



American Expression E2626 On the blink

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

“On the blink” is an informal idiomatic expression that means something is not working properly or is temporarily out of order. It is most often used to describe machines, devices, or systems that are malfunctioning. When someone says a television, computer, or car is on the blink, they usually mean it is unreliable, inconsistent, or broken in some way.

The phrase has a casual tone and is commonly heard in everyday conversation rather than formal writing. Its origin is somewhat uncertain, but many believe it relates to the idea of blinking lights or signals that flicker irregularly. A blinking signal can suggest instability or interruption, which fits the idea of something not functioning smoothly. Over time, the expression evolved to refer more generally to malfunction.

In modern life, the phrase frequently applies to technology. For example, a smartphone that freezes repeatedly or a Wi-Fi connection that keeps disconnecting might be described as being on the blink. The expression captures frustration without sounding overly technical. Instead of explaining the exact mechanical issue, speakers can simply use this phrase to convey that something is not operating as it should.

Although it is most often used for objects, “on the blink” can sometimes be applied humorously to people. Someone who is feeling unwell, confused, or mentally unfocused might jokingly say they are on the blink. In this sense, the phrase suggests temporary dysfunction rather than permanent incapacity. The humor softens the seriousness of the situation.

The expression also reflects how dependent modern society is on functioning systems. When appliances, vehicles, or digital tools are on the blink, daily routines can be disrupted. Small malfunctions may cause significant inconvenience, highlighting the importance of reliability in technology and infrastructure. The phrase often carries an undertone of mild irritation or impatience.

Interestingly, “on the blink” implies that the problem may not be permanent. Unlike stronger words such as “broken” or “ruined,” it suggests a temporary or repairable condition. This nuance makes the phrase versatile and less dramatic. It leaves room for hope that the malfunction can be fixed with a simple adjustment or repair.

In conclusion, “on the blink” is an informal expression used to describe something that is malfunctioning or unreliable. Its likely connection to blinking or flickering signals adds vivid imagery to the idea of instability. Whether applied to technology or used humorously about a person’s condition, the phrase conveys temporary dysfunction with a light tone. Ultimately, it reflects both everyday frustrations and the expectation that problems can be resolved.

Questions for Discussion

1. What types of devices or systems are most often described as being on the blink, and why?
2. How does the phrase “on the blink” differ in tone from simply saying something is broken?
3. In what situations might someone use “on the blink” humorously about themselves?
4. How does modern reliance on technology make the idea of something being on the blink more stressful?
5. What steps can people take to stay calm and solve problems when important equipment is on the blink?