



American Expression E2762 Make or break

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“Make or break” is a common English expression used to describe a situation, event, or decision that will determine whether something succeeds or fails. When something is described as “make or break,” the outcome is especially important because there may be little room for recovery afterward. The phrase can apply to careers, relationships, businesses, examinations, competitions, negotiations, projects, and many other situations where the consequences are significant.

The expression comes from the simple contrast between “make,” meaning to create, establish, or cause success, and “break,” meaning to destroy, damage, or cause failure. Together, the words present two opposite possibilities. Something will either help produce a successful result or cause serious difficulties. This sharp contrast gives the idiom its dramatic quality and explains why speakers use it when describing crucial moments or important turning points.

For example, a company launching its first major product might describe the launch as a make-or-break moment. If customers respond enthusiastically, the company could grow rapidly, attract investors, and establish a strong reputation. If the product performs badly, however, the company might lose money and struggle to survive. Similarly, an athlete might face a make-or-break competition that determines whether the athlete qualifies for an important championship or loses that opportunity.

The expression is also frequently used in personal situations. Communication, for instance, can be a make-or-break factor in a relationship. If two people discuss their problems openly and respectfully, their relationship may become stronger. If they avoid difficult conversations or repeatedly misunderstand each other, the relationship may deteriorate. Likewise, an important job interview can become a make-or-break opportunity for someone seeking a particular career position, especially when competition is extremely strong.

“Make or break” can function as different parts of a sentence depending on its grammatical use. People commonly say, “This could make or break the business,” where the phrase functions verbally. It can also appear as an adjective before a noun, usually written with hyphens, as in “a make-or-break decision,” “a make-or-break year,” or “a make-or-break meeting.” Both forms emphasize the decisive importance of the situation being described.

Although the phrase sounds absolute, people sometimes use it somewhat dramatically. Not every make-or-break situation literally produces permanent success or complete failure. A person who fails an important examination may have another opportunity, and a business that experiences an unsuccessful product launch might recover. Nevertheless, the expression communicates that the immediate stakes are unusually high. It encourages people to recognize the importance of preparation, judgment, timing, effort, and careful decision-making when approaching a critical situation.

In conclusion, “make or break” describes something that can strongly determine success or failure. Its meaning comes from the contrast between making something successful and breaking it through failure. The expression is useful because it communicates both importance and uncertainty in only a few words. Whether discussing a business launch, examination, relationship, competition, interview, negotiation, or major decision, calling something make-or-break emphasizes that the outcome could significantly influence what happens next. Understanding this idiom helps English learners recognize how speakers describe decisive moments when choices, actions, and results carry unusually serious consequences for everyone involved.

Questions for Discussion

1. What does “make or break” mean, and in what situations would you use this expression?
2. Have you ever experienced a make-or-break moment in your life? What happened?
3. What factors can make or break a person’s career or business?
4. Can good communication make or break a relationship? Why or why not?
5. How should people prepare themselves when facing a make-or-break decision?