



American Expression E2810 Run out of steam

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

The expression “run out of steam” means to lose energy, enthusiasm, strength, or momentum before completing an activity. It describes a person, project, or process that begins with determination but gradually becomes less effective. For example, “After studying for six hours, I ran out of steam” means that I became too tired to continue productively. The phrase often suggests gradual exhaustion rather than an abrupt decision to stop. It is very common in everyday conversation and workplace discussions.

The expression comes from the age of steam powered machinery. Steam engines needed sufficient steam pressure to keep moving and performing work. When pressure dropped, an engine could slow down or stop. This mechanical image became a metaphor for human effort and progress. Just as an engine needs power, people need physical energy, mental concentration, and motivation. When these resources diminish, we may say that someone has run out of steam.

In daily life, people often run out of steam after demanding activities. Imagine cleaning your entire house on Saturday morning. At first, you work quickly, organize shelves, and wash the floors. By afternoon, however, you feel exhausted and leave the remaining tasks unfinished. You could explain, “I planned to clean the garage too, but I ran out of steam.” The phrase clearly communicates that fatigue prevented you from maintaining your original pace.

The expression also describes projects, businesses, and social movements. A team might launch a new initiative with great excitement, only to run out of steam when difficulties appear. For example, “The marketing campaign ran out of steam after several unsuccessful weeks.” Here, the campaign lost momentum and stopped producing meaningful results. Similarly, a public discussion may run out of steam when participants lose interest or have nothing new to contribute.

Grammatically, “run out of steam” functions as a verb phrase. Its present form is “run out of steam,” while its past form is “ran out of steam.” The past participle is “run out of steam,” as in “Our team has run out of steam.” It also appears in future sentences: “If we work without breaks, we will run out of steam.” The phrase usually does not take an additional direct object.

Several expressions have similar meanings, but their nuances differ. “Get tired” focuses mainly on fatigue, while “lose motivation” emphasizes declining interest. “Burn out” often describes deeper exhaustion resulting from prolonged stress or excessive demands. “Run out of steam” can describe temporary tiredness, fading enthusiasm, or weakening progress. Someone who runs out of steam may recover after resting, adjusting expectations, or receiving additional support. Therefore, the expression does not necessarily mean permanent failure.

In conclusion, “run out of steam” describes losing the energy or momentum needed to continue something effectively. It applies to individuals, teams, projects, and activities. Remember that “ran out of steam” is its simple past form. Recognizing this expression helps you understand discussions about fatigue, motivation, and progress. By practicing it in realistic situations, you can describe declining energy naturally and communicate more clearly in English.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you ever run out of steam while working on an important project or assignment? What caused you to lose your energy or motivation?
2. What do you usually do when you run out of steam after a long and stressful day at work?
3. Have you ever started learning a new skill or language enthusiastically but eventually run out of steam? How did you regain your motivation?
4. Why do you think some businesses or organizations run out of steam even after making a successful start?
5. What advice would you give to someone who frequently runs out of steam before achieving their goals?