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**William:** Hello and welcome to another exciting edition of *How To* – my name is William Kremer. Coming up today....

**Man:** He's about fifty, greyish hair, beard... looks a bit like a politician.

**Woman:** Well, he's kind of scary when you first meet him, but he's a really nice guy.

**William:** We're going to be talking about vague language – that is, language that isn't very exact, it isn't very precise. Now in the past, some people have thought vagueness to be a bad thing but actually it's very useful. But it's important to note that vagueness in written English is quite different from vagueness in spoken English – and it's spoken English that we're looking at today.

Let's start by listening to this clip:

**Woman:** Have you had a chance to read the new contract?

**Man:** Yeah I mean it's more or less the same as the last one, but there are one or two bits we should look at.

**William:** The man said that the new contract was *more or less* the same as the old one. In practice, we use *more or less* to mean *almost* - the contracts are more or less the same, they're almost the same. Perhaps more interesting than this is what he says afterwards...

**Man:** Yeah I mean it's more or less the same as the last one, but there are one or two bits we should look at.

**William:** ... *there are one or two bits we should look at*. He's saying that there are one or two *things* in the new contract that need attention. And these words – *bit*, *thing*, also the word *stuff* – they're very vague, we don't know exactly what it is he's talking about; that's a discussion for another time.

**Man:** Yeah I mean it's more or less the same as the last one, but there are one or two bits we should look at.

**William:** That phrase he uses, *one or two bits*, is also vague. There might actually be three or four bits, but by saying *one or two*, the man shows that there are a few things that we need to talk about

Let's now look at another way that we can be vague when we're using numbers...

**Man:** Have we got all the pencils?

**Woman:** Yeah... There's about a hundred in that box and about thirty in that one.

**William:** *There's about a hundred in that box and about thirty in that one*. In fact, there might be slightly more or fewer pencils than this number. Now, as well as saying *about* we can also say *around* ... and we can use these words – *about*, *around* - for counting pencils, or to talk about someone's age –

**Man:** He's around twenty

**William:** Or to give an idea of the time –

**Man:** I leave work at about 5 most days.

**Woman:** Shall we meet at around four?

**William:** I'm sure a lot of you will already know those words, *about* and *around*. But you might not know this next phrase. Listen carefully. How many people work in the man's office?

**Woman** How many people are there, where you work?

**Man:** About fifty-odd, I think.

**William:** How many people work in his office? About *fifty-odd*.

**Man:** About fifty-odd, I think.

**William:** Now, this doesn't mean that he works with 49 strange people! – *odd* is being used here to mean *about*. He works with *fifty-odd* people, about fifty people. Notice how the emphasis falls on the number, not the word *odd*.

**Man:** About fifty-odd, I think.

**William:** Now this word *odd* is perhaps not as useful as *around* or *about* because we only use it for counting – we can't use it to talk about someone's age or to give an idea of the time. So, if you don't know exactly what the time is, you can say *it's about two o'clock*. Or, you could use the following phrase:

**Man:** What time do you think you'll be finished tonight?

**Woman:** I dunno, sevenish maybe.

**William:** The woman will be finished at *sevenish* – at about seven o'clock. *Sevenish*.

**Woman:** I dunno, sevenish maybe.

**William:** So, to be vague we can add *ish* to numbers: fiveish, sixish, sevenish. But we can also add it to some adjectives... and this makes it a very useful way to

describe someone or something in a vague way. Listen to this description of a person:

**Man:** He's about fifty, greyish hair, beard... looks a bit like a politician.

**William:** The man being described has *greyish* hair – hair that is slightly grey - perhaps he's going grey! Now listen to this person describe someone else:

**Man:** Erm.. she's quite tall and she's got sort of reddish-brown hair...

**William:** *She's got sort of reddish-brown hair... So we can use *sort of* to describe someone in a vague way. And we can also use *kind of* in this way...*

**Woman:** Well, he's kind of scary when you first meet him, but he's a really nice guy.

**William:** *He's kind of scary when you first meet him.* Now we don't know why he's scary but in some way he's scary when you meet him.

**Woman:** Well, he's kind of scary when you first meet him, but he's a really nice guy.

**William:** So, there you have it. If you want to be, sort of, vague you have a number of ways of doing it. There must be ten different ways – no, twenty-odd ways to be kind of vague, more or less.