

A few weeks ago, I went to pick up my son from High School. Usually I park away from the heavy traffic, on the right side of the parking lot, and he meets me there. I usually sit waiting for a few minutes, and catch up with(1) my emails while I wait. This particular day though, I suddenly heard the back of the car open, and a voice say, "Hey Mom, can you help me with this?" I looked back and saw an enormous, brown, wooden tower. Hudson was carrying it, and it was so large that I couldn't even see him. "Wow!" I said, as I jumped out of the car(2). "Let me put the back seats down for you(3), otherwise, it won't fit in the back." I lowered the two back seats of the car, and helped Hudson put his creation from his art lesson in carefully. As we drove home he showed me the gift certificate(4) that he and his team mates had won for building this mini-Eiffel Tower. "Well done, darling," I said. "It's quite a work of art." The night before, he had asked me if I had any extra Christmas lights that he could use for his art project. I gave him some, but didn't ask him about the project. I actually expected it to be some normal, small art project, perhaps something that shows a certain painting technique, or some specific medium, like oil paint, clay, or metal paper. This, however, was much more than I had expected(5). It completely took me by surprise(6). It sits in his bedroom now, and is lit up. I'm considering bringing it downstairs for our Christmas entryway decoration. It'll make a change from a Christmas tree.

1. 'To catch up with my email' this verbal phrase can be used in many contexts. It means to get up to date, or to read the latest emails, to hear the latest news etc.

a. Yesterday I caught up with my bills; thankfully I paid every one on time.

b. Last week I caught up with my best friend. She had a lot of news to tell me.

2. "...as I jumped out of the car." In this part of the podcast, I don't literally mean that I jumped out of the car. In English, we often use a verb such as jump to describe a quick, enthusiastic movement or decision.

a. I jumped to volunteer; I could see that he needed help. (speed)

b. He jumped up from his chair and started to sing. (enthusiasm).

3. "Let me put the back seats down for you." Here in the podcast, I literally mean, " Let me fold down the seats so the project will fit," or "Let me fold down the seats so we can fit your art project in the back of

the car." You can see that these two sentences would be quite long and unnecessary. As in any language, English will often use a shorter version. It is understood that we have to make room in the back of the car for the project, so it is much simpler to say, "Let me + verb for you." If you are helping someone do anything physical, you can just use this phrase instead of going into detail.

a. Let me open the door for you. (to carry the old tv out and to bring the new one in).

b. Let me hold that up for you. (the sofa, while you look underneath for your phone).

4. Gift certificates are a very popular present for all occasions.

a. I got a Starbucks gift certificate for my birthday.

b. Let's buy him a gift certificate to the hardware store.

5. "This was much more than I had expected." I have included this sentence in the grammar notes because it is perfect to learn by heart in order to use it in multiple situations.

a. (Realizing that there is a surprise party for you) "This is much more than I had expected."

b. (Being given the award for excellence by your company) "This is much more than I had expected."

6. "It completely took me by surprise." This is another 'ready made' sentence that you can use in your conversations.

a. The rain storm caught us/got us while we walked home. It completely took me by surprise.

b. He turned up with his luggage at midnight. It completely took us by surprise.