Simplified Speech #088 – How to write English like a native speaker

Episode description

Many of our listeners have become better English speakers, but what does it take to become a better English writer? In this Simplified Speech episode, Andrew and Jeremy give their advice on how to write like a native English speaker.

Fun fact

There are around 4000 new English words added to the Oxford English Dictionary every year. One reason is that new technology requires us to come up with descriptive terms for new actions. For example, emoji, tweet, retweet, crowdfund, and so many more have only been made official words in the last 10 years.

Expressions included in the study guide

➢ Thirsty

➢ To throw [someone] under the bus

➢ Ton

➢ Hack

➢ Open-ended
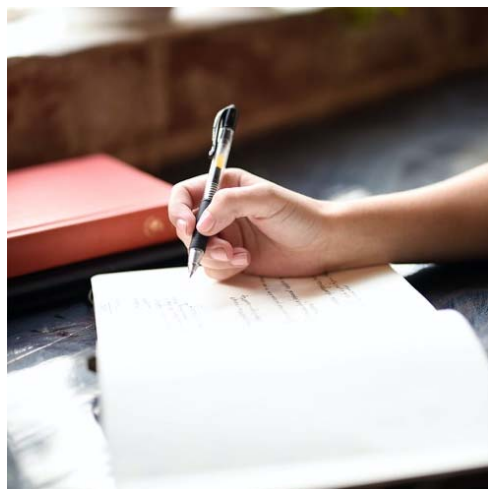
Transcript

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: Hello, everyone. My name is Andrew.

Jeremy: And my name is Jeremy.

Andrew: And you are listening to Culips.

Andrew: Hello, there everyone. This is Simplified Speech, the Culips series featuring totally natural English conversations that are slowed down just a little bit and simplified just a little bit. Today I am joined by my cohost, Jeremy. Jeremy, what's up?

Jeremy: Hey, how you doing, Andrew?

Andrew: Jeremy, I am doing very well. And I wanted to kick off today's episode by reading an email that we received this week from one of our listeners named Lucia from South Korea. Kind of rhymes, Lucia from Korea. I like it. And Lucia writes, "Hi Culips team. I am a loyal listener and a premium member of Culips." Thank you for being a member, Lucia. That's awesome. She continues, "I listen to your podcasts every day for at least 2 hours. I guess no matter how busy I am, I am really having a great help from you guys." Again, that's awesome that you find us so helpful. "I really, really, really, really want to hear from your professional teachers about how to be good at writing in English in a logical and formal way. Writing is the most difficult and hard skill for foreigners. And I think the biggest reason is that we have little chances to write in English and, even when we do, it's difficult to get some help."

Andrew: She goes on to say, "I am using HelloTalk to write short pieces on my thoughts and asking natives to correct them. But I'm still **thirsty** about corrections and good advice for them." So I guess she means she is still curious about how she can improve her writing. And, finally, she says that we have talked about repetitive listening and reading so far. Jeremy, you've done a great job talking about these topics in your Jeremy's English tips series. But now, she would like us to talk about writing. And, yeah, I guess just how English learners can become fluent English writers. So we're going to tackle this big topic today.

Andrew: But, everyone, before we do that, I wanna let you know about the study guide that we've made for this episode. We custom designed it to teach you the most important things that you need to know from our talk today. So vocabulary expressions, examples, the transcript, a quiz. All of these things are included in the study guide, and it's a great way to increase what you will learn here with us today. So just visit our website, Culips.com, to give it a download.

Andrew: All right, let's get into it, Jeremy. Writing—what's your take? How can English learners become good writers?

Jeremy: Well, I think that they can kind of follow the same path that native English speakers do to become good English writers. I know you probably had a similar experience to myself, but we all went through school. And every year in school, third grade, fourth grade, fifth grade, all the way through high school, even through university, we are given writing assignments. And in third grade, we might have a writing assignment about, I don't know, volcanoes or dinosaurs or something like that. And in university, we write about more complex things, like politics or psychology or something like that. Now, there is a lot of repetition that goes on throughout that whole process. When you're in third grade, you learn to write your reports, and your teacher gives you feedback. And then next time, you try to improve: feedback, improve, feedback, improve. And this feedback loop, as we call it, a feedback loop, plus repetition equals improvement, or learning. So, feedback loop plus repetition equals learning. So, to improve your writing, you need consistent feedback from someone, probably a native speaker, and you need to do it a lot, repetitively.

Andrew: Yeah, Jeremy, you bring up a really interesting point, actually, and that is that even native English speakers have to learn how to write. You know, we become fluent listeners and speakers naturally, just from living in an English-speaking environment. But that doesn't mean we can translate those skills or transfer those skills to becoming good writers. Some of my friends, I don't want **to throw them under the bus** here, but some people I know are really great storytellers. They're amazing speakers, but their writing actually sucks. And when I read it, I get kind of confused. It's not very clear, and it's difficult for other people to understand. So writing is not something that you learn naturally. It's a skill that needs to be developed through practice. And it's something that's difficult even for native English speakers. So we're all in this struggle together, guys, although the challenge is greater for, for English learners, of course.

Andrew: But, Jeremy, I completely agree with you there on your points about how feedback is so important. And this is what researchers have found when, you know, looking at any skill that is learned, how do people learn skills, and it's all of the things that you just mentioned. It's repetition, right? So doing something again and again and again. It's being patient and persistent. So not giving up. And, you know, the magical number that's floated around is the 10,000-hours metric, right, about that, you could become an expert or a master at any skill if you put in 10,000 hours of work. Of course, that's just a guideline. It's not true for everyone. But it, it's a nice metric to think of, because it shows that you need a lot of work, right? You can't become really good at anything without **a ton of** practice and **a ton of** time.

Andrew: I think most importantly, though, Jeremy, is your point about feedback and focusing on your weaknesses. That is going to be huge when learning English writing. So although you probably could do a lot of self-study with writing textbooks and learn a lot that way, where you're going to see the most improvement is getting personalized feedback from, like, a writing coach or a writing tutor that can point out your weaknesses to you and then help you get over those weaknesses. So, I think specifically for English writing, hiring a tutor is a really good investment if you're serious about becoming a better writer.

Jeremy: I recently have been trying to improve my Korean writing, actually, for those of our listeners who don't know that I have been learning Korean for almost 10 years. My speaking is much, much better than my writing. When I speak, I sound like an intelligent adult. I can say anything I want to say. But when I write, it's very confusing. People don't know what I mean. I can write text messages. But if I try to write an academic paper or something like that, I have a lot of trouble. However, when I write professional emails in Korean, I don't have as much trouble because I have worked for a Korean company in the past for a few years. And I've worked with Korean people professionally for quite a long time. So I have many more repetitions writing business emails than I do writing academic papers or, you know, writing my thoughts about a recent economic change or something like that.

Jeremy: So what I would say to Lucia is she should choose what kind of writing she wants to improve on, because native speakers, we have many, many, many years to improve all of our writing skills: emails, text messaging, you know, academic papers, novel writing, poems. These are all different skills, right? And I know English learners do not have that kind of time. I would advise her to choose the specific kind of writing she wants to practice and then find a tutor, maybe a professional tutor, or a language exchange partner, someone who is a native speaker, to give her feedback on her writing, and practice that specific kind of writing many, many, many times. That would be my first piece of advice. What do you think about that, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah, I agree with you. And, actually, the good news for anybody who wants to become a better writer with specific genres, like academic writing or business writing, is that they're very standardized. And learning some set expressions, you know, like, for example, in academic writing transitional phrases, so some transitional words and phrases that will help you move from one paragraph to the next paragraph or one point to the next point, memorizing these and using them repetitively is actually kind of a **hack**. It's like a way to improve the clarity of your writing in a pretty easy way. So these standard forms. Of course, if you want to write novels or poetry, then it's much more open and difficult because it lacks that standard structure. But the good news for academic writing and business writing is that it's standardized.

Andrew: And I think, you know, using a textbook in this situation, I usually don't like textbooks for language learning, as maybe people could guess, but I think for writing, we can make an exception here. There are some really great textbooks out there to help English language learners with writing for business and academic contexts. And there's even online courses, too. And, guys, depending on how comfortable you feel in English, there are things called MOOCs. Jeremy, do you know about MOOCs?

Jeremy: Massive online courses or something like that?

Andrew: I think massively open online courses. MOOC, I believe is the acronym. So a MOOC is a free university-level class. And I googled English writing MOOC and I found, like, a list of 100 different open online classes from reputable American universities like University of Iowa, University of Arizona, and they have free writing classes that are designed for freshmen, native English-speaking students. So the vocabulary, everything is going to be a little bit high level because, you know, it's made for native speakers, but the concepts are the same. And freshmen university students, even English native speakers, are not very good writers for the most part. So I think even our listeners could gain a lot from taking one of those classes and, hey, why not? It's free, right? You've got nothing to lose. If you commit yourself and if you're really serious about making some strides in your English writing, then this could be something to do.

Jeremy: I think that is definitely a great method. I personally have taken a short online course to improve my Korean writing, also. So, I can vouch for that. That's a good expression, vouch, meaning I can say from my experience that I have experienced that, and I agree.

Andrew: It's like a personal recommendation. I can recommend it. I can vouch for it. V-O-U-C-H.

Jeremy: V-O-U-C-H. I don't think I have ever written that word. I have only said that word. I have also heard that writing about the same topic, repetitively, can be very helpful. So, for example, if you google writing prompt, which is basically a topic in the form of a question, you can take one of those and write something about it.

Andrew: And, of course, we have writing prompts in our study guide, too. So that's a great place where you can find writing prompts. And even The New York Times, the famous newspaper in the USA, they have a section on their website for students, again, aimed towards native English speakers, but I don't know why English learners couldn't use them as well, where they give you a writing prompt every day and also a picture prompt every day. So they take one of the photos from their newspaper that, you know, has a kind of interesting, it's like an interesting photo, right? And then they'll give you a prompt to write about that. And it's usually pretty **open-ended**, like, what do you think of when you see this photo? Or what do you think is happening?

Andrew: But this is a great way to get repetition, by writing about a similar prompt in many different situations, right? Even though the prompt is the same almost every day, the photo is different. So you're going to get repetition, but also variety at the same time, which might keep things more interesting.

Jeremy: That's a good point. Yeah. So, basically, you write about a certain thing and get feedback on that top, get feedback on your writing from a native speaker or tutor or someone, and then you rewrite the same text, but with the corrections from your tutor or teacher. Then you rewrite another piece, another text about the same topic one more time, from memory, without looking at your original draft. And this exercise can be very, very helpful, because it helps you to internalize the grammar forms, connective expressions, phrasal verbs, overall formatting of the text.

Andrew: I'm teaching a writing class at my university this semester. And this is exactly what I do with my students. I'll give them a writing prompt that they have to answer for homework, they hand it in, and I check it for them. But the first time that I check it, I don't give them specific feedback. I just highlight where there are some awkward sentences or some errors. And then their job is to examine that again. So now they know, oh, something's funky here. But I don't tell them exactly what it is. I want them to try and explore and find it on their own. And then they have to rewrite. They rewrite the writing assignment again, hand it in, and then I give them specific feedback. And once they have specific feedback, usually I see an improvement. Honestly, students are, you know, sometimes they just write something quickly. I don't know if they proofread. Of course, yeah, university students are sometimes prone to not do the highest quality of work for the first draft. But then, yeah, I give them some specific feedback for the second draft. And then I have them write it again, and hand it in a third time, and that's what they're finally marked on. So.

Jeremy: Wow. That's great. That's perfect.

Andrew: Yeah, of going through the steps like this, that's what I teach my students to do, and I think that's what I'd recommend for Culips listeners, as well. But you got to find a highly qualified tutor that can help you out, specifically somebody that has some experience with teaching writing, right? Because, like we said, just because you're a native English speaker, doesn't mean that you're a good writer.

Jeremy: True. You need someone who is a good writer.

Andrew: Yes.

Andrew: All right, Jeremy. I think we will wrap it up here. Thanks again to Lucia for the interesting question.

Andrew: Listeners, if you have a question that you would like to ask us, please send us an email. Our address is contact@Culips.com. You can also find us on social media. We are on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram. If you search for the Culips English Podcast, you will be sure to find us.

Andrew: And, finally, consider supporting Culips by becoming a premium member just like Lucia. When you become a member, you'll get full and unlimited access to our study guide library. We make a study guide that is designed to help you become a better English user for every episode we produce, and they are a great way to study with us. For all the info you need about how to become a Culips member, just visit our website, Culips.com.

Andrew: That's it for us. We'll be back soon with another new episode and we'll talk to you then. Goodbye.

Jeremy: Bye, everyone.

Detailed Explanations

Thirsty
Slang

Thirsty describes someone eager or desperate to get something. It first appeared in 2003 and became popular on the internet in 2014. It describes people who want approval, affection, or attention, usually of a sexual nature.

Thirsty has evolved to become a more general term for any strong desire. For example, someone can be **thirsty** for knowledge. However, be careful when using this particular slang term, because it's still used mostly for sexual or physical desires.

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

Iona: Can I borrow $50?

Haleema: What? Why so much?

Iona: I just need it. I promise I'll pay you back!

Haleema: I'm not lending you anything until I know why you're so **thirsty** to borrow some money!

Iona: Fine! It's my mom's birthday tomorrow and I don't get paid until Friday!

Haleema: In that case, yeah, I'll lend you the money.

Carl: Man, that game last night was rough. That number 12 was so **thirsty** for the win, he took out nearly half our team.

Umar: That idiot. He checked me into the boards so hard, my whole left side is bruised. That guy really doesn't understand the meaning of recreational.

Carl: I hope he gets injured before our next match. He took all the fun out of the game.

To throw [someone] under the bus
Informal expression

To throw [someone] under the bus means to cause someone to suffer in order to save yourself or to gain a personal advantage. The person **thrown under the bus** is the scapegoat or sacrifice.

This can be used to show cruelty or, as is the case in this episode, it can be more lighthearted and honest. Andrew mentions that some of his friends are great storytellers, but their actual writing sucks. He says, "I don't want **to throw them under the bus**," meaning that he doesn't want to make them sound bad, but he still uses them as an example to highlight the fact that native English speakers aren't always great at writing in English.

Here are a couple more examples with **to throw [someone] under the bus**:

Nia: I'm scheduled to work with Josh tomorrow and I'm really not looking forward to it.

Owain: I hear that. I had a shift with him last weekend and the guy totally **threw me under the bus**. He told Mina that I was the one who was rude to a customer who was complaining, but it was actually his customer.

Nia: What a jerk. If he does that to me, I'll … Well, I don't know what I'll do. Probably cry.

Owain: Nah, don't do that. Just text me. Or punch him.

Aleena: So Jasper is asking about brunch on the weekend. Can I tell him that you've got an appointment or something and we can't go?

Yasin: Whoa, don't **throw me under the bus** like that! If you don't want to go, just tell him we can't go. We don't need to give a reason.

Aleena: He'll ask why, though, and I'll have to say something.

Yasin: Then think of an excuse that doesn't involve me. I'm not going **to be thrown under the bus**, babe.

Aleena: Fine. Let's just go, then.

Ton
Informal noun/slang

When **ton** is used as an informal noun or slang, it means an extremely large amount. There is no set limit on how much or how little is in a **ton**. Usually this term is used for exaggeration or emphasis, rather than for an exact measurement, and you could say **a ton of**, **tons of**, or just **tons**. Also, **ton** doesn't always refer to a material or physical thing. In this episode, Andrew says, "You can't become really good at anything without **a ton of** practice and **a ton of** time."

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

Emelia: Hey, Jasmin! Want to come over for lunch tomorrow? We have **tons of** food left over from our big family dinner.

Jasmin: I dunno. I have **a ton of** work to do around the house.

Emelia: You don't have to stay long! Just eat and go. If you don't help us eat this food, it'll just go bad.

Jasmin: OK! I'll gladly eat your food. See you tomorrow!

Yao: How many of those little beaded straps do we have left in the back?

Langdon: Tons.

Yao: OK. That's, uh, great. But can you be more specific? The inventory list doesn't have an option for **tons**.

Langdon: Oh, you need the actual number. Give me a bit, I'll go count.

Yao: Great, thanks.

| **Hack** |
| Slang |

A **hack**, also known as **a life hack**, is a simple and clever tip or trick to do something easier, faster, or more efficiently.

There are different definitions for **hack**, depending on its role in a sentence and the context. For example, to **hack** means to be able to do something, so you can say that someone can't **hack** it or can **hack** it. If someone is called a **hack**, it means he's a fake and/or can't do what he claims to be able to do.

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

Gerard: Your cubicle smells great today, Sarita. Did you clean?

Sarita: No! I found this **life hack** online—I made these little gel air fresheners at home with some essential oils and gelatin. This one is citrus.

Gerard: Hmm, that's really neat. Why citrus, though?

Sarita: It's supposed to help you stay alert and focused during the day. And I need all the help I can get to stay awake today!

Gerard: Ha! Well, good luck with that!

Melanie: I made a new recipe last night. It was so good. But keeping the cookbook open was such a pain!

Jaslyn: Oh! I have a trick for that. Do you know those pants hangers? The ones with the clips on either side?

Melanie: Yeah?

Jaslyn: I pin the clips to either side of my cookbook to hold it open.

Melanie: And it works?

Jaslyn: Usually, unless the cookbook too stiff to stay open.

Melanie: Nice! I'll try that **hack** next time I'm cooking.

Jaslyn: So … Tonight?

Open-ended
Adjective

Open-ended means to have no limit or end. When something is **open-ended**, it can flow or change. This adjective describes conversations, questions, events, contracts, and many other things.

An **open-ended** conversation means people can talk in a way that is not planned or controlled. An **open-ended** question is one that has no fixed answer; the question cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. For example, the Writing and Discussion Questions Culips includes in the study guides are almost always **open-ended**. An **open-ended** event is an event without a set end time or planned way to end.

Here are a couple more examples with **open-ended**:

Deepti: Did you find out if you got that job you interviewed for last week?

Ha-joon: I did, but on contract.

Deepti: Oh, that's new. When's the contract good until?

Ha-joon: It's **open-ended**, so I guess it'll be valid until they fire me?

Deepti: Hmm … Well, I guess that could be a good thing, right? If they like you, they can keep you for a long time.

Ha-joon: Yeah, but if they don't like me, they can end the contract without any warning.

Deepti: Maybe you can add a clause in there saying that they have to give you 2 weeks' notice.

Ha-joon: Yeah, I'll try that. Thanks!

Li Wei: When conducting an interview, it's best to use **open-ended** questions.

Sakura: Really? Why?

Li Wei: When you ask yes or no questions, the answers are short, and the interview ends up being choppy and boring. **Open-ended** questions encourage the person you're interviewing to give more detail and provide more explanation. It can also take the interview into new and unplanned directions, which often make them more interesting to read or watch.

Quiz

1. What does it mean if you have a ton of homework to do?

a) your homework weighs 1 ton
b) you have a large amount of homework to do
c) you don't have very much homework to do
d) your homework weighs 1 gram

2. Which of the following means to desperately want something, especially attention?

a) thorny
b) thrifty
c) hungry
d) thirsty

3. What is an open-ended question?

a) one without a simple yes or no answer
b) one without a question mark at the end
c) one with no correct answer
d) one with no answer at all

4. Which of the below expressions could be used to describe the following situation? Jacqueline told her boss that Josh made an error on the spreadsheet.

a) Jacqueline and Josh missed the bus
b) Jacqueline was on the struggle bus
c) Jacqueline threw Josh under the bus
d) Jacqueline threw Josh's hat into the ring

5. Which of the following means a simple and clever tip or trick?

a) lifeboat
b) life hack
c) hack around
d) life cheat

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. **Thirsty started out as internet slang. Can you list some other words that were first used only online?**

2. **Describe a time when you felt like someone threw you under the bus.**

3. **In this episode, Andrew says, "You can't become really good at anything without a ton of practice and a ton of time." What is something you've become good at with practice, and why did you want to be good at it?**

4. **What is a life hack you've discovered recently?**

5. **Tell about your favourite hobby. This is an open-ended question, so explain as much or as little as you'd like.**

Quiz Answers

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

Episode credits	
Hosts:	Andrew Bates and Jeremy Brinkerhoff
Music:	*Something Elated* by Broke For Free, *Let It Go* by Scott Dugdale
Episode preparation/research:	Andrew Bates
Audio editor:	Andrew Bates
Transcriptionist:	Heather Bates
Study guide writer:	Lisa Hoekstra
English editor:	Stephanie MacLean
Business manager:	Tsuyoshi Kaneshima
Project manager:	Jessica Cox
Image:	Hannah Olinger (Unsplash.com)