrew Bates and Kassy White

Music: *Something Elated* by Broke for Free

Episode preparation/research: Kassy White

Audio editor: Marshall Vaillancourt

Transcriptionist: Heather Bates

Study guide writer: Alina Morozova

English editor: Andrew Bates

Operations: Tsuyoshi Kaneshima