

Introduction

Download the LearnEnglish Themes podcast. You'll find more information on this page:
<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-podcasts-themes.htm>

This support pack contains the following materials:

- the article that you can listen to in the podcast
- an optional comprehension activity based on the article
- links to other activities on the LearnEnglish website on this theme (Christmas).

Read the article**Christmas – the Good, the Bad and the Ugly**

by Keith Sands

Christmas is one of those holidays which means very different things to different people.

It can be a spiritual time, a family time, a time for giving, a time for partying or a time for just over-eating... Most people (in those countries where it is the main religious festival of the year) find something to enjoy about Christmas, whether they are Christians or not. But hasn't Christmas in the consumer age become just a bit too big? And a lot too commercial?

I think so. The secret of a good Christmas is to be selective. Here is my personal list of the things Christmas (at any rate, Christmas in Britain) would be infinitely better without. Let's get rid of....

Plastic Christmas trees

Fussy people don't like trees that drop their needles on the carpet. Surely, in the age of vacuum cleaners, this is not a problem any more? Worst of all are those plastic trees that come with their own decorations already attached, so depriving children of the great pleasure of hanging the decorations themselves.

Replace with: Real fir trees, from sustainable forests.

Fairy lights that don't work

We have sent people to the moon. Computers have changed our lives. On the Internet, huge amounts of information travel all over the world at the speed of light. So it shouldn't be too difficult to put a few coloured light bulbs in a row, so they last until New Year without breaking down.

Replace with: Candles. And fireproof fir trees.

Slade's "Merry Christmas Everybody"

A stomping, two-chord song from the dark days

of 1970s rock. Played endlessly in British pubs and on the radio through December. It is the musical equivalent of jumping up and down with heavy boots on and trying to drink beer at the same time. I remember once, at a Christmas party, picking up my can of beer and taking a sip - to find out someone had used the can as an ashtray. And this song is the theme tune of that kind of party.

Replace with: The Pogues and Kirsty MacColl's Fairytale of New York: a great, soulful Christmas song.

**Bing Crosby's White Christmas**

While we're on the subject of Christmas songs, let's not forget that this sentimental 1950s tune is the biggest selling single of all time. It's ideal for falling asleep in an armchair but finally just too nostalgic. And very annoying.

Replace with: Silent Night, a beautiful German carol known all over the world.

Office parties

Doesn't a computer decorated with tinsel, and an office with paper chains hanging from the ceiling, look just a tiny bit depressing? And office

Christmas parties are worse. Under the influence of cheap wine in paper coffee-cups, strange things happen with the photocopier. Rude messages are faxed to clients. Most people can't relax in the office. And those that can will probably do something they'll regret later.
Replace with: an extra afternoon off work.

British Christmas Weather

In Richard Curtis films (like the recent hit "Love, Actually"), it always snows at Christmas in London. The city is covered with a beautiful white blanket, the perfect setting for a romantic happy ending. What's the reality of Christmas weather in the South of England? Grey skies with a good chance of cold drizzle in the late afternoon.
Replace with: Russian Christmas weather.

TV

It's a fact that we spend more time in front of the TV at Christmas than at any other time of year. The TV schedules are filled with old films, comedy "Christmas Specials", soap operas with Christmas-related plots, and of course hundreds of adverts. Switch it off and visit your relatives instead.
Replace with: log fires, board games.

Turkey with Cranberry Sauce

In Britain, the usual Christmas dinner is turkey with cranberry sauce – although ultra-traditionalists may prefer goose. Cranberry sauce is basically a kind of jam. We don't put jam on meat at other times of year, so why at Christmas?
Replace with: No cranberry sauce.

Consumerism

You know what I mean. Adverts for toys on children's TV. Department stores which put out Christmas decorations as early as September. The stress of Christmas shopping. Everywhere the message is spend, spend, spend. Christmas is a Christian religious festival, to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. It's not just an excuse for making money.
Replace with: Midnight carols at church, peace on earth, and goodwill to all men.

So that's my advice. Avoid these things and you'll have a good chance of having a truly Merry Christmas. Which is what I wish you now. And a happy new year.

After reading

Exercise 1

Below are 11 statements about the text. For each one decide if it is True or False.

1. The writer doesn't like Christmas.
2. He doesn't like the commercialisation of Christmas.
3. It's not really difficult to clean up the needles from a real tree.
4. He is impressed by the technology of fairy lights.
5. He doesn't like any Christmas songs.
6. He mentions two kinds of party he doesn't like.
7. He thinks the film 'Love Actually' is realistic.
8. Christmas should be a time for visiting your family.
9. He thinks Cranberry sauce goes well with turkey.
10. He enjoys Christmas shopping.
11. He seems to prefer a rather traditional Christmas.

More activities on this topic

You'll find links to all the following activities connected to the theme of Christmas at:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-themes-christmas.htm>

- **Magazine article: Christmas Past or Christmas Presents.** *“Christmas is a time of many traditions which haven't changed in centuries but its meaning has changed for me as I have got older”.*
- **Word game: Christmas jokes.** Match the questions and answers to get the Christmas jokes
- **Game: Run Santa Run!** In this fun Christmas game, you control Santa, making him jump and duck to avoid obstacles. See how far you can get him to run without getting knocked over!
- **Story: A Christmas Carol.** This story by Charles Dickens is a Victorian morality tale of an old and bitter miser, Ebenezer Scrooge, who undergoes a profound experience of redemption.
- **Story: The Christmas the Lights Went Out :** Five people, whose lives interrelate, live the build up to Christmas in different ways in different places. A sudden blackout changes their lives forever ...
- **Trivia:** Everything you (n)ever wanted to know about Christmas.
- There are also 2 Christmas-related cartoons, a poll and some carefully selected external links.

Answers to comprehension activity:

1. False (F); 2. True (T); 3. T; 4. F; 5. F; 6. T; 7. F; 8. T; 9. F; 10. F; 11. T

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