 Quiz: Choose the best ways to get back on topic in a discussion...

1.  
a) Where was you? Oh yes…  
b) Where was I? Oh yes…  
c) Where am I? Oh yes…

2.  
a) Getting back to my story…  
b) Getting on to your story…  
c) Getting backing to my story…

3.  
a) As we was saying…  
b) As I was saying…  
c) As I was said…
Answers

1) b) Where was I? Oh yes...

2) a) Getting back to my story...

3) b) As I was saying…
Transcript

Callum
Hello - I'm Callum Robertson. Today I want to talk about How To get back on topic in conversations.

Have you ever found yourself talking to someone and for some reason you find yourself talking about the wrong thing? Maybe you've been interrupted or maybe you've just gone off the subject yourself and what you want to do is get back to the right topic.

I do it a lot myself, particularly in our webcast programmes. I get chatting away about something I think is interesting but it's not really the topic of the programme and I have to get back to the subject. Here's an example from a programme about history. For some reason I was talking about banks making mistakes with our computer records, but I really needed to get back to the topic. Have a listen to this piece of a conversation between myself, my colleague Jackie and our studio guest, Maddy. Listen out for when the topic changes: can you pick out the word that I use to make that change?

Callum
It is quite scary that, you know, a wrong - little wrong piece of information which somebody, maybe by accident, puts into a computer –

Jackie
Yeah. An extra zero or something, or a minus instead of a plus, and that's it.

Callum
Yes - can affect your life. Anyway, that's nothing to do with our topic today. Moving on from that, err Maddy, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about your personal history.

Callum
So I'm finally back on topic, but did you catch the word? Here it is again:

EXAMPLE
Anyway, that's nothing to do with our topic.
Callum
Yes: it's anyway.

EXAMPLE
Anyway –

Callum
One word: a-n-y-w-a-y. Anyway. This word has a number of uses and it is one way we change the subject to get back on topic. As it happens, I've just had lunch with a few colleagues and while chatting away I counted at least four anyways as our conversation progressed. Unfortunately, I didn't have a microphone at the time to record us. But we were in the canteen and it was very noisy so it wouldn't have been a good recording. Anyway, here's a different conversation I had with Jackie in which I forced her to go off topic by interrupting her. She's trying to tell me about something that happened to her on the underground. How many times did she have to get back on topic?

Jackie
Well I was on the tube the other day, going home after work –

Callum
When was this? What day was this?

Jackie
It was, err, Monday.

Callum
Right.

Jackie
Anyway, so I was going home from work and this guy tried to get off and it was very crowded and he pushed past someone else –

Callum
I'm sorry. What time was this?

Jackie
Erm, it was about 6.15.
Callum
Yes - it's very busy that time, isn't it?

Jackie
Yes. So as I was saying, he was trying to get off and he pushed someone as he moved across to get off the tube and this person sort of shouted at him and said, you know, 'Can you be a bit more polite please?' Err, and he turned round and shoved him really hard so he hit me, and I –

Callum
Oh no!

Jackie
Yes, it was horrible, erm –

Callum
What did he look like?

Jackie
Erm, he looked - he was wearing a suit and he had, erm, dark hair.

Callum
So - like a businessman.

Jackie
Yes, he was a businessman: he looked very smart and quite young, so I was quite surprised. Erm, where was I? Yes - anyway, so he had pushed this other man back into me and everyone else on the tube started shouting at him and trying to hold him back because it looked like there was going to be a really big fight.

Callum
Right.

Callum
There were three times she was interrupted and had to get back on topic. And although she did use the word anyway, that wasn't the only language she used to move the conversation back to what she was describing. Listen again to the three sections where Jackie has to get back on topic, what does she say?
EXAMPLES

Jackie
It was Monday.

Callum
Right.

Jackie
Anyway, so I was going home from work –

Callum
What time was this?

Jackie
It was about 6.15.

Callum
Yes - it's very busy that time, isn't it?

Jackie
Yes. So, as I was saying –

Jackie
He looked very smart and quite young, so I was quite surprised. Erm, where was I? Yes - anyway, so he had pushed this other man back into me.

Callum
The first time she says, anyway followed by so.

EXAMPLE

Jackie
Anyway, so I was going home from work

Callum
After the next interruption she says something different: another useful expression to know - so, as I was saying.
EXAMPLE
Jackie
Yes. So, as I was saying –

Callum
And finally she uses another expression along with anyway. Where was I? Yes - anyway, so.

EXAMPLE
Jackie
Where was I? Yes - anyway, so he had pushed this other man back into me.

Callum
Well that’s about all from this edition of How To. Today we’ve looked at how to get back on topic in conversations. We’ve heard the following bits of language that naturally guide a conversation back on to the right subject:

Anyway -
So, as I was saying -
Where was I? Oh yes –

So why not try those out yourself the next time you’re having a conversation and you find yourself, like me, going way off topic. That’s all from me.