

Basics

In *C21 English for the 21st Century*, you have practised speaking alone (for instance, when giving a presentation), in pairs and in groups. In each of these situations, you may sometimes want to change the topic and talk about a different subject. There are many reasons you might want to do this. For example: you may have an important point to make; you may not want to talk about something that has already been covered; or you might feel that the speaker has wandered away from the main point. If you are speaking, you can control the change of topic. If you want to change what someone else is talking about, you might need to politely interrupt them first.

The academic context

In seminars and workshops, when it is your turn to speak, you might want to change the topic that is under discussion. You may also need to find a way to interrupt in order to do that. This gives you the chance to contribute to the dialogue with your own ideas.

Additionally, when you are delivering a monologue (for example, when giving a presentation, talk or lecture) you might want to cover a variety of subjects, so you will need to change the topic here too. It is important to let your audience know what you are doing by explaining the transition (see the Focus box in *C21 English for the 21st Century*, Level 5 Course Book, page 104).

Key features

Whether someone else is speaking or you are speaking, you will use linking phrases which indicate that you want to change topic. These phrases don't have to be very formal, but they should be suitable for your audience. In order to change topic effectively, you can do one or more of the following:

- Be direct:
I'm going to change the subject now ...
- Praise or thank the other speaker:
That's an interesting point. If I can, I'd like to move on to ...
- Apologize for interrupting:
Sorry to interrupt you, but we really need to talk about ...
- Draw a line under something that was said:
On that note, I think it's time we talked about ...
- Use something another speaker said to introduce what you want to say:
Speaking of costs, which you mentioned a little earlier, I'd like to ...

Challenges / difficulties

It can be difficult to strike a balance between being formal and being friendly. The people listening to you will not be entertained if you are too serious and formal – they might even be bored. On the other hand, you don't want people to be angry or offended because they feel you spoke rudely to them, or they feel you are being too familiar or light-hearted. Because of this, choosing the right linking phrase for the situation can be a challenge. In discussions, there may also be people trying to dominate the conversation. It can be hard to choose your moment to speak.

How can I develop this skill?

The Worksheet will give you the opportunity to try out several strategies. Beyond that, the only way to develop is to speak. The more you practise speaking in different situations, the easier it will be for you to change topic effectively.

Learning outcome

When you can change topic effectively, you can take part in discussions and give yourself the opportunity to express your opinions. In addition, when you are delivering a monologue, it will keep the audience interested and on your side.

Theory to practice

1 Look at the beginnings of the sentences and match them to their functions.

- a** 'That's an interesting point, but I think the real issue we need to address is ...'
- b** 'On a totally unrelated point ...'
- c** 'Sorry to break in, but ...'
- d** 'Now, if I may, I'd like to move on to ...'
- e** 'By the way, ...'

Which speaker ...?

- ☐ openly admits that he/she is changing topic
- ☐ casually introduces a completely new topic
- ☐ is most likely giving a prepared presentation
- ☐ recognizes that he/she might appear rude
- ☐ acknowledges what the other person says, but suggests that another topic is more important

2 Make a note of any other phrases (similar to a–e above) that you could use.

Ways to get more practice

When you're watching TV or listening to the radio, or when you're having conversations, be aware of how people change topic. Notice the effect that this has on the other people in the room. Are they happy, or are they angry? Practise using some of the phrases given here and on the Worksheet.

If you need to speak in front of a group of people, remember that your speech should be easy to follow, so being able to **Understand and use signal words and phrases** is important. You can decide how formal or light-hearted your phrases are – this is based on your relationship with your audience. Noticing what works well (and what doesn't work so well) is an important step on the way to becoming a good public speaker.