



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 114

TOPICS

American cities: Boston; vanity license plates, to make a difference versus to make the difference, lame, devil's advocate

GLOSSARY

New England – the northeastern part of the United States; the states of Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont

* New England is beautiful in the fall, when the leaves on the trees are changing color.

founded – established; created; begun; initiated

* Willamette University was founded in 1842 and is the oldest university in the western United States.

massacre – the way that many people are killed in a violent way

* What do you think other countries should do about the massacre in that country?

East/West Coast – the eastern and western parts of the United States, next to the Pacific (West Coast) and Atlantic (East Coast) Oceans

* She grew up in California on the West Coast, but then she moved to Maryland to work on the East Coast.

accent – a person's way of pronouncing words, often showing where he or she is from

* Some people from other countries think it is difficult to understand the U.S. southern accent.

ancestor – the relatives who came before oneself; the family members who lived earlier

* My ancestors include my grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great grandparents.



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license plate – a flat, rectangular piece of metal with letters and/or numbers, placed on the front and back of one's car as identification

* The man was driving very dangerously, so we wrote down his license plate number and called the police.

vanity – too much pride in oneself; having too high an opinion of one's beauty, accomplishments, or wealth

* Do you think it's vanity that makes him think that every woman he meets is in love with him?

to register (a car) – to officially let the government know the type of car that one owns; to officially record with the government one's ownership of a car

* How much do you have to pay to register your car in Wisconsin?

motto – a phrase that guides a person or organization through life; a phrase that indicates how people in an organization should behave and what they believe in

* The University's motto is, "not unto ourselves alone are we born," meaning that people should help others.

to make a difference – to do something that is important and has a positive impact on other people's lives or on the outcome of something

* Crystal joined the Peace Corps because she wanted to make a difference and help people in other countries.

to make the difference – to do something that influences something else; to do something that is the deciding factor in how another thing will happen

* His hard work made the difference in our being able to finish the project on time.

lame – socially inept; unable to understand what is happening in a social situation; not socially acceptable; not able to participate in a social situation

* His idea was so lame that everyone started laughing when he suggested it.

devil's advocate – a person who expresses an unpopular opinion just to get the group to discuss an issue

* If all of the members of a team agree quickly, then it's a good idea for one person to be the devil's advocate and propose the opposite idea, so that everyone discusses it thoroughly.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

The Bostonians by Henry James

Henry James was a famous American “author” (writer). In 1886, he published one of his most famous novels, The Bostonians. A “Bostonian” is a person who lives in Boston, Massachusetts.

The novel begins when a woman named Olive takes her cousin, Basil, to a political meeting in Boston. There they hear a woman named Verena giving a “feminist” (relating to women’s rights) speech. Olive is “fascinated” (very interested) by Verena and her ideas. Basil is very “conservative” (traditional, with old-fashioned ideas) and doesn’t like Verena’s ideas, but he, too, is fascinated by the woman.

After the meeting, Olive “convinces” (persuades, or gets someone to do or believe something) Verena to live in her home where they can study feminism together. Basil returns to his home in New York, but he often returns to Boston, trying to “win the affections” (get someone to fall in love with oneself) of Verena. Will Basil win Verena’s heart? Will Olive, Verena, and Basil be happy? You’ll have to read the book to find out.

The Bostonians is interesting because it “illustrates” (shows through art) the “feminist movement” (the period of the time when women fought for more rights and greater freedoms) in America in the late 19th century. “Critics” (people who share their opinions about whether books are good or bad) of the time didn’t “receive” (respond to) the book well, but later critics are more “appreciative of” (willing to say something nice about) James’ novel. This book was the last one in which James made politics such an important topic.



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 114.

This is English Café episode one-one-four (114). I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

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Our topics for this Café are the City of Boston – we've been talking about different cities and states here on the Café; we're going to talk about one of the oldest and most famous cities in the U.S., Boston, Massachusetts. We're also going to talk about vanity license plates, what they are and why people have them. As always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

We begin this Café talking about the City of Boston. Boston is in the state of Massachusetts; Massachusetts is in an area of the country we call New England. New England is in the northeast part of the U.S. Boston is the largest city in New England; it's also one of the oldest cities and most historic cities in the U.S. Many important events in American history, especially in our early history, took place in the City of Boston.

Boston has a population of about six million people. If you live in Boston, you're called a "Bostonian." If you live in St. Paul, where I'm from, you're called a "St. Paulite." If you live in Minneapolis, Minnesota, you're called a "Minneapolisite." Every city has its own way of indicating what you call the person or people who live there. In Los Angeles, we're called "Angelenos."

Boston is a very popular tourist site, especially for American visitors. Boston was founded in 1630. When we say something was "founded," we mean it was started. The "colonists," the people who were coming over from England, founded the city. It was an extremely important city during the American Revolution – the revolution against Great Britain when America separated itself and became the United States of America. You may know that happened in the late 18th century; our Declaration of Independence was in 1776, and there was a war that followed that.



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Two events that all Americans schoolchildren learn about when they study the American Revolution are the Boston Massacre and the Boston Tea Party. A “massacre” (massacre) is when many people are killed. This was an event – the Boston Massacre – that took place where some British soldiers had killed some of the colonists who didn’t want them there. The Boston Tea Party was a protest against British taxation of tea. The British needed to raise money, that is they needed to get more money from the American colonies in the 18th century so they increased the taxes including putting a tax on tea, and as a protest some of the Bostonians took tea and dumped it into the harbor. When we say they “dumped” it, we mean they threw it out – they threw it into. And this was called the Boston Tea Party, sort of a comical, humorous description of what happened, but a very serious one. Boston was also the “site,” or the location, of some famous battles during the American Revolution, including the Battle of Bunker Hill.

Boston’s very rich history includes first public school in the United States. It is also the home – or at least, very close to Boston – of the first college, Harvard College, which was started in 1636. We now call it Harvard University. It’s actually not in Boston; it’s in a city next to Boston called Cambridge. Boston had the first subway system in the United States, and had the first big public park in the United States: the Boston Common and Public Garden.

When you ask Americans what they associate with Boston, they will, of course, say the history of Boston. The American Revolution is something that most Americans know about, they study about it in school. If you visit Boston, you can see some of the famous buildings. There’s a little trail, it’s called – a route, a path – that you can take that connects some of the most important historical sites in Boston; it’s called the Freedom Trail. It includes the old government building, what’s called the State House, and other famous buildings from the American Revolution.

When you ask Americans about Boston, they will probably also think about the particular accent that people have in Boston. Especially in the eastern United States the accents can be very different from place to place – from city to city. This is less true in the western United States. But in the eastern part of our country, the oldest part, where people were often separated because of the lack of transportation – easy transportation between cities and towns – you will hear some very distinct accents. The New York accent, for example, is very different than the Boston accent, and even in Boston, there are different parts of the city where you will hear different accents. Part of this is because, as I say, of the separation historically. The famous river that goes through Boston, the Charles



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River, still separates different groups in terms of their accent. Now, that's become less and less in recent years, but you can still notice some of those differences, especially if you're from Boston.

Boston is also famous for its education – the educational institutions in Boston or in the Boston area. I mentioned Harvard College, which is now Harvard University, often considered the best or one of the top two or three schools – universities – in the U.S., perhaps one of the best in the world. In addition to Harvard University, which is located next to Boston in the City of Cambridge, you also have the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which most people called simply by its initials, M.I.T. Some of the most famous scientists have studied and work at M.I.T. Boston has other colleges and universities as well: Boston University and Boston College are two other institutions, and there are several others. In fact, there are close to a quarter of a million students in the Boston area.

Boston is famous, in addition, for its population, especially during the 19th century. Boston was one of the first places that the Irish immigrants arrived to in the 19th century, when there was economic and political problems in Ireland during the middle of the 19th century. Many Irish people “emigrated,” they left Ireland, and “immigrated,” or came to the United States. And Boston was one of the first places that they came, because Boston is on the coast, and so ships will arrive there, in Boston. My ancestors, the first McQuillans who came from Ireland to the United States back in 1840 arrived in Boston.

Boston has a very large Irish American population. Even today, the Irish American population is very important in Boston and in the State of Massachusetts. Some of our most famous politicians, such as John F. Kennedy and other famous politicians, come from Boston – come from the Massachusetts area. The Irish were very important in politics in many cities in the U.S. The other area where the Irish tended to have a lot of influence was in the Catholic Church. Even now, many of the most important “bishops,” leaders of the Catholic Church, in the U.S. are Irish Americans; their ancestors came originally from Ireland.

Boston has a couple of other interesting immigrant groups; there were also many Italians who came over. There were also a lot of French Canadians, as well as Russian and Polish Jewish settlers who came to Boston. Each of these groups went into its own area – its own neighborhood. I remember when I visited Boston many years ago – 20 years ago or so – and we went to different neighborhoods in Boston. The North End neighborhood is the Italian neighborhood, and you can



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still get some very good Italian food there, at least American Italian food. The Irish were most popular in the south part of Boston, South Boston it's called. So you can still find these different neighborhoods, especially in many of our older cities, the cities on the East Coast – on the eastern side of the U.S.

The final thing most Americans know about Boston is its baseball team, the Boston Red Sox. "Sox" is spelled "S O X," not "S O C K S," just for the team – the baseball team. Normally we spell it "S O C K S," but when we're talking about the Boston Red Sox, it's spelled "S O X."

The Boston Red Sox are one of the oldest baseball teams in the United States. In fact, the "baseball park," the place where they play baseball in Boston is called Fenway Park. It was built in 1912, and is the oldest sports stadium still used in the United States. It was used just a few weeks ago when the Boston Red Sox were in the National Championship of baseball, what we call, somewhat inaccurately, the World Series. Of course, it's not the world, it's the United States, but some Americans think they are the world! Boston won the World Series this year; they also won it three years ago, in 2004. So, the Boston Red Sox have the best baseball team in America, and they are very proud of their baseball team in Boston.

If you want to visit Boston, I suggest you visit during the summertime or through September; after that, it tends to get very cold in Boston, as it does in most of the northern cities in the U.S. Boston is one of my favorite cities that I have visited, and perhaps someday you'll have a chance to visit as well.

Our second topic today is license plates. "License plates" are the things that you put on the front or back of your car that have letters and numbers that identify your car. In the United States, license plates are done by each individual state, so every state has its own license plates. If you live in California, you have to "register" your car with the State of California and get California license plates. Minnesota has its own; every state has its own license plates. You have to pay a tax each year in order to get your license plates or keep your license plates.

What's interesting about license plates in the U.S. is that each state has its own design, so every state will have a different looking license plate. When I was child, we would take trips around the U.S., driving in our car. We played a game where we tried to identify the state of the license plate of the cars that were driving by us. In California, for example, the license plates are white, but a few years ago, the license plates were all blue, and before that, the license plates in California were brown. So states change the colors; they change the designs –



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the way that the license plate looks. Most license plates have a state “motto,” or state saying, on them. For example, Minnesota license plates used to have – and probably still do have – the words “Land of 10,000 Lakes,” because that’s something that Minnesota is famous for.

“Vanity license plates” are what some people call “personalized plates.” “Vanity” is usually a negative term. If you are “vain,” you are very concerned about your own appearance; you’re always worried about how you look, you’re always looking in the mirror, checking your hair – something I do almost every day! That’s the definition of the word “vanity.” Well, a “vanity license plate” is a plate that you get your specific numbers or letters – you can ask for certain numbers or letters. You have to pay extra – you have to pay additional money to get these special plates, and most states allow you to do that. In some states it’s very popular. Here in California, for example, there are many people who have these vanity plates.

Many people try to put something on the license plate that identifies them. If you are familiar with text messaging on cell phones, you know that people try to save time and space by creating abbreviations for things. This also happens on vanity plates. So you’ll be driving down the street here in Los Angeles, and you’ll see someone’s license plate that is a vanity plate, the first thing you try to do is figure out what it says. Usually there’s some sort of funny message or something that identifies the person in the car. Because you only have six or seven letters and numbers however, you have to abbreviate words – you have to spell the word with fewer letters than it normally has. For example, one license plate I saw said “old” (old) and then “A C T R.” Well, when you look at that, most people would recognize that second word as “actor,” but because you only have a small space you have to make the word shorter, and that happens with vanity license plates. So, if you come to the U.S., or live in the U.S., and you want a special license plate, now you can get it – in most states – if you want to pay a little extra money.

Now let’s answer a few of your questions.

Our first question comes from Vladimir (Vladimir) in Toronto. Vladimir wants to know the difference between the expression “to make a difference” and “to make the difference.”

“To make a difference” means to influence something – to influence a result or to influence other people, to change a situation, usually to have a positive impact. What you’re doing is making something or someone better. Many university students, when they think about what they want to do for the rest of their life say,



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“I want to make a difference,” meaning I want to give something positive to other people or in some situation that needs it.

“To make the difference” usually is used to talk about between one thing and another thing. “To make the difference” is to be the most important thing, the most influential thing. We might also say “to be the deciding factor,” that is the thing that helps you decide one way or another. For example: “What will make the difference between succeeding and failing is how much time we spend on this project” – what will make the difference between succeeding (being successful), and failing (or failure). That’s an example of the use of “to make the difference” between something and something else.

Huang (Huang) from China wants to know the meaning of the expression “lame” (lame). For example: “This television show is really lame.”

“Lame” is an informal expression that has become popular in the last 15 or 20 years. It means stupid, dumb, maybe not interesting, something that is very poorly done. For example, you go to a party and you say to your friend, “This party is really lame” – it’s really boring, it’s really dull, it’s not very interesting.

The word “lame” has another meaning in English as well; it’s used for people who cannot walk because they’ve had some sort of illness or injury, usually something wrong with their feet or their legs. So, if someone is “lame,” they could also be someone who has difficulty walking, but the most common informal use means something that is boring or dull or stupid. I hope that our podcasts are never considered lame!

Finally, Mohammed (Mohammed) from Bahrain wants to know the meaning of the expression “the devil’s advocate.”

“Advocate” is another word for a lawyer, an attorney, or someone who is in favor of some position. You could say, “I’m an advocate for the environment,” meaning I try to help the environment by doing things politically or otherwise. The “devil” is the character from Christian religion that is the evil force in the world – it’s the bad force in the world. The devil is often represented in the movies or in television as someone who wears red because the devil lives in hell, and the idea is that in hell – the popular idea about hell is that it is a place of fire. So if you’re a bad person, when you die you could go to this very bad place called hell. The devil is sort of the leader of hell.



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Well, “devil’s advocate” really is not related to being an evil or bad person. A “devil’s advocate” is someone who argues the other side of the issue, not because they believe that issue but because they want to have a more meaningful discussion. A “devil’s advocate” is a person who tries to find problems with someone else’s opinion or views in order to make those views better or those problems less important. For example, if I wanted to quit my job here at ESL Podcast and become a professional singer, Lucy might try to convince me by playing devil’s advocate. Notice we use the verb “to play.” “I’m going to play devil’s advocate,” meaning I don’t necessarily believe what I’m going to say, but I want us to think about the other possibilities. You may have a good idea, and I’ll say, “Let me be the devil’s advocate,” or “let me play devil’s advocate and ask you some questions about some problems with your idea.” So, that’s the idea of a “devil’s advocate.”

If you have a question that you’d like us to try to answer on the Café, email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com. We don’t have time to answer all of your questions, but we will try to answer many of them.

From Los Angeles, California, I’m Jeff McQuillan. Thanks for listening. We’ll see you next time on the English Café.

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