

## General extenders *and things like that*

A: *cos we made like a video*  
B: *yeah I saw it*  
A: *you remember, right?*  
B: *yeah*  
A: *so er we made her a video **and stuff***

Researchers have found that little phrases such as *and stuff* or *and stuff like that*, *and everything* and *or something* (usually termed 'general extenders' or 'set marking tags') have important discourse functions in spoken English.

They have also found that they seem to be losing their literal meaning, probably because their discourse functions have become more important.



### Getting material to investigate

You could investigate their functions and whether they have their literal meaning by gathering your own data, perhaps in one of these three ways:

(1) Research has found that general extenders are often used by young people between the ages of about 14 and 18, and that they often occur in interviews. You could try to collect some examples by interviewing someone of this age for about 20 minutes, asking them a series of questions about themselves and the things that they are interested in. Then you could transcribe their speech and look for any general extenders that they use.

(2) You could identify the general extenders that are used in the first few pages of J.D. Salinger's *A Catcher in the Rye*. In this novel Salinger uses general extenders *and all that crap* to almost as if he is speaking



such as *and all*, *or something*, create an informal style a young American boy, directly to the reader.

(3) Yet another interesting investigation would be to record an interview with an elderly person and a young person and then compare the different forms that the speakers use. Or just record an elderly person and see what general extender forms they use.

### Questions to investigate



Once you have your transcript (or the extracts from *A Catcher in the Rye*) and have made a list of the general extenders that you find there, you could see whether the way they are used in your material is the same or different to what other researchers have found.

#### Question 1. Which general extender forms do you find in your material?

Recent research has suggested that the most frequent general extender forms used by young people in the UK are *and things*, *and stuff* and *and that*, with *and that* preferred by working class speakers. Elderly speakers seem more likely to use longer forms like *and things like that* and *and stuff like that*, as well as more individual forms like *and all that game* or *and all that kind of caper*. Do your findings confirm this previous research or not?

#### Question 2. What does each of the general extenders refer to?

The reason that phrases like *and stuff* are called 'general extenders' or 'set marking tags' is that they often extend the meaning of the word or phrase immediately before them by showing that they are just one member of a larger set. For example if someone says *I like to eat apples and things*, by using *and things* they show that *apples* is just one of the kinds of things that they like to eat, and they suggest that the other things might be other kinds of fruit.

You could look for 3 possibilities:

(1) The set could be well known with a word that describes it, like the *apples and things* example.

**TIP:**



Sometimes it can be more difficult to think of the set of things that the general extender refers to. For example if someone says *you can get a hamburger or whatever*, there isn't an obvious word for the set of things that a hamburger is an example of, but it might be things that could be on a fast food menu, such as, perhaps, a hot dog or a pizza.

(2) There may be no obvious set, but you can see a vague category that the general extender may refer to and that the speaker has perhaps thought of on the spur of the moment, while they are speaking. In the example below a student seems to be thinking about a set of things that could get someone sent to the head teacher's office in secondary school:

*If I do anything bad like I talked in class or something then she says like "stop talking" but if he was talking he'd get sent to the office.*

(3) There doesn't seem to be any set at all. For example in the extract below the speakers are only talking about a video so it's difficult to think of a set of things that the video could be part of. This is a good example of using a general extender in a way that shows it has lost its literal meaning (as there is no 'stuff' for it to refer to).

A: *cos we made like a video*

B: *yeah I saw it*

A: *you remember, right?*

B: *yeah*

A: *so er we made her a video and stuff*

**Question 3. Does *stuff* mean 'stuff' and *things* 'things'?**

Another way of investigating whether a general extender has lost its literal meaning is to see whether the speaker uses *and things* or *and everything* or *or something* to refer to count nouns that are 'things' (such as chairs, apples or, at a pinch, dogs and cats) and *and stuff* to refer to mass nouns, that can't be counted (such as water, money, sand). If someone says *I love apples and stuff*, this shows that *and*

*stuff* is used here without its literal meaning, and suggests that its discourse function is becoming more important than the literal meaning of referring to a set of kinds of 'stuff'.

**TIP:**



Test to see if a noun is a count noun by trying to make it plural (add an -s) and to put a number in front of it. This works for *I'd like an apple* (you could say *I'd like three apples*) but not for *water* (*I love drinking water* but not *\*I love drinking three waters*). A general extender would have its literal meaning in the phrase *I love drinking water and stuff* or *I love apples and things* but not in the phrase *I love drinking water and things*.

**Question 4: what functions do the general extenders in your material have?**

You will need to look at the context where it is used to try to answer this question.

Some of the functions that researchers have found for general extenders are:

they show vagueness, or that the speaker isn't sure about what they are saying. *Or something* is perhaps especially likely to be used this way;

they show that the speaker has come to the end of their turn and invite the listener to say something on the same topic (you can check this by seeing if the listener does do this);

they create solidarity between speakers, by suggesting that the listener knows as much about the topic as the speaker (and so the speaker doesn't have to list all the members of the set) or that the listener has the same opinion as the speaker. For example although *and things* in *I love apples and things* may refer to other kinds of fruit, if the listener is a close friend of the speaker they may both know that the speaker is not referring to fruit at all but to the kinds of things that the speaker likes to eat for a quick dessert such as, perhaps, yoghurt or chocolate;

they may just 'punctuate' speech by splitting it up into manageable chunks like full stops do in writing;

*and everything* and *and everything like that* are sometimes used to add emphasis to what has just been said. Some researchers find that *and all* and *and all that* are also used this

way.

**TIP:**



A general extender may have several functions at the same time. Sometimes another discourse marker in the same clause can help to suggest the function of the general extender. For example if someone says *I'd maybe like an apple or something*, the combination of *or something* and *maybe* seems to show quite clearly that the speaker isn't really sure what they'd like to eat. Sometimes, though, it's impossible to see a particular function for a general extender.

**In conclusion**

Once you've answered these questions, you can consider whether your data confirms that general extenders are tending to lose their literal meaning, and whether or not they have important discourse functions in spoken English.

**SUGGESTED READING:**

Cheshire, Jenny. 2007. [Discourse variation, grammaticalisation and stuff like that](#). *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 11/2: 155-193.

Tagliamonte, S. and Denis, D. 2010. The stuff of change: General extenders in Toronto, Canada. *Journal of English Linguistics* 38 (4): 335-368. (Click [here](#) for a summary of this paper)