

Simplified Speech #106 – Countdown to Christmas

Episode description

In this seasonal Culips episode, Andrew and Kassy talk about what they do to prepare for Christmas and the holiday season. Christmas isn't simply a one-day affair, it's a month-long celebration of winter, family, and good cheer.

Fun fact

Christmas might be the most widely known December holiday in Western culture, but there are several other religious holidays that occur at the end of the year, such as Hanukkah, Rohatsu, Kwanzaa, and St. Nicholas Day, to name a few.

Expressions included in the study guide

- Countdown
- A grinch
- Heirloom
- Last minute
- Dated
- Cheesy



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: This Simplified Speech episode is brought to you by all of the Culips members. Without the support of our members, we wouldn't be able to keep this podcast going and teach English to all of our listeners. So thank you so much to all of the Culips members for your continued support. And thanks to everyone for learning English with us.

Andrew: Hey, everyone. My name is Andrew.

Kassy: And I'm Kassy.

Andrew: And this is the Culips English Podcast.

Andrew: Welcome back to Culips. Today, we have a Simplified Speech episode planned for you. And if you don't know what that is, well, Simplified Speech is the Culips series that features clear, natural conversations that are designed to help you boost your English listening skills and make you become a better English speaker overall. Today, I am joined by my cohost Kassy. Hey there, Kassy.

Kassy: Hey, Andrew.

Andrew: And we are going to talk about Christmas and preparing for the holiday season. But before we do that, I did wanna let everyone know that there is a study guide for this episode. And, guys, we make study guides for each and every one of our episodes. And when you're a Culips member, you can download them. You get unlimited access to our study guide library. The study guides are designed to help you become a better English listener and speaker, and they're a really great way to learn with us. We recommend following along with the study guide while you listen to us here today.

Kassy: And if you're not a Culips member yet, don't worry, you can access our study guides, an awesome resource for studying English, by visiting Culips.com. You can select the Study Guide Samples option from the Membership menu, and you can download six free study guide samples.

Andrew: Another awesome benefit of being a Culips member is you get ad-free episodes. So you don't have to listen to us talk about the study guides and our membership options every time you listen to Culips. So that's just another thing to keep in mind.

Andrew: But, Kassy, today we are going to talk about something completely different than study guides. We're going to talk about Christmas and, more specifically, the **countdown** to Christmas. So, Kassy, we are recording this episode, it is December 4th today. There's always a delay between when we record and when the episode actually gets published. But it will come out sometime before Christmas, I hope. So we're just sort of right in the thick of things now, aren't we? We're about, what, 3 weeks away from Christmas, exactly?

Kassy: Yeah, exactly. From December 1st, that is the official **countdown** to Christmas. In Western culture, you know, a lot of people count the days from December 1st all the way to the 25th.

Andrew: Yeah, exactly. Now, when I was a kid, one of my favourite Christmas traditions was the Advent calendar. Kassy, did you ever have an Advent calendar when you were a kid?

Kassy: Yeah, we did. Ours were little Velcro things that you could stick on a picture frame and, you know, they created a Christmas story by the end of the month. But, Andrew, what is an Advent calendar before we talk about this?

Andrew: Yeah, we should explain what an Advent calendar is. So an Advent calendar is a **countdown** calendar. So it's usually only 25 days in length, and it is something that most people start doing and following on December 1st. And every day, you open the calendar and cross off one of the days on the calendar and count down how many days are remaining until Christmas.

Andrew: And, Kassy, your Advent calendar actually sounds quite a bit different than the one that I used to have when I was a kid. My Advent calendar, you could just buy them in the store. They're sold everywhere, just, like, a regular A4 paper-sized box, really. It has a nice Christmas image on the front. And there are little squares with a number all over the picture. And so on the first day, you look for the number 1 and then you have to kind of open a little box and there's usually a candy, a chocolate, behind it, so you could eat the chocolate. And then that is your way to count down, oh, 1 day has passed, there are 24 days left until Christmas. And then you do the same thing every day, open the calendar, eat a chocolate, and get excited, get stoked that Christmas is getting closer and closer.

Kassy: Get stoked. Yeah, our family did not have the candy Advent calendar. But we still loved it. And my sisters and I would always fight, we had to have a schedule of who could put the next Velcro piece onto our image each day. How about you, Andrew, would you and your siblings fight over who got to have the chocolate that day?

Andrew: No, because we all had our own Advent calendar.

Kassy: That's a good idea.

Andrew: So we didn't have to share. I'm sure if we had to share then it would have been a different story. But, yeah, they're pretty cheap to buy at the store, probably only a couple of dollars. The chocolate is really low-quality chocolate. I remember it was never too delicious. The exciting thing about the Advent calendar was opening the box and counting down the day, more so than the chocolate itself.

Andrew: I have a friend back in Canada, Kassy, and her mom does this really cool thing where she prepares an Advent for her daughter, where there is a little gift that she gets every day until the lead-up to Christmas. And this friend goes on Instagram and kind of opens the present on Instagram every morning. It's usually something small, like a little candle or a bar of soap, or maybe a bottle of wine, something like that. And so even though, you know, my friend is, like, 30 years old, but she still has this kind of Advent tradition that was started by her mom. It's pretty cool to follow along with. I think her mom must be very organized to prepare all of these gifts by the start of December. But it's pretty cool.

Kassy: Yeah, that sounds really fun. I should try that. Sounds like a lot of work, though.

Andrew: Yeah, I think it's more fun to open the presents than it is to prepare the presents, perhaps.

Kassy: Yeah. Andrew, what other traditions or preparations does your family do in Canada to count down to Christmas?

Andrew: Yeah, well, traditionally, you know, growing up, Christmas was always a big deal in my house. And we always would decorate our house, putting Christmas lights outside on the exterior of the house. And this is just something that everybody in our neighbourhood would do, put up lots of Christmas lights. And at night, it's cool to drive around through the neighbourhood and to see all of the decorations. We would also decorate the inside of our house, putting up a Christmas tree and stockings. And my mom had lots of different Christmas decorations that she would hang up and she would buy poinsettias, which are a Christmas, a red Christmas flower. We also had a Christmas cactus.

Kassy: A Christmas cactus?

Andrew: Yeah, Christmas cactus is a type of cactus that usually flowers around Christmas. So if you're lucky, you have some flowers from the cactus around that time. So that's why it's called a Christmas cactus. And, yeah, there's lots of just different activities, year-end parties, Christmas gatherings, concerts, and sometimes we would go to church, and, yeah, it's just a busy time of the year.

Andrew: Now that I'm older though, I don't really do as many of these things. I don't want to say that I'm a **grinch**, but it just seems like a lot of work, you know, putting up a tree and putting up lights. The last few years my girlfriend and I have done this. We have celebrated Christmas by putting up a tree and putting up some lights. But, you know, when I was younger, it was something that I was just begging my mom to do. "Come on, Mom, it's finally December. Can we put up the tree? Can we celebrate Christmas?" And now it's, like, oh, it's December 24th. We better put up the Christmas tree. Like, it's kind of a **last-minute** thing.

Kassy: Christmas is really magical as a kid, so families that have children are much more involved in the holiday season than, you know, young couples or families without kids.

Andrew: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. So do you decorate your house or put up a tree or I'm sure you probably bake something, maybe some Christmas baking?

Kassy: Yeah, I have not decorated since coming to Korea, but I do love to make Christmas cookies. I make gingerbreads and sugar cookies with rainbow sprinkles on top shaped like snowmen and Christmas stars.

Andrew: Have you ever made a gingerbread house?

Kassy: I have not. But, yeah, back home my mom is in love with Christmas. So the day after Thanksgiving is traditionally Black Friday in America, where everybody goes shopping. But in my family, it was Christmas tree shopping day. As soon as the turkey is put away, the Christmas stuff comes out. And she would buy the biggest tree that could fit in our house. And we had so many ornaments, they weren't even all able to fit on the tree when I was growing up.

Andrew: Wow. So the ornaments are the decorations that we hang on the tree, right? At least in my family, maybe this is the same in your family, as well. I don't know if this is, like, a traditional thing, but a lot of the decorations and the ornaments that we have are kind of **heirlooms** that have been passed down to us from different family members. I think my mom and her sisters kind of gave each other different ornaments throughout the years. So they're quite meaningful. They're not just, like, store-bought. Some of them are, of course, but, yeah, there were a lot of ornaments that were very meaningful to my mom. Of course, to me when I was a kid, it was just like, oh, what is this old snowflake? Why is this one special? But, yeah, that's kind of cool that we have that tradition as well.

Kassy: Yeah, a lot of our ornaments actually had dates on them. Like, the year, our first Christmas or the first Christmas my parents were married. Or we had ones from when, yeah, my mom was a kid.

Andrew: Wow. Yeah, that's awesome to put the date on it. I like that idea.

Kassy: Yeah, actually, I think there's one more special **countdown** tradition that my family had. I think girls do this more than boys. So maybe you haven't participated. But there's a TV channel in America, not sure if it's in Canada, it's called the Hallmark Channel. And the Hallmark company creates holiday cards. And during Christmas, they also create dozens of holiday romantic movies. So it was a tradition in my family to sit down together at night and watch a **cheesy**, horribly acted but amazing holiday Christmas movie every night.

Andrew: Oh, that's hilarious. That's really funny. I'm glad that you said that word **cheesy**, because I think we do have the Hallmark Channel in Canada as well. If we don't, we definitely get the movies played on one of the Canadian channels, because everybody knows what Hallmark movies are. And they are stereotyped as being kind of low-budget and maybe quickly produced. And, as a result, they come across as very **cheesy** and maybe not the highest quality. But a lot of people find them really heartwarming and touching. They're kind of designed to make you feel good and feel a little bit sentimental or emotional.

Kassy: Yes.

Andrew: Is this right? I haven't actually seen one myself.

Kassy: Yeah, we always say they're so bad, yet so good.

Andrew: OK, and are they Christmas themed?

Kassy: Yeah, every single one. And it's usually, like, a grouchy businesswoman who comes back to her hometown and meets a handsome, traditional lumberjack-style man from her hometown. And he introduces her back to the holiday spirit and they fall in love—every single time.

Andrew: I love it, sounds good. It's funny that you mentioned Christmas movies because there are so many and we could probably do a whole episode just chatting about Christmas holiday movies. But I'd be remiss if I failed to ask you what your favourite holiday movie is. Kassy, do you have a favourite?

Kassy: I think my favourite holiday movie is probably Elf.

Andrew: Elf, OK.

Kassy: Yeah, I don't usually like Will Ferrell, but he's really funny and cute in that movie, so. How about you, Andrew?

Andrew: Yeah, that's a good choice. Elf is a good choice. I like Home Alone. I like Christmas Vacation and an older movie, but it's still a classic, It's a Wonderful Life. I like that one as well. Those are my top 3, but it's hard to choose just one. I try to spread them out. I know some people, like my sister, I believe watches Christmas Vacation every year, but I can't really handle that, it's too much to watch the same movie every year for me.

Kassy: To be honest. I've never even watched Christmas Vacation.

Andrew: Oh, you have to watch it! It's so funny. It's a comedy. Maybe it's a little bit **dated** now. But back when it was a newer movie, so funny.

Kassy: OK, I'll check it out.

Andrew: Yeah, so I try to spread them out. You know, I'll watch Christmas Vacation one year. Home Alone the next year. It's a Wonderful Life the next year, once every 3 years is OK, something like that.

Andrew: I think we should leave it at here for today. So to recap what we talked about, everyone, we discussed some of the different Christmas traditions that Kassy and I grew up with. And also the **countdown** to Christmas, and the lead-up, and how we prepare and how we celebrate this day. So I hope that answered some of your questions about Christmas, everybody. I know, recently, we've had a lot of people write to us and ask us to talk about Christmas. It's a really big, important festival for Americans and Canadians, and, frankly, a lot of people around the world. And there are so many aspects of it to talk about, really, we could probably do a whole Christmas series, Kassy, but maybe by the time we finished talking about it, Christmas would be over, so.

Kassy: That's very true.

Andrew: So we'll leave it just at here for today. But thank you all for listening and tuning in. We hope that you found this episode to be educational and also entertaining.

Andrew: If you like studying with Culips, and you do learn a lot with us, then please consider supporting us. There are so many ways that you can do that, such as signing up and becoming a premium Culips member. Remember that when you do become a Culips member, you get unlimited access to our study guide library, access, as well, to the Culips Fluency Files, which is our special series that is only for Culips members, as well as live streams for Culips members and a bunch of other nice bonuses as well. So to sign up and become a member, just visit Culips.com.

Andrew: But, of course, that's not the only way you can support us. You could really help us out by following us on social media, telling your friends who study English about us, or by leaving us a five-star rating and a nice review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your podcasts.

Andrew: We'll be back soon with another brand-new episode and we'll talk to you then. Merry Christmas, everyone, and goodbye.

Kassy: Merry Christmas!

Detailed Explanations

Countdown Phrase

A **countdown** is a count backwards from some predetermined number all the way to zero, when the awaited event will occur. Every **countdown** is different. A **countdown** can be as short as a few seconds or as long as several months. The **countdown** to Christmas begins on December 1st and ends on Christmas day. However, the **countdown** to New Year's is much shorter, usually beginning at 11:59, 1 minute before the start of the new year.

Countdowns are not used just for holidays or businesses; people can make their own **countdowns** as well. People often make **countdowns** to exams, interviews, book releases, vacations, birthdays, and more.

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

Laurel: Are you excited for our vacation? Just a week left until we leave!

Jasmine: Heck, yeah! I've had a **countdown** tracker on my phone since April.

Laurel: I know, right? But the long wait is almost over. Only 7 days until our flight!

Jasmine: We'll be sipping margaritas and digging our toes in the sand. I can smell the ocean already!

George: All right, people, the **countdown** has begun. We have exactly 1 month until product launch. How are preparations coming?

Brandon: The bugs have been fixed on the website and we've also worked out the kinks in the supply chain.

George: How's the response on social media?

Brandon: Lots of hype, sir. We already have a fair number of pre-orders lined up.

George: Good, good. Keep up the good work. We want everything working like a well-oiled machine by the end of the month.

A grinch

Noun

The **Grinch** is a famous children's book character by Dr. Seuss. He is notorious for hating Christmas and everything related to Christmas. Therefore, if someone is called **a grinch**, it means that they are grumpy during the holidays and unwilling to get caught up in the holiday spirit.

Calling someone a scrooge is another way to refer to someone who refuses to participate in the holiday cheer. This comes from the story A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens, which is about a greedy old man named Ebenezer Scrooge. The end of the year is about spending time with friends and family, giving gifts, and helping the community. Someone who is unwilling to participate in the end-of-year celebrations, is stingy, and seldom buys gifts for others is known as a scrooge.

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

Hank: Ugh, the Christmas carollers are going at it outside again. Can't they just give us some peace and quiet?

Dorothy: C'mon Hank. Where's your holiday spirit? Stop being such **a grinch**.

Hank: I'm not **a grinch**. I just don't like listening to the same old Christmas music year after year sung by tone-deaf Christmas carollers.

Dorothy: Well, if it bothers you that much, put your ear plugs in. They'll be gone in an hour or so.

Alexis: Do you wanna go ice skating tomorrow?

Rachel: No. It's too cold and there are too many people and everyone will act so lovey-dovey since it's Christmastime.

Alexis: Will you go for me? It's my favourite activity and I don't want to go alone.

Rachel: I'd rather get a tooth pulled out than go ice skating.

Alexis: Rachel, why do you have to be such **a grinch**?

Heirloom

Noun

An **heirloom** is a special object that has belonged to one family for several generations. An **heirloom** does not have to be worth a lot of money; the importance of the object is based on the sentimental value it brings to the family. Common family **heirlooms** include jewelry, furniture, diaries, bibles, dolls, quilts, and recipes.

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

Francine: Wow, that's a really cool star on top of your tree.

Hetta: Thanks. It's a family **heirloom**. We've been putting it on top of our tree for the last 100 years.

Francine: Wow, that's incredible!

Hetta: Yeah. I was in tears when it fell off the tree one year and broke. Luckily, we were able to get it repaired.

Greta: Wow, you guys really go all out for Christmas. Your house looks like a private Christmas gift shop.

Tiffany: Ha, I'm not sure about that. We do have a lot of decorations, though. My mother loves Christmas, as did her mother and her mother's mother, so we have a lot of **heirlooms** we've passed down over the years.

Greta: What's this?

Tiffany: Oh, a lot of the wooden ones were handcrafted in Germany.

Greta: And the train?

Tiffany: I'm not sure where we got that, but it's been around for as long as I can remember. We add more pieces to it every year, so now it's quite impressive.

Last minute

Noun

Last minute is the very last bit of time before an event occurs. People who like to procrastinate in their work tend to do things **last minute**. In other words, procrastinators tend to finish work only right before it is due. In this episode, Andrew says that he usually puts up a Christmas tree at the **last minute**. He waits until the day of Christmas Eve, the **last minute**, to put up a tree rather than put it up early and enjoy it for the entire holiday season.

Last minute is often used to talk about a sudden change of plans. For example, a concert that is cancelled at the **last minute** is cancelled the day of the event or a day before the event. A meeting that was supposed to start at 9:00 a.m. and is suddenly changed to 10:00 a.m. would be considered a **last-minute** schedule change.

Here are a couple more examples with **last minute**:

Brady: What should I get Mary for Christmas?

Joe: What? You haven't bought her a present yet? Dude, it's Christmas Eve!

Brady: I know, I know. It's super **last minute**. I just couldn't think of anything good, and now I can't put it off any longer.

Joe: Just get her some nice jewellery or something.

Brady: Yeah, I guess that will have to do.

Cora: Can you look over the guest list? I made some **last-minute** changes that I want you to look over.

Gary: You invited your Aunt Darla? Are you sure that's a good idea?

Cora: Well ... She is family.

Gary: Yes, but she has a tendency to drink one too many cocktails and cause at least one person in attendance to leave in tears.

Cora: She has done that once or twice, hasn't she? Hmm ...

Dated Adjective

If something is described as being **dated**, then that thing is old-fashioned and out of style. For example, the slang word groovy is a **dated** expression that was popular in the 1960s and 1970s, but is not widely used today. Similarly, in this episode, Andrew says that the movie Christmas Vacation is a bit **dated**, but still very enjoyable. In other words, Christmas Vacation is an old movie, but that doesn't decrease its entertainment value.

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

Roger: Wow, Ken. This software is really **dated**. You should get an upgrade.

Ken: How much is that gonna cost me?

Roger: Don't worry about the cost. Whatever it costs now, it will save you time and money in the end.

Ken: I guess you're right. It has been awhile.

Laurel: What do you think of the wedding dress I picked out?

Rosie: I mean, it's pretty, but don't you think it's a bit **dated**?

Laurel: What? No! It's vintage. Old doesn't always mean old-fashioned, OK?

Rosie: Yeah. I get that, but you could show a bit more skin. The cut of that dress does nothing for your figure. You look like a nun instead of a bride.

Cheesy Adjective

Cheesy is a very popular word in the English language, but it's not easy to describe to a non-native speaker. Something that is described as being **cheesy** is overly cute, over-the-top, and kind of silly. For example, couples that have funny pet names for each other like Pumpkin and Boo-Bear are considered **cheesy**. The pet names they give each other are silly and uncool, but they also make you smile. Hearing or watching something **cheesy** often makes the observer roll their eyes because of how silly or over-the-top it is, but just as often it puts a smile on the observer's face.

In this episode, Andrew and Kassy mention Hallmark movies and how **cheesy** they are. Hallmark movies are famous for being very **cheesy**, with lots of clichés and bad acting, but that **cheesiness** is also why people love watching Hallmark movies every Christmas.

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

Marta: How about we wear matching sweaters this year for the Christmas party?

Dante: I don't know. Isn't that kinda **cheesy**?

Marta: Of course it's **cheesy**. That's the fun of it.

Dante: You call dressing up in embarrassing outfits fun?

Marta: Yes. Now will you do it with me or not?

Dante: Ha, all right, but remember that this just shows how much I love you.

Harvey: Ugh, this is so **cheesy**. Why does Mom still make us take a picture with Santa? We're too old for this.

Gracie: So what? Are you too cool for Santa or something? I think it's fun.

Harvey: Well, I don't. I wish I could've just stayed home.

Gracie: Oh, don't be such a grump. You're making Mom happy. You know how much she loves the holidays. Don't ruin it for her.

Harvey: All right, all right.

Quiz

1. Which TWO options below are true about family heirlooms?

- a) they are always very expensive
- b) they belong to a family for generations
- c) they are all related to Christmas
- d) they hold a lot of sentimental value

2. Why might someone refer to you as a grinch?

- a) you love Christmas carolling
- b) you bought a fancy sports car
- c) you failed your test
- d) you refuse to participate in the holiday parade

3. Which two words describe “cheesy” as it’s used in this episode?

- a) silly; over-the-top
- b) scary; horrifying
- c) boring; tiresome
- d) greasy; untrustworthy

4. True or false? Doing something at the last minute refers to activities that only take 60 seconds or less to complete.

- a) true
- b) false

5. Which of the choices below is a synonym for the word dated?

- a) relationship
- b) timely
- c) old-fashioned
- d) marked

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. If you celebrate Christmas, what are some countdown to Christmas traditions in your family?
2. If you don't celebrate Christmas, does your family do something to celebrate winter and the end of the year? What do you do?
3. In your home country, what is the most common winter activity?
4. What is your favourite holiday movie and why?
5. Do you have a family heirloom? What's the story behind it? How long has it been in your family?

Quiz Answers

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

Episode credits

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Episode preparation/research: Andrew Bates

Audio editor: Andrew Bates

Transcriptionist: Heather Bates

Study guide writer: Kassy White

English editor: Stephanie MacLean

Business manager: Tsuyoshi Kaneshima

Project manager: Jessica Cox

Image: Annie Spratt (Unsplash.com)