

Describing Boring Tasks

For speaking exams, it's good to be able to talk about anything and everything. One way to train yourself to do this is by practising describing everyday menial tasks. For example, you've maybe practised talking about the best day of your life or the most interesting place you've ever visited, but have you ever tried to describe something as mundane as doing the washing-up? If you can describe your walk to the bus stop, or how you do up a tie, you'll be able to describe anything!

1 Speaking Game – No Um-ing and Ah-ing Allowed!

Work with a partner. Try to speak for twenty seconds on the topic of “describe your pen” without pausing or umming or ahing. Keep going – try to describe every small detail, e.g. colour, shape, style, origin, use, cost, etc. Start off with ten points. For each um or pause longer than two seconds your partner deducts one point. The player with the most points at the end wins! If you can do it, increase the time! *Consider: what are good techniques for doing this?*

2 Reading

a) Read aloud the **transcript** (written version of speech) of a native speaker describing how he does a boring task – the washing-up. What do you notice about how he speaks?

“I start to run the water, hot water hopefully, put some washing-up liquid, not too much, just a, a little squirt, erm, pop it in, maybe run some cold water to get the lather going up. And then when it's half full **1.** I switch off the water and... but even before I switched off the water I maybe start **2.** to, erm, clean, wash the glasses, so I start off with glasses – yeah? – running the, I'm washing in the hot water with the soap, so the glasses come out really soapy and I'm rinsing them. I move the tap over to the left-hand side, and **3.** I'm rinsing the glass. Er, glasses. Yep? Each glass, and putting it on the top drainer. So there shouldn't be any suds on it.

“So... I start off with the hot water and the glass – all the glass stuff; then I do the cups – any cups and mugs; anything that we drink out of. That... And they're all done. And I've rinsed each one individually in the left-hand sink. Then I get into the phase, what I call, **4.** the sort of, er “It's all gravy” phase. So, this means it's all easy to do. **5.** I can do really quickly, I put all the plates and saucers and plates and small and dinner plates and so on, and stick them all in the water, and then this frees up space in the left-hand sink, so, er, I'm running water in the left-hand sink – just a little bit to rinse – and I'm washing the plates really quickly in the right-hand sink, and I'm washing them, erm, with the sponge, and then rinsing them in the left-hand side and sticking them on the drainer with the... with the, er, insert bits for the plates. [Pause; clears throat] And, er, like I said, I do this really quickly. I can do all of the plates in just, er, a couple of minutes like this.

“Anyway, er, once you've done the plates and so on, then really you've just got the bigger items to do, like **6.** the, erm, thing – the thing you use for grating cheese – saucepans, big spoons, big cutlery, and then the odd items to do. Not like the big... maybe jars and things. [Pause] So, I try and do the rest of it as quickly as I can, erm, all the things I've just mentioned, I put them... I drain... I sort of rinse them and then put them on the drainer. If I've got extra, **7.** then I tend to... er, put... er, I tend to put it on a, on a plastic tray by the side of... the sink, just to get dry; er, and I might even dry that up afterwards, so it doesn't look like a mess, there's still a mess there.

8. “So, erm, I've done all the... the bigger items, then I've got the cutlery – and I do have a special routine for cutlery as well, uh, what I... what I do there is, first of all I take all the knives out – like maybe six or seven knives, hold them in my left hand, pick them out of the left-hand sink, hold them all together and wash them in the right-hand sink, in the water, one by one, individually with the sponge – just really quickly go, take the dirt, the bits of food and grease off it, off them, then, hold them, holding them all together, I rinse them in the left-hand sink, and put them in the cutlery drainer. Then I do the same with the forks; er, then I follow the same pattern with the, with the spoons – like cereal spoons, bigger spoons. And finally just the small spoons; teaspoons – and there's usually loads of these for some reason, so I will, um, do maybe two lots of the teaspoons. And everything's rinsed; everything is nice and clean, hopefully – as far as I know.”



b) Discourse markers such as “erm” are like verbal punctuation. They give us the chance to pause for breath before continuing our speech – without letting another person interrupt. How many of these discourse markers can you find?

c) Match the 8 features of speech below to the highlighted parts of the text:

- a) Using a personal term, e.g. slang
- b) Grammatical error
- c) Self-correction
- d) Changing a word for a more suitable synonym
- e) Long rambling sentence with too many clauses
- f) Grasping for what to say next
- g) Using incorrect or unsatisfactory vocabulary
- h) About-turn – stop and change direction

d) Where possible, find another example of each in the text.

Glossary

washing-up liquid:

detergent that makes water soapy

the “It's all gravy” phase:

part of the process which is easy to do

suds:

the bubbles that are made by the detergent

to rinse:

to run water over sth to remove the bubbles

drainer:

the rack where plates, etc. stand to drain

cutlery:

knives, forks, spoons, etc.

3 Reading

a) We asked the same person to **write** a description of doing the washing-up. Compare an extract from the written version with paragraph 3 of the transcript. What do you notice?

Then all I'm left with is the big stuff, like the saucepans and large baking trays, or awkwardly-shaped stuff, like the cheese grater and various plastic jugs. I deal with these quickly in the water, which by now is getting a bit dirty. If there is a lot of washing-up I will drain the sink and refill it with fresh water before continuing with the heavy items. I might use a metal scouring pad to clean the saucepans, depending on how encrusted with grease and bits they are...

b) Rewrite paragraph 1 of the transcript by removing the pauses (erm, um, etc.) and correcting the errors (as in question 4). Read it aloud. What is the difference from the original version?

c) Discuss the following questions with your partner:

- What kind of person do you think the speaker is? What can you tell about their personality, background, age, income, education, etc. from how they speak and what they say? Give reasons.
- What is *your* spoken English like? Do you leave long pauses? Do you make mistakes? Does a flood of words rush out or do you umm a lot? Do you talk in well-structured sentences? Why? / Why not?

4 Writing

Summarise how the person in the text does the washing-up into a step-by-step list of instructions using **imperative form**, for example: **1. Run the hot water...**

5 Re-order the steps for changing an ink cartridge in a printer:



- ___ Follow the instructions for calibrating the new ink cartridge
- ___ Fit the cartridge into the holder
- ___ Open the ink cartridge box
- ___ Buy a new ink cartridge which is suitable for your printer
- ___ Press it to make sure that it's securely in place
- ___ Open the front of the printer
- ___ Remove the outer packaging that surrounds the cartridge
- ___ Close the front of the printer
- ___ Wait for the cartridge holder to move to the right-hand side
- ___ Take off the plastic strip that covers the bit where the ink comes out
- ___ Switch on the printer
- ___ Take the cartridge out of the box

6 Interview

a) Your partner interviews you as you describe doing a boring everyday task, e.g. **making breakfast** or **brushing your teeth**. Record it. Try to make the steps as detailed as possible. Your partner could pretend to be an **alien**, who has no experience of this activity and needs to find out a lot of information. Here are some questions you could use:

- How often do you do it?
- Why do you do it?
- Do you enjoy doing it? Why? / Why not?
- How did you learn to do it?
- What would happen if you didn't do it?
- What do you think about while you're doing it?
- Do you have a fixed routine or do you do it a different way each time?
- Can you describe to me in detail what you do, step by step?



b) Change roles and repeat the activity. Then each student writes a transcription of part (or all) of their partner's audio. Study it for speech markers and features of speech as in question 4. Give your partner advice for improving their speaking skills. They then read it again, but without the pauses and errors.

7 Sentence Blocks – Imperative Form

- First, fill the sink with hot water. [what x2, when]
- Wash the glasses in hot soapy water. [where, what x2]
- Next, rinse each plate in the left-hand sink. [what, where]
- Put the forks into the cutlery drainer. [where, what]

1 Speaking Game – No Umming and Ahhing Allowed!

Extension:

A group of SS sit in a circle. One student begins talking about a boring task, but the moment they umm or pause for longer than two seconds the student on their left-hand side has to continue talking. The teacher is timing each student with a stopwatch, and the winner is the student who can continue talking for the longest!

2 Reading

b) If you count up all the pauses marked by “er”, “erm”, “uh”, and “um” the total number is: 19. There are other discourse markers in the transcript too, where the speaker pauses for breath, or to consider what to say next, for example:

Line 1: “just a, a little squirt” – the speaker repeats a word to give himself time to think of the next phrase. This occurs again later in the transcript: “put it on a, on a plastic tray...” and once again: “with the, with the spoons...”

“so” – the speaker uses this word as a discourse marker, rather than as a conjunction with its proper meaning

“yeah?” and “yep?” – the speaker is checking that the listener is still following what he is saying

“...” this punctuation mark with three dots, called the ellipsis, is used to indicate a short pause in speech

“ – “ the dash is also used to indicate a short pause

[*Pause; clears throat*] there are a couple of times in the transcript when a pause is clearly marked. On the first of these occasions the speaker pauses to clear his throat, i.e. to cough; to clear any phlegm from his mouth so that he can speak more clearly

If we count all of the pauses in the transcript, we can say that the speaker paused 43 times in total. And perhaps there were other pauses which weren't recorded in the transcript.

c) The answer are as follows:

- | | |
|---|-------|
| a) 4. | e) 8. |
| b) 5. (It should be: “I can do it really quickly.”) | f) 7. |
| c) 3. | g) 6. |
| d) 2. | h) 1. |

d) Answers will vary.

3 Reading

a) Answers will vary, but there are several key differences between the transcript and the written version. In the written version:

- there are no pauses
- there are no grammatical errors
- classic grammatical structures are used properly, e.g. first conditional: “If there is... I will...”
- the vocabulary is richer, e.g. *awkwardly-shaped* and *encrusted with grease*
- the paragraph is better ordered and follows a more logical structure
- we read what the individual wanted to present – an edited version of their thoughts – rather than a transcript of their improvised rambling speech

b) Answers will vary. Here is an example of a rewritten “tidied-up” version of paragraph 1:

"I start to run the hot water and add some washing-up liquid, but not too much. Just a little squirt. I will perhaps run some cold water to make an effective lather. When it's half full I begin washing the glasses and rinse each one under the hot water, which is still running in the left-hand sink. This is to wash off the soap, because the glasses come out really soapy. After I have finished rinsing a glass, I place it carefully onto the top drainer. There shouldn't be any suds on it..."

Extension: SS could continue rewriting more of the transcript, or all of it.

c) Answers will vary.

4 Writing

Answers will vary. Here is an example summary of the steps outlined in the transcript:

1. Run the hot water
2. Add a little washing-up liquid
3. Run some cold water to make the lather
4. Wash the glasses
5. Rinse the glasses under the tap on the left-hand side
6. Wash and rinse the cups and mugs
7. Wash and rinse the saucers and plates and put them on the drainer
8. Wash and rinse the larger items and put them on the drainer
9. If there are too many items for the drainer, put the extra ones on a tray by the side of the sink
10. Wash the cutlery, starting with the knives
11. Wash and rinse the forks, spoons, and teaspoons and put them in the cutlery drainer
12. Dry up the extra items on the tray, if there are any

5 Writing

This is the correct order:

1. Buy a new ink cartridge which is suitable for your printer
2. Open the ink cartridge box
3. Take the cartridge out of the box
4. Remove the outer packaging that surrounds the cartridge
5. Take off the plastic strip that covers the bit where the ink comes out
6. Switch on the printer
7. Open the front of the printer
8. Wait for the cartridge holder to move to the right-hand side
9. Fit the cartridge into the holder
10. Press it to make sure that it's securely in place
11. Close the front of the printer
12. Follow the instructions for calibrating the new ink cartridge

Extension: SS could put the instructions into different tenses, e.g. if you describe how you did it in the past, you could say: "I bought a new ink cartridge... I opened the ink cartridge box..." etc. Or if you want to describe how you are planning to do it in the future, you could say: "I'm going to buy a new ink cartridge..." and so on. SS could also do this for the step-by-step instructions that they create in question 6.

6 Interview

Tip: SS should try to imagine doing the activity in slow motion, so that every movement is examined and noted. For example, if you want to describe brushing your teeth, you could say: "I pick up my brush with my right hand; hold it up, then pick up a tube of toothpaste with my left hand, and open the top with my right hand. Then I press the middle of the toothpaste tube so that a pea-sized amount of toothpaste comes out. I connect this toothpaste with the waiting brush head..." and so on. SS could even film themselves doing this kind of mundane activity and use the video to find out and write down exactly what they do. The aim is to analyse in detail activities that we normally do without thinking about them.

7 Sentence Blocks – Imperative Form

Note: parts of the text *in italics* will vary. SS should use their own ideas:

1. First, fill the sink with hot water. (imperative form)

What should I do first? / Fill the sink with hot water. / Should I fill the sink with hot water first? / Yes, you should. / Should I *make a cup of tea* first? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't *make a cup of tea* first. / So...

What should I fill with hot water? / The sink. / Should I fill the sink with hot water? / Yes, you should. / Should I fill the *bath* with hot water? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't fill the *bath* with hot water. / So...

When should I fill the sink with hot water? / First. / Should I fill the sink with hot water first? / Yes, you should. / Should I fill the sink with hot water *last*? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't fill the sink with hot water *last*. / So...

2. Wash the glasses in hot soapy water. (imperative form)

Where should I wash the glasses? / In hot soapy water. / Should I wash the glasses in hot soapy water? / Yes, you should. / Should I wash the glasses in a *cool mountain stream*? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't wash the glasses in a *cool mountain stream*. / So...

What should I wash the glasses in? / In hot soapy water. / Should I wash the glasses in hot soapy water? / Yes, you should. / Should I wash the glasses in *sparkling mineral water*? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't wash the glasses in *sparkling mineral water*. / So...

What should I do with the glasses? / Wash them in hot soapy water. / Should I wash the glasses in hot soapy water? / Yes, you should. / Should I *throw the glasses in the nearest bin*? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't *throw the glasses in the nearest bin*. / So...

3. Next, rinse each plate in the left-hand sink. (imperative form)

What should I do next with the plates? / Rinse each plate in the left-hand sink. / Should I rinse each plate in the left-hand sink next? / Yes, you should. / Should I *put each plate in the cupboard* next? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't *put each plate in the cupboard* next. / So...

Where should I rinse each plate? / In the left-hand sink. / Should I rinse each plate in the left-hand sink? / Yes, you should. / Should I rinse each plate *in the River Thames*? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't rinse each plate *in the River Thames*. / So...

4. Put the forks into the cutlery drainer. (imperative form)

Where should I put the forks? / Into the cutlery drainer. / Should I put the forks into the cutlery drainer? / Yes, you should. / Should I put the forks *into the fridge*? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't put the forks *into the fridge*. / So...

What should I put into the cutlery drainer? / The forks. / Should I put the forks into the cutlery drainer? / Yes, you should. / Should I put *the plates* into the cutlery drainer? / No, you shouldn't. You shouldn't put *the plates* into the cutlery drainer. / So...

About Talk a Lot Intermediate Book 2

The aim of any Talk a Lot course is for students to practise and improve their speaking, listening, and pronunciation skills. Along the way the student will learn plenty of new vocabulary – including non-literal English expressions, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, and slang – and also practise reading, writing, and grammar skills, e.g. verb forms, word order, parts of a sentence, and so on.

This two-page spread provides an organised sequence of learning activities for students at intermediate level

(CEF B2). We believe that there is easily enough material here for a 90-minute lesson. Of course, how long the material lasts will depend on a variety of factors, such as the level of your students, and how familiar they are with Talk a Lot techniques. If you used extension activities, you could make the material last much longer.

Although many of the activities in this book can be used without having previously studied with Talk a Lot material, e.g. the reading comprehension tests, this is the second Talk a Lot Intermediate course book and the author has assumed that students will have some prior knowledge of Talk a Lot methodology, e.g. knowing how to make sentence blocks, and how to find the stressed syllables and sounds in a word or phrase; or how to read the New English Alphabet. If you or your students feel a bit lost with some of this material, you may practise the techniques with any of the previous Talk a Lot course books:

Talk a Lot Elementary Books 1-3

Talk a Lot Elementary Handbook

Talk a Lot Foundation Course

Talk a Lot Intermediate Book 1

All of these books – and much more – may be downloaded for free from <http://purlandtraining.com>

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