



ESL Podcast 1040 – Dealing with Bureaucracy

GLOSSARY

contract – a legal agreement between two or more people, groups, or businesses

* Which company got the contract for that bridge construction project?

two-edged sword – something that has advantages and disadvantages; something that is good and bad at the same time

* Getting accepted into college was a two-edged sword, because although Kelly was really excited, now he has to figure out how to pay the tuition.

to jump through hoops – to perform many small tasks, especially if they are somewhat difficult, to fulfill the requirements of someone or something

* Applying for citizenship is a long process, and sometimes all this paperwork makes it feel like we're jumping through hoops.

bureaucracy – a system of government that involves many people participating in complex processes and following complex procedures, especially involving a lot of paperwork

* The Internal Revenue Service is a huge bureaucracy, so it can be hard to find someone who can directly answer complicated tax questions.

to pull (one's) hair out – to be extremely frustrated and annoyed

* If I had to teach a classroom of 30 five-year-old children, I'd be pulling my hair out!

in triplicate – with three copies of everything or of every page of a document

* We have to submit the proposal in triplicate, with one copy for the case manager, one copy for the committee, and one copy for their archives.

to the letter – exactly; precisely; following instructions perfectly

* Manuel is a careful driver who follows the laws to the letter, never speeding or failing to stop at a stop sign.

verbiage – wording, especially text that uses too many words, and many complicated words

* If we delete all the unnecessary verbiage, we can turn this 10-page document into a two-page document.

convoluted – very complex and difficult to understand

* If streets didn't have names, driving directions would be very convoluted.



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to interpret – to perceive and understand in a particular way, possibly different from how other people perceive and understand it

* Jaya was really offended by Pete's comment, but I interpreted it as a bad joke.

to the best of (one's) ability – as well as one can; with maximum effort and good intentions

* Olivia painted the scene to the best of her ability, but she wasn't able to capture the effect of the sun setting behind the mountains.

form letter – a letter that was written earlier and is sent to many people without changing it for each recipient, intended to deal with matters that arise frequently

* Karina almost cried when she received yet another form letter rejecting her manuscript for publication.

to hear back – to receive a response from someone regarding one's inquiry, especially after one has left a message

* Thank you for your application. You should hear back from our hiring manager within two weeks.

to be palmed off – to be passed to another person or department, so that arrangements are made for someone else to deal with something

* You can't keep palming off your responsibilities onto your colleagues like that.

straight answer – a direct, clear, and honest answer

* Give me a straight answer: Are you going to vote for the new law, or not?

red tape – too many requirements to follow procedures and processes and to complete paperwork that seems unnecessary and silly, apparently only slowing things down

* The investment banks don't want to support projects in that country, because there is too much red tape.

sword – a weapon that is like a very long knife, often used for fighting in the past

* After the knight killed the dragon with his sword, he rescued the princess and they lived happily ever after.

to put (one) out of (one's) misery – to kill someone as an act of kindness so that he or she will no longer suffer

* After months of painful surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation, Chuck begged the doctors and his family to put him out of his misery.



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COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. What does Jogi mean when he says that the bureaucracy has him pulling his hair out?
 - a) The bureaucracy requires submitting a sample of hair
 - b) The bureaucracy gave him an illness that causes hair loss.
 - c) The bureaucracy is extremely frustrating.
 2. What communication has Jogi received from the government?
 - a) A mailed letter
 - b) A phone call
 - c) An email
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WHAT ELSE DOES IT MEAN?

to the letter

The phrase “to the letter,” in this podcast, means exactly or precisely, and following instructions perfectly: “Make sure you follow Jim’s directions to the letter or you’re likely to get lost trying to find our farm.” The phrase “the letter of the law” describes the literal meaning of the words in a law, but not necessarily the true intention of the law: “Technically, they stuck to the letter of the law, but their behavior clearly was wrong.” A “dear John letter” is a letter written by a wife or girlfriend to let a man know that she no longer loves him and/or that she is leaving him: “Harold was shocked to come home and find a dear John letter on the kitchen counter.” Finally, in high school, “to letter” in a sport means to receive an award for having achieved a certain level of performance and participation in a team sport: “Blake lettered in football and baseball.”

to be palmed off

In this podcast, the phrase “to be palmed off” means to be passed to another person or department, so that arrangements are made for someone else to deal with something: “Leo’s kids were palmed off onto their grandparents for the weekend, so that he could have a relaxing weekend to himself.” “To palm (something)” means to hide something in one’s hand, especially when stealing or when performing a magic trick: “Did you see that kid palm a candy bar and then walk out of the store?” Finally, the phrase “to palm (something) off on/onto (someone)” means to persuade someone to accept or buy something that is poor quality or that isn’t what he or she really wants: “Did you really think you could palm off that old car on me for thousands of dollars?”



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CULTURE NOTE

The Paperwork Reduction Act

In 1980, the U.S. government “enacted” (made into law) the Paperwork Reduction Act. The law was “prompted” (initiated; brought about) by a recognition that many “federal” (national) “agencies” (departments) were requiring too much paperwork from businesses and individuals. The Act requires government agencies to follow certain procedures if they want to collect information from the public.

Specifically, agencies must identify the purpose of why they are collecting information from the public, as well as a plan for how the information will be used. All forms must include a statement about why the information is being collected, an “estimate” (a good guess about the size or amount of something) of how long it will take to “complete” (fill out) the form, and whether filling out the form is “voluntary” (optional; not required) or “mandated” (obligatory; required by law). When requests are granted, there is usually a 60-day period when members of the public can “comment on” (provide their opinions about) the decision. Each approved form is assigned a “control number” (a number allowing something to be tracked or followed) that has to be renewed every three years.

The Act has made the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) a “clearinghouse” (a building or department where everything must pass through, especially for approval) for all forms issued by the U.S. government. Each year, the OMB “issues” (releases) a report on the “overall” (entire; whole) paperwork burden. In 2009, it found that the federal government placed a paperwork burden of 9.71 billion hours on U.S. citizens and businesses!

Comprehension Questions Correct Answers: 1 – c; 2 – a



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COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 1,040 – Dealing with Bureaucracy.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 1,040. 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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This episode is going to be a dialogue between Jogi and Deborah about having to deal with, or have an interaction with, a large organization. Let's get started.

[start of dialogue]

Jogi: I knew when we got this government contract that it would be a two-edged sword.

Deborah: How so?

Jogi: I'm grateful for the work, but having to jump through hoops of the government's bureaucracy has me pulling my hair out.

Deborah: What's wrong now?

Jogi: You know that all of our documents have to be submitted in triplicate. I anticipated that and had done everything to the letter, or so I thought.

Deborah: I know. I helped you prepare those documents. What's the problem?

Jogi: The documents were sent back to us because they say we didn't follow some of the reporting regulations. But the verbiage in the regulations is so convoluted that I had to interpret them to the best of my ability. I thought I had done everything right.

Deborah: Didn't they tell you what they thought was done wrong when they returned the documents?



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Jogi: All I got was a form letter with no specifics.

Deborah: I suggest calling the office responsible for reviewing the documents and asking someone there.

Jogi: You don't think I've tried? Each time I think I have the right department and leave a voicemail message, either I don't hear back or I get palmed off on another office. I can't get a straight answer to any of my questions. I never expected this much red tape.

Deborah: So I see what you mean about that two-edged sword.

Jogi: I can think of one good use for that sword right now – to put me out of my misery!

[end of dialogue]

This episode is called “Dealing with Bureaucracy.” “Bureaucracy” is a large, usually complicated organizational system, or complicated and complex organization that has a lot of different requirements, often involving what we call “paperwork” – filling out forms, submitting documents, that sort of thing.

Almost every government has a large bureaucracy, a complicated system of offices and departments and “bureaus,” which is just another name for a division of the government. We can also have a bureaucracy in a large company, but usually we associate it with the government and with “inefficiency” – with not being a very fast or efficient way to do something.

This dialogue is about dealing with bureaucracy, and it begins with Jogi saying, “I knew when I got this government contract that it would be a two-edged sword.” A “contract” is a legal agreement, an official agreement, between two people or two organizations, each promising to do something for the other.

Jogi has a contract with the government, but he calls it a “two-edged sword.” “Two-edged” (edged) refers to a knife or some sharp object that is sharp on both sides. A “sword” (sword) is like a large knife that you would use to fight someone or kill someone. The meaning of the phrase, however, is that this is a situation that has some advantages and some disadvantages – some good things and some bad things.

Having a government contract is, according to Jogi, “a two-edged sword,” meaning there are good things about it and there are bad things about it.



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Deborah says, “How so?” “How so?” means “How is it a two-edged sword?” in this case. We use this question “How so?” when we want someone to give us a more detailed explanation. Jogi does that. He says, “I’m grateful” – I’m thankful – “for the work, but having to jump through hoops of the government’s bureaucracy has me pulling my hair out.”

The phrase “to jump through hoops” (hoops) means to have to do many different small, often difficult tasks that don’t seem to have any real purpose, but that are required to get what you want. Government agencies and offices often require that you fill out lots of forms. You give them this piece of paper, you give them this piece of information – it seems like they’re asking you to do a lot of little things that don’t seem necessary.

This would be “jumping through hoops” – having to fulfill or go through a lot of different requirements in order to get what you want. A “hoop” is a circular piece of metal or wood that can be used for lots of different things. We have what’s called a “basketball hoop,” which is the place where you throw the ball through – it’s the round circle that the basketball has to go through in order to score a point. I’m guessing this phrase comes from the activity that you might see at a circus, for example, where they have dogs or other small animals that jump through the circle. They have to jump through these hoops as part of the activity that is supposed to be entertaining, I guess. That’s just a guess. I’m not sure if that’s exactly where we get this expression, but that would make sense. The important thing is that it refers to having to do a lot of small, often seemingly unnecessary things in order to get what you want.

Jogi is talking about jumping through the hoops of the government’s bureaucracy. This has him “pulling his hair out.” “To pull your hair out” means to be very frustrated, to be very annoyed. You’re so frustrated, you’re so mad at a certain situation, that you pull on the hair of your head with your hand so hard that you pull it out.

Of course, you’re not actually pulling out your hair, although I used to teach high school here in the United States – high school students between the ages of 14 and 18 – and I used to have a lot of hair, and now if you see a photograph of me, or a video, you will see that I don’t have any hair. That’s because teaching high school caused me to pull my hair out, it was so frustrating. That’s not true. I like teaching high school, for a while.

In our episode, Jogi doesn’t like having to jump through the hoops of the government’s bureaucracy. Deborah says, “What’s wrong now?” Jogi says, “You know that all of our documents have to be submitted in triplicate.” “Triplicate”



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(triplicate) means three copies of the document. “Tri-” as a prefix means three. So, three copies of every document have to be submitted to the government.

Jogi says, “I anticipated that and had done everything to the letter, or so I thought.” Jogi says he “anticipated that.” He knew that was going to happen, and so he had a plan for it. He thought he had “done everything to the letter.” “To the letter” here means exactly, precisely, the exact way the government wanted him to do it. But at the end of the sentence he says, “So I thought,” meaning that’s what I thought, but obviously that isn’t true.

Deborah says, “I know. I helped you prepare those documents. What’s the problem?” Jogi says, “The documents were sent back to us” – were returned to us – “because they,” meaning the government, “they say we didn’t follow some of the reporting regulations” – some of the rules – “but the verbiage in the regulations is so convoluted that I had to interpret them to the best of my ability.”

“Verbiage” (verbiage) refers to a lot of words, too many words, that are often confusing or unclear. It’s a negative way of describing, in this case, some sort of official document that has lots of different language that doesn’t make a lot of sense. This is something you will often see in a legal document. That’s why we have lawyers – so that they can charge you a lot of money to tell you what it means.

In the case of Jogi, the regulations are, according to him, “convoluted,” or at least the language that the regulations are expressed in is convoluted. “Convoluted” (convoluted) means very complicated, very complex, very difficult to understand. Jogi is trying to interpret, trying to understand, these regulations to the best of his ability. If you say you do something “to the best of your ability,” you mean you’re doing it as best as you can, as well as you can.

Deborah says, “Didn’t they tell you what they thought was done wrong when they returned the documents?” That is, didn’t the government say where you did this wrong and this wrong and this wrong? Jogi says, “All I got” – the only thing I received – “was a form letter with no specifics.” A “form (form) letter” is a letter that is written usually by a government agency or a large company that is sent to a lot of different people with a similar problem. It’s not specifically written for you. It’s a letter they use for lots of different people who have whatever problem you have.

Deborah says, “I suggest calling the office responsible for reviewing,” or looking at, “the documents and asking someone there.” Deborah says well, just call them up. Of course, that doesn’t often work with the government. Jogi says, “You don’t



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think I tried?” meaning I’ve already tried that. I’ve already done that, of course. Jogi says, “Each time I think I have the right” – the correct – “department and leave a voicemail message, either I don’t hear back or I get palmed off on another office.”

Jogi calls what he thinks is the correct office. He leaves a message, but then he doesn’t hear back. “To hear back” means to receive a response from your message – either your email or your telephone message. The phrase “to be palmed (palmed) off” means that you are passed to another person or department. For example, if you go and ask someone a question in a government office and the person says to you, “Oh no, you have to go to that office,” you’re being “palmed off.” You’re being handed to another department.

One of the meanings of this expression is that the person with whom you speak originally doesn’t really want to deal with you, doesn’t want to handle the problem, so they’re going to give you to someone else because they don’t want to do the work. That could be one reason why you are “palmed off.” “Palm” (palm) is the part of your hand that is between your wrist and your fingers – the inside part of your hand.

Jogi says, “I can’t get a straight answer to any of my questions.” A “straight (straight) answer” is a clear, direct, honest answer. Jogi can’t get a straight answer to any of his questions. He then says, “I never expected this much red tape.” The expression “red tape” means a lot of rules and regulations that have to be followed that are required by usually a government organization. These are often considered unnecessary or even silly regulations that you have to follow, rules that somebody created that don’t really have any good purpose.

Deborah says, “So, I see what you mean about that two-edged sword.” Deborah is saying that she understands why Jogi described his government contract as a “two-edged sword,” with pluses and minuses. Jogi says, “I can think of one good use for that sword right now – to put me out of my misery.”

Remember we said a sword is basically a weapon that you can use to cut or kill someone. The expression “to put someone out of his misery” (misery) means to kill someone as an act of kindness, someone who’s suffering. If you have a dog that’s very sick, you might want to put the dog out of its misery. “Misery” is suffering, is pain, so you’re trying to stop the dog from suffering.

Here, of course, Jogi is joking. He doesn’t really want to kill himself. He just wants to no longer suffer the pain of dealing with a bureaucracy.



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Now let's listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

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[end of dialogue]

There's nothing convoluted about our scripts on ESL Podcast, thanks to our wonderful scriptwriter, Dr. Lucy Tse.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again right here on ESL Podcast.

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