

BBC Learning English

How to ...

respond to compliments



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William: Hello, and welcome to *How to...* our guide to the everyday language of life.

My name's William Kremer. I take every opportunity to shock my colleagues here at BBC Learning English dot com and earlier on I gave several of them a big shock. I went around the office complimenting them.

Why did I compliment them? Did they look good? Had they made programmes that I'd enjoyed? Well no, not really. I just wanted to see how they would react - how they would respond - to my compliments.

I started off by approaching Carrie at the photocopier. How did she react when I gave her a compliment?

William: Hello Carrie. You're looking lovely today...

Carrie: What are you after?

William: What do you mean, what am I after? I'm just saying you look lovely. I like your purple T-shirt.

Carrie: It's just you don't ever normally give me compliments so you must be after something...

William: Well, I told you that my colleagues would be shocked by me paying them compliments. When I told Carrie that I thought she looked lovely she said: 'What are you after?'

William: Hello Carrie. You're looking lovely today...

Carrie: What are you after?

William: 'What are you after?' means 'What do you want?'. Carrie thinks that I am being nice to her because I want to ask her a favour. She said that I didn't normally compliment her so 'I must be after something'. 'What are you after?' is a humorous, and quite common response to an unexpected compliment. It is sometimes said that the British don't know how to respond to compliments. So after Carrie's rather disappointing answer, I thought I'd try someone from abroad, so I approached my colleague Khalid....

William: Khalid!

Khalid: Hello!

William: Khalid's busy. But I just wanted to say... erm you're looking fantastic today. As always, actually! You're so smart....

Khalid: Oh thank you! What do you want?

William: You're the second person that's said that! No, I don't want anything, I don't need you to translate anything at all... I just thought I... I... I thought you look very smart.

Khalid: Well thank you so much, that's very, very kind. I got my shirt from er Dubai actually – erm, very cheap shop in Dubai... erm – it didn't cost me a lot of money but I think it's nice, and you think it's nice.

William: Well, either I don't ever pay people compliments or my colleagues never receive any! Khalid also asked me if I wanted anything – if I was looking for a favour. But then he said, 'Thank you so much, that's very kind'.

William: ... I just thought I... I... I thought you look very smart.

Khalid: Well thank you so much, that's very, very kind. I got my shirt from er Dubai actually – erm, very cheap shop in Dubai... erm – it didn't cost me a lot of money but I think it's nice, and you think it's nice.

William: After Khalid thanked me for the compliment, he went on to tell me about his shirt – specifically that it hadn't cost much money. In Britain this is quite a common way of responding to compliments about clothes – to say that actually your clothes aren't so special. We often say 'Ooh, it was only cheap' or maybe 'I've had it for ages'. You're not disagreeing with the compliment, but saying this kind of thing shows that you're surprised by it.

Next, I complimented Callum Robertson on his programme Grammar Challenge, and he replied using a standard phrase.

William: So, I listened to one of your grammar challenges the other day... and erm... I thought it was fantastic

Callum: Ah well, it's very nice of you to say so, thanks

William: Callum said 'It's very nice of you to say so'

Callum: Ah well, it's very nice of you to say so, thanks

William: Now, there's an important strategy that people use in reacting to compliments. That is to return the compliment – to give a compliment back to the person who gave it to you! Listen to my conversation with Hina:

William: No, I ... I... thought that I'd, I'd come over and compliment you on the way you're looking today because I think you're looking very smart...

Hina: Thank you Will, that's very kind of you to say. You're looking very smart and tall as usual....

William: I'm tall! Yes – I can't help, I'm always looking tall, that's just the way I am!

William: Hina returned my compliment by saying that I was looking very tall. Normally, we don't say that people *look* tall, we say that they *are* tall... that's why I told Hina that I'm always looking tall.

Hina: You're looking very smart and tall as usual....

William: I'm tall! Yes – I can't help, I'm always looking tall, that's just the way I am!

I am actually a very tall person, and I get a lot of compliments about my height. Old ladies are always saying to me 'Oh, you're lovely and tall'. That sounds very nice, but actually it gets pretty boring. And, it can be quite difficult for me to return the compliment. It would be very strange for me to say 'Oh, thank you very much. You're lovely and short'!

But, after someone compliments you, you always need to say something.
Goodbye!