# More on discourse markers and spoken English

# *Okay*, *OK*

We use *okay* (also spelt *OK*) in informal language. We use it in different ways, as a discourse marker, adjective or adverb.

## *Okay* as a discourse marker

### Agreeing

We use *okay* as a response token to show that we understand, accept, or agree with what someone is saying:

**A:** *I’ll see you at 5 in front of the library*.

**B: *OK***. *See you later*.

**A:** *Why don’t you get a lift with Raviv?*

**B:** *Oh*, ***okay*.**

### Changing topic or closing a conversation

We often use *okay* to show that we are moving on to a new topic or phase of conversation. This is common in situations where we are giving instructions:

***Okay****, let’s get into groups of four now.*

[piano teacher to pupil]

***OK****, right, let’s see. Now, keep that hand ready, so it’s there when you want it.*

We also use *okay* to mark the end of a conversation:

*Right,****okay****, take care of yourself. Bye.*

### Checking understanding

We often use *okay?* to check understanding. We usually put it in end position:

*I know it’s difficult to talk … just nod or shake your head.****OK****?*

*Tie it the opposite way … just like tying a shoelace really,****okay****?*

## *Okay* as an adjective

We often use *okay* as an adjective to say that something is not a problem, it’s ‘all right’:

**A:** *Thanks for helping me out*.

**B:** *That’s* ***OK***. *No problem*.

**A:** *Sorry to keep you waiting*.

**B:** *It’s* ***okay***.

*‘It’s****OK****, just tell me what to do,’ I said. I think I was a bit afraid, but I was trying to sound calm.*

We often use *okay* to talk about our health:

**A:** *How are you?*

**B:** *I’m* ***okay***, *thanks*.

[talking about someone who has been very ill]

*She’s going to be****OK****.*

We use *okay* to say that a situation or state is satisfactory, neither very good or very bad:

*‘What do you think of my plans?’ ‘They’re****okay****,’ Jenny said unenthusiastically.*

## *Okay* as an adverb

*Okay* is used as an adverb in informal speech, meaning ‘all right’, ‘neither well nor badly’:

*Even though I had never slept in a tent, in a sleeping bag or had any experience canoeing, I did****OK****.*

*The Internet was down all morning, but it seems to be working****okay****now.*

# *All right* and *alright*

*All right* is an adjective or adverb.

## *All right* as an adjective

We use *all right* as an adjective after verbs such as *be, feel, seem* or *look*, but not before a noun (predicative adjective). It means ‘well’, ‘OK’, ‘satisfactory’:

**A:** *How are you?*

**B:** *I’m* ***all right***.

**A:** *Is everything* ***all right****?*

**B:** *Yes, fine thanks*.

*Was your meal****all right****?* 🡪 Not: ~~Was it an all right meal?~~

*All right* may be written as *alright*, but *all right* is more common:

*There was an accident and the bus driver was injured, but all the passengers were****alright****.*

## *All right* as an adverb

We use *all right* as an adverb to mean ‘well’, ‘OK’, ‘satisfactorily’:

*Jill is really worried about her driving test, but I think she’s doing****all right****.*

**A:** *Is everything going* ***all right*** *for you these days?*

**B:** *Yes, business is good*.

## *All right* as a discourse marker

We use *all right* to show that we want to begin a new topic or a new action:

***All right****, can we start the music now please?*

We also use *all right* to show that we accept a point of view, or agree with what needs to be done:

***All right****, you have a point but I still think we need to get more advice.*

We can also use *all right* as a question to follow up a statement. This is informal:

**A:** *I think I’ll leave at 5*. ***All right****?*

**B:** *Yes, that’s okay with me*.

# *Well*

*Well* is a discourse marker, adverb or adjective.

***Well* as a discourse marker**

**Spoken English:**

In speaking, we often use *well* at the start of what we say. Its main function is to show that we are thinking about the question that we have been asked:

**A:** *How was your meeting?*

**B: *Well***, *it’s difficult to say. I think they liked our presentation but I am not sure*.

**A:** *How long would it take to drive from Dundee to here?*

**B: *Well***, *let me see. I’d say it would take at least three hours, if not more*.

**Spoken English:**

We can use *well* to show a slight change in topic, or when what we are about to say is not quite what is expected:

**A:** *Have you found a house yet?*

**B: *Well***, *we’ve stopped looking actually. Nadia’s company has offered her another contract and we’ve decided to stay in Edinburgh for another year*.

**A:** *Did you like that book?*

**B: *Well***, *it was interesting, but war stories are not really my favourite*.

We can use *well* when we want to change what we have said slightly, or say something in another way:

*I’m not going on a hiking holiday. I hate walking.****Well****, I hate being out in the cold weather.*

*Fiona is feeling better.****Well****, she’s much better than she was. She’ll be back to work on Monday.*

We can use *well* when we admit or acknowledge that something is correct or true:

**A:** *It’ll take four hours to get to Glasgow*.

**B:** *It’ll take more than that. We’ll have to stop for a break somewhere*.

**A: *Well***, *that’s true*.

**Warning:**

We can use *well* with a rising intonation as a type of question when we want someone to tell us something. In this case, it means *tell me* or *tell us*. Be careful when you use this, as it can sound very direct:

**A:** *There’s something I have to tell you*.

**B:** *What is it?*

**A:** [silence]

**B: *Well?***

***Well?****What did you say to her?*

***Well* as an adverb**

We use *well* as an adverb when something is done to a good standard or in a good way:

*He drives very****well****.*

*I work very****well****late at night.*

We often use *well* before *-ed* forms, often with a hyphen:

*This table isn’t very****well-made****.*

*I like my steak****well-cooked****.* (I like my steak cooked for a long time.)

**A:** *I’ve passed my driving test!*

**B: *Well done***.

*Well* and *good*

*Well* and *good* have a similar meaning, but *good* is not used as an adverb. It is used as an adjective.

**Compare**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *She sings very****well****.* | *well* used as an adverb modifying *sings* |
| *She is a very****good*** *singer.* | *good* used as an adjective modifying *singer* |

***Well* as an adjective**

We use *well* as an adjective, normally after a linking verb such as *be, look* or *get*, to mean ‘in good health’:

**A:** *How are you?*

**B:** *I’m very* ***well***, *thanks. And you?*

*Are you feeling OK? You don’t look very****well****.*

In American English, it is common to use *good* instead of *well* in this context. This is less common in British English:

**A:** *And how’s your mother?*

**B:** *She’s* ***good***. *Thanks for asking*.

# *Actual* and *actually*

***Actual***

*Actual* is an adjective meaning ‘true’, ‘real’ and ‘the thing in itself’. It does not refer to time. *Actual* always comes immediately before the noun it is describing:

*We didn’t go to the****actual****match but we watched it on TV.*

*People think she is over thirty but her****actual****age is eighteen.*

**Spoken English:**

*Actual* is often used in speaking in the expression ‘in actual fact’. It has a similar meaning to ‘in fact’, but it gives more emphasis to what the speaker is saying:

***In actual fact****, her health a year ago was much worse.*

***Actually* as a discourse marker**

**Spoken English:**

*Actually* is often used in speaking as a discourse marker. We use it to indicate a new topic of conversation or a change or contrast in what is being talked about. We also use *actually* to give more detail about a topic. We do not use it to refer to time:

**A:** *I suppose you’re going away this weekend?*

**B: *Actually***, *I am going to stay at home. I’ve got a lot of work to do on the computer*.

[a customer (A) in a large bookshop is asking about books about travel.]

**A:** *Could you tell me where your books on Austria are kept?*

**B:** *What kind of books?*

**A:** *Well*, ***actually*** *I’m looking for a book on skiing in Austria*.

**B:** *Er, yes, they’re in that corner over there*.

***Actually* as contrast**

**Spoken English:**

We can use *actually* to emphasise a contrast with what is expected to be true or real:

*He****actually****admitted that he enjoyed it.* (He was not expected to enjoy it)

**A:** *Where are they now?*

**B:** *They’re very near to your apartment* ***actually***. (They were not expected to be so near)

We can also use *actually* to correct someone politely:

*I think ten people, not eight, came to the meeting,****actually****.*

***Actual* and *actually*: typical errors**

* In some languages *actual* has the meaning of ‘current’ and ‘at the present time’. This is not correct in English:

*The****current****population of the Russian Federation is 230 million.*

Not: ~~The actual population of the Russian Federation~~ …

***At the present time****she is working in London.*

Not: ~~Actually she is working in London~~.

# *In fact*

*In fact* is a discourse marker.

We use *in fact* to add more detailed information to what has just been said:

**A:** *Did she pass her driving test?*

**B:** *Yes, she did;* ***in fact***, *she’s now taking an advanced driving test*.

*In fact* is commonly used in front position in a clause, although in informal situations, it may occur in end position:

*The holiday was really disappointing – a complete disaster,****in fact****. It just rained all the time.*

Other discourse markers which have similar meanings include: *in actual fact, as a matter of fact, in point of fact, actually, in truth*.

# *So*

**Spoken English:**

Especially in speaking, we sometimes use *so* in front position in short responses with reporting verbs such as *believe*, *say, tell, hear, read*:

*She’s the most popular singer.****So****everybody says, anyway.*

**A:** *Janet got the job*.

**B: *So*** *I heard*. (I heard that Janet got the job.)

**A:** *The Council has given planning permission for another shopping centre in the city*.

**B: *So*** *I read in the paper*. (I read that the Council has given planning permission for another shopping centre.)

When we make exclamative responses, we can use *so* as a substitute before the subject and verb *be*, or subject and modal or auxiliary verb:

**A:** *We’re out of salt*.

**B:** *Oh*, ***so*** ***we are****!*

**A:** *Look Mum, I can climb all the way to the top*.

**B: *So*** ***you can!***

***So* as a discourse marker**

**Spoken English:**

*So* is a very common discourse marker in speaking. It usually occurs at the beginning of clauses and we use it when we are summarising what has just been said, or when we are changing topic:

[from a lecture on English literature]

***So****, we’ve covered the nineteenth century and we’re now going to look at all the experiments in the novel in the early twentieth century.*

[discussing whether to eat a pudding or keep it till the following morning]

**A:** *I’m not having it cold in the morning*.

**B:** *Oh*. ***So*** *what sort of pudding is it?*

***So****, what time does the film start?*

***So:* other uses in speaking**

*So far* means ‘up to now’:

***So far****we have kept the news within the family.*

We use the expression *is that so*? in responses to express surprise or suspicion:

**A:** *When I came to the flat all the lights were still on!*

**B:** *Oh*, ***is that so?***

**A:** *Yes*!

**Spoken English:**

We sometimes use *so* in informal speaking to indicate the size or extent of something. We use it in a similar way to *this* and we usually use hand gestures to show the size or extent:

[referring to a valuable diamond in a ring]

*It’s about****so****small.* (or *It’s about* ***this*** *small*.)

We also sometimes use *so* to mean ‘like this’:

*Hold the racket in your left hand –****so****. That’s right.*

In speaking, we also use *so* to intensify words, phrases and clauses. We stress *so*quite strongly. This usage is very common among some younger speakers. It has a meaning similar to *just* or *just like*:

*I’m****so****not interested.*

*That’s****so****Jack. He always behaves like that.* (That’s just like Jack.)

*That is****so****what I don’t want to hear!*

# *Like*

***Like* in spoken English**

In informal speaking, you will hear *like* used very commonly. It has a number of functions. It is important not to use these forms in formal writing such as academic essays.

Filler

We can use *like* to fill in the silence when we need time to think about what to say next or how to rephrase what we have just said:

*I want to …****like****… I think we need to think carefully about it. It’s …****like****… it’s a very difficult decision for us to make.*

Focusing attention

We can use *like* to bring attention to what we are going to say next. We do this especially when talking about quantities and times:

*There were****like****five hundred guests at the wedding.* (*like* brings focus to the large number of guests)

*It wasn’t till****like****12:00 that I actually got to start on the project.* (*like* brings focus to how late it was)

Asking for an example (*Like what?*)

In speaking, we often use *like what?* to ask for an example:

**A:** *Some really funny things happened on the last day of school*.

**B:** *Funny things?* ***Like what***?

It can also be used to ask a question, meaning ‘similar to what?’

[talking about a new restaurant]

**A:** *There was kangaroo steak on the menu. I decided to try it*.

**B:** *Really?*

**A:** *Yeah. It actually tasted good*.

**B: *Like what?***

**A:** *I don’t know. Like steak but softer*.

Softening what has just been said

We can use *like* at the end of what we say to modify or soften what we have just said especially if we are not sure if it was the right thing to say:

[A and B are talking about B’s holiday]

**A:** *So did you buy anything there?*

**B:** *No. It was too expensive*, ***like***.

*I hated the film. It was very violent,****like****.*

# *Look*

***Look as a discourse marker***

We sometimes use *look* as a discourse marker but it needs to be used carefully as it is very strong. We use it when we are explaining something or making a point, especially when we are annoyed or speaking very forcefully:

[in a political debate]

***Look****, too many people have died in this war.*

[a boss talking to an employee]

***Look****, Mark, you have been late for work every day this week. Is there a reason?*

# *Of course*

We use *of course* to refer to things that are obvious or already known to the speaker and listener, or to everybody:

*A tropical climate is,****of course****, very humid, so we sweated all the time.* (We use commas here, before and after *of course*, to show that it refers to the whole of the first clause.)

**A:** *It’s a public holiday – that’s why the shops are closed*.

**B:** *Oh*, ***of course***, *yes! I’d completely forgotten*.

We use *of course* when a situation or piece of information is not surprising:

*Our car broke down on the way to the station so,****of course****, we missed the train and had to buy new tickets. It cost us £80!*

*He’s mega-rich and,****of course****, he can afford to fly first class all the time.*

We use *of course* to mean ‘yes’ when we are giving permission to someone to do something:

**A:** *Can I borrow your newspaper for a minute?*

**B: *Of course***. *Go ahead*.

**Warning:**

We don’t use *of course* when we answer a question and give the listener information they do not already know. This can sound impolite:

**A:** *When you were in London, did you go to any shows?*

**B: *Yes, we did***. *We went to three*.

Not: ~~Of course. We went to three~~. (The listener A may hear *of course* as meaning ‘how could you think we didn’t go to any shows?’ and A may think B felt that A had asked a stupid question.)

# *Adverbs as discourse markers (anyway, finally)*

Discourse markers organise longer pieces of conversation or text. They can mark the openings or closings of conversations, changes in topics, and other functions connected with organising a conversation or text. Most discourse markers belong to the class of adverbs.

***Anyway****, I’ve got to go and pick up the children.* (signals that the conversation is finishing)

***Finally****, we need to consider the broader economic issues.* (signals the last item in a list of points or arguments)

***Right****, now, sorry to keep you waiting.* (signals something new)

***So****you want to go to Spain, do you?* (focuses on a topic)

# *Oh*

***Oh* as an interjection**

We use *oh* as an interjection to express surprise or disappointment:

**A:** *We’re almost out of petrol*.

**B: *Oh****! We’d better find a station*.

**A:** *Amanda is very good on the violin. She used to play in an orchestra*.

**B: *Oh****! I never knew that*.

**A:** *It’s going to cost quite a lot of money to fix the car*.

**B: *Oh***. *What’s wrong with it?*

***Oh* as a discourse marker**

We use *oh* as a discourse marker to respond to new information or to show that we have just discovered something surprising. We often use it with other discourse markers:

*I can’t find the switch.****Oh right****, here it is.*

**A:** *I need to talk to you urgently*.

**B: *Oh okay***. *Do sit down*.

*Oh, that’s …*

We often use *oh* in responses with statements beginning with *that’s*:

**A:** *I tried to book a table at The Quays but they are booked out for Friday night*.

**B: *Oh, that’s a pity***. *We could try that new place, The Corn Market. I’ve heard it’s good*.

**A:** *Some great news. I got the job in Manchester*.

**B: *Oh, that’s wonderful***. *Congratulations*.

*Oh yes* and *oh no*

We often make *oh* more positive by adding *yes*, and more negative by adding *no*:

**A:** *The council has agreed to give us some money for the town festival*.

**B: *Oh yes!*** *That’s great news*.

**A:** *The weather forecast says it’s going to rain tomorrow*.

**B: *Oh no!*** *What a pity*.

*Oh right*

We use *oh right* when we want to acknowledge what has been said and to politely introduce a contradiction:

**A:** *I’ve been trying to phone Joe this morning to get an update. He doesn’t seem to be in his office*.

**B: *Oh right***. *Well, I did see his car in the car park*.

*Oh yeah*

We use *oh yeah* with a rising intonation as a response token when we are listening to and responding to a story. It shows that we are very interested and want the story to continue:

**A:** *So then she decided to tell him what had happened*.

**B: *Oh yeah***.

**A:** *He wasn’t very pleased and then …*

*Oh well*

We use *oh well* to acknowledge that what has been said is disappointing. We often add a suggestion after *oh well*:

**A:** *Liz can’t come so one of us will have to drive*.

**B: *Oh well***. *Let’s just get a taxi between us*.

*Oh dear*

We use *oh dear* to respond to bad news:

**A:** *Veronica’s been in an accident. She’s in hospital*.

**B: *Oh dear***. *What happened?*