



## Cultural Allusions as Vocabulary Lessons

by [Claire Fisher](#)

One evening in 2018, I wrapped up my homework for a vocabulary-focused MA course and fired up Netflix for a little comfort food in the form of *Star Trek*. As I listened to the [famous opening monologue](#) (“Space: the final frontier”), I suddenly wondered: Was this TV show responsible for introducing the phrase “final frontier” into American English?

### Culture: The Final Frontier

Corpus research demonstrated that the 1966 version of *Star Trek* was, in fact, one of the earliest documented instances of that collocation. Judging by Google Books, its usage has soared since *Star Trek* premiered: the phrase “final frontier” became 500% more popular between 1960 and 2000 (Figure 1). Intriguingly, all pre-1960s instances of “final frontier” that I found used *frontier* in the sense of *border*. However, 21st-century matching strings for “final frontier” almost exclusively refer to outer space. In short, *Star Trek*’s definition for “final frontier” has replaced all other potential meanings.

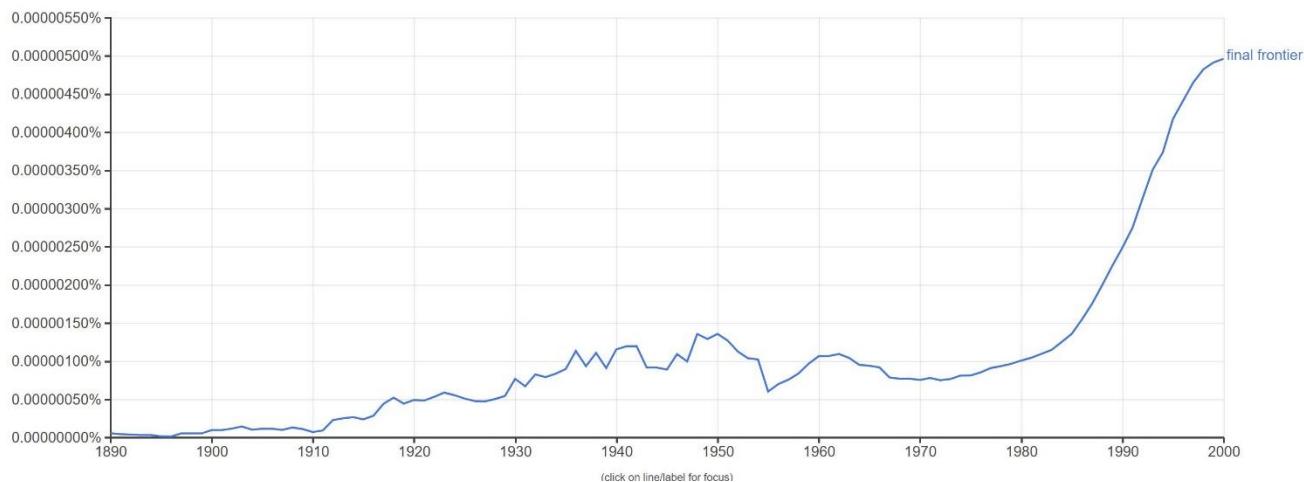


Figure 1. Google Books Ngram Viewer, “[final frontier](#),” 1890–2000.

Digging deeper, I noticed that the pattern of “NOUN, the final frontier” could be found in unexpected places: financial headlines, websites unrelated to *Star Trek*, and even academic journals (see Figure 2).

# Star Fintech: Partnerships, the Final Frontier

Figure 2. Headline from a financial blog. (Pocard, 2016)

“Final frontier” wasn’t alone, either: phrases such as “warp speed” and “beam up” appear everywhere from pot roast recipes to serious news articles (see Figure 3).

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## The Coronavirus Is Forcing Medical Research to Speed Up

What does it mean for science — and public  
health — that scientific journals are publishing  
research at warp speed?

Figure 3. Home page of NYTimes.com, 25 April 2020. (Tingley, 2020)

Would an English language learner understand those texts, if they were unfamiliar with *Star Trek*? Probably not without support.

## When Words and Collocations Become Idioms

Though *Star Trek* was where I began my research, there are dozens of works of fiction that have introduced new words and collocations to the English language. Consider the following list of terms coined within the past 50 years:

Term	Origin
Bucket list (n)	Movie, <i>Bucket List</i> (2008)
Red pill (v)	Movie, <i>The Matrix</i> (1999)
Macgyver (v)	TV show, <i>MacGyver</i> (1985-1994)
Stan (v)	Song, “Stan” (2000)
Go darkside / join the dark side (v)	Movie series, <i>Star Wars</i> (1977-2019)

Looking further back in history, you can find an even greater variety of such phrases, including:

Term	Origin
Chase a white whale	Book, <i>Moby Dick</i> (1851)
Albatross around my neck	Poem, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798)
Down the rabbit hole	Book, <i>Alice in Wonderland</i> (1865)
We’re not in Kansas anymore	Movie, <i>Wizard of Oz</i> (1939)

In every case, the influence of these phrases goes well beyond the original context for which they were coined. In short, these phrases have become idioms. English users who aren’t familiar with them are likely to get lost in certain discourse spaces, especially online. Sooner or later, every student of English will encounter one of these—and when they do, neither textbooks nor dictionaries will help them understand.

So, how can teachers introduce these to our students?

## Suggested Classroom Activities

### 1. Watch Clips Together

Use of authentic media, including films and TV shows, is already popular as a listening exercise. Albiladi et al. (2018) have also shown that learners perceive American movies as a valuable source of both cultural knowledge and new vocabulary. The caveat is, of course, that movies aren’t designed for pedagogical purposes, so teachers must support learners’ understanding of them.

With a bit of preparation, even a clip that uses advanced vocabulary can be a fun addition to a course. I like to start the semester by asking students whether they already enjoy English-language media, and if so, what types? In the process, I’ve discovered secret fans of everything from *Fight Club* to *Dallas*. After getting a sense of the crowd’s preferences, I can find appropriate clips that they will appreciate.

For example, one group expressed interest in knowing “what movies all Americans would know.” Realizing that six lines on the American Film Institute’s [100 Years...100 Quotes list](#) come from *Casablanca*, I decided to teach the film’s final 6 minutes. The worksheet I created (Appendix) activated students’ schema about World War II. Then, the group watched the scene and worked together to figure out the meanings of lines like “we’ll always have Paris,” “round up the usual suspects,” and “this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” We finished the class by imagining conversational situations in which one of these lines might come up. The funniest part was the following week, when some students were late returning from break, and another student said, “I’ll round up the usual suspects!”

A similar lesson, or series of lessons, could be used to introduce the meaning of many idioms on our list, such as “we’re not in Kansas anymore” or “macgyver.”

## 2. Critically Examine a Phrase's Origins

Sometimes, the current meaning of a phrase is quite far removed from the context in which it was coined. In this case, awareness of the concept underlying the metaphor is more important than knowing the source.

“The red pill,” for example, entered the language as a reference to *The Matrix* (1999), in which a man living inside a simulation breaks out into the real world. The phrase “red pill” came to mean “opening your eyes to a fact you’ve been ignoring.” In May 2020, however, Elon Musk tweeted “Take the red pill” and got cursed at by the screenwriter of *The Matrix*.



Figure 4: Lilly Wachowski replies to Ivanka Trump and Elon Musk, 17 May 2020 (Pulver, 2020). *NOTE: This image has been modified to censor possibly offensive language.*

Even people who have seen *The Matrix* might not be able to guess why quoting the movie infuriated its screenwriter. Online, as it turns out, the phrase “red pill” has been coopted by several movements with whom Ms. Wachowski disagrees. The Men’s Rights Movement, for instance, uses it to mean “realizing that feminists are secretly oppressing men.” Among alt-righters, it can refer more generally to opposing government action. In Mr. Musk’s case, he was apparently suggesting that Americans should defy public health orders and reopen businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic (Pulver, 2020).

Learners who practice their English online may encounter these darker meanings of “red pill” long before they learn its more innocuous meaning. A teacher can help by introducing the phrase’s origins and its evolution at the same time. For example:

- Watching the original scene
- Predicting what “take the red pill” means based on its origin
- Checking predictions against the four different definitions provided by UrbanDictionary.com (assuming, of course, that your audience is comfortable with user-provided definitions which may use harsh language)
- Discussing how the first meaning led to the others

- Reading articles about online communities who call themselves “Red Pillers” and debating their significance

This type of discussion could be used for many other phrases that mean something different online than off. For instance, depending on the context, “down a rabbit hole” can mean discovering something unexpected, becoming obsessed with a new hobby, or being swallowed up by a conspiracy theory. The relationships among those definitions could spark a fascinating classroom conversation with advanced students.

### 3. Work With Text Types

Finally, one can combine a cultural vocabulary lesson with a lesson on text types. Byrne & Jones (2018) have pointed out that the verbal captain’s logs delivered throughout each *Star Trek* episode are “more than an expository device...[they] require the Captain to conduct self-analysis.” In other words, Captain Kirk demonstrates reflective self-talk. As many learning journals and assignment reflections prove, some students struggle to get started with that process.

In my intensive English program, every student must assemble a semester portfolio of eight to 12 assignments and write reflections for each one. In the past, students have asked why they can’t simply post their assignment and their grade. So, I decided to explicitly teach the reflection format, using *Star Trek*. This spring, I developed a lesson plan based around clips from the episodes “[The Man Trap](#)” and “[Arena](#).” (Both episodes are available through subscription on Netflix and CBS All Access.) The sequence was as follows.

- Elicit meaning of the words “blog” and “log in.” Ask students to predict what “log” originally meant. Guide them to “a record of everything that happens.”
- Introduce the basic format of a log: date, what happened, why it happened, what’s next.
- Activate knowledge about sci-fi. Point out that the genre uses some made-up words (e.g., *technobabble*).
- Preteach the *technobabble* for Clip 1.
- Have students watch Clip 1 and answer: What happened? Why? What’s next? (Repeat as necessary.)
- Between clips, discuss why a log is an important TV narrative device: It helps the audience catch up if they missed a scene. Connect this with how they can explain their work to an outside grader.

After five clips, we progressed to writing a captain’s log about something we each did that day. In a follow-up lesson, we translated our three questions into questions you can ask about any project:

- **What happened** ⇒ What went well? What didn’t go well?
- **Why** ⇒ What skills did I use? Which ones need more practice?
- **What’s next** ⇒ How can I do better on the next assignment?

Finally, we used this format as a guideline for writing assignment reflections for their end-of-semester portfolios. I noted that, despite the midsemester switch to an online format, there were fewer questions about how to write a reflection or why reflections are useful.

## Conclusion

Because English-language media have contributed idioms to the English language, English learners need to be exposed to influential media artifacts. Using movies and TV to teach vocabulary is an enriching and fun addition to a standard English language curriculum.

## References

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*Claire Fisher is a longtime nerd whose love for language overlaps with her love for books, movies, and television. She has taught ESOL in Massachusetts, New Jersey, and New York and received a master's degree in TESOL at The New School in 2019.*