

LEVEL B1

My Life as a Storm Chaser

The Man Who Drives Toward Tornadoes

Marcus from Birmingham drives toward tornadoes for a living in Oklahoma. He tells Olivia how he got hooked, what a normal chase day looks like and how a storm nearly caught him in the mud.

Key words

- hooked
- blame
- savings
- for good
- add up
- forecast
- hail
- spin
- bust
- shortcut
- slippery
- ditch
- reckless
- selfish
- warning

In this workbook

Key words	2
Full transcript	3
Did you understand?	9
Who said it?	9
Word partners	10
Your turn	10
Answer key	11

How to use it

1

Listen to the episode on YouTube.

2

Read the transcript and learn the key words.

3

Do the activities, then check the answer key.

Includes the full transcript, key words, activities and answers

Listen to the episode on the Aprendos YouTube channel

Key words

These words appear in the episode.

Key words	Meaning	Example
hooked <i>adjective</i>	Very interested in something and wanting to do it again and again.	<i>I watched one episode of the series last night, and now I'm hooked.</i>
blame <i>verb</i>	To say that someone or something caused a problem.	<i>My brother always blames the dog when food disappears from the kitchen.</i>
savings <i>noun</i>	Money that you keep and don't spend, often in a bank.	<i>She used her savings to buy her first car.</i>
for good <i>phrase</i>	Forever, with no plan to come back or change.	<i>After ten years in London, my aunt moved back to Spain for good.</i>
add up <i>phrasal verb</i>	When small amounts slowly become a big amount.	<i>A coffee every morning doesn't seem expensive, but it adds up.</i>
forecast <i>noun</i>	A report that says what the weather will probably be like.	<i>The forecast says it will rain all weekend, so we moved the picnic.</i>
hail <i>noun</i>	Small balls of ice that fall from the sky like rain.	<i>The hail was so loud on the roof that we couldn't hear the TV.</i>
spin <i>verb</i>	To turn round and round very fast.	<i>The children spun in circles in the garden until they fell over.</i>
bust <i>noun</i>	A plan or event that goes wrong and gives you nothing.	<i>The fishing trip was a bust, because nobody caught a single fish.</i>
shortcut <i>noun</i>	A quicker way to get somewhere than the usual road.	<i>We took a shortcut through the park and arrived ten minutes early.</i>
slippery <i>adjective</i>	Wet or smooth, so it's easy to fall or slide.	<i>Be careful, the kitchen floor is still slippery after I cleaned it.</i>
ditch <i>noun</i>	A long, narrow hole at the side of a road or field, often with water in it.	<i>My bike hit a stone and I ended up in a ditch full of leaves.</i>
reckless <i>adjective</i>	Doing dangerous things without thinking about what could happen.	<i>He lost his licence for reckless driving on the motorway.</i>
selfish <i>adjective</i>	Thinking only about yourself and forgetting about other people.	<i>It was a bit selfish of me to eat the last piece of cake.</i>
warning <i>noun</i>	A message that tells people about danger before it happens.	<i>There was a warning on the radio about ice on the roads this morning.</i>

Full transcript

My Life as a Storm Chaser: The Man Who Drives Toward Tornadoes

- MARCUS** The rain stopped, just like that. And then the whole car started to shake.
- OLIVIA** How far away was it?
- MARCUS** About a mile, but it felt much closer than that.
- OLIVIA** And you couldn't drive away?
- MARCUS** I couldn't drive anywhere, because my car was stuck in the mud.
- OLIVIA** This is Aprendos English, level B1. I'm Olivia. My guest today drives toward tornadoes for a living. Marcus is twenty-seven, he grew up in Birmingham, in England, and he now lives in Norman, Oklahoma.
- MARCUS** Hiya. Thanks for having me.
- OLIVIA** We'll come back to that mud, I promise. But first, why does a guy from Birmingham chase tornadoes?
- MARCUS** Because Birmingham had one first.
- OLIVIA** Wait. England has tornadoes?
- MARCUS** Oh, loads. In July 2005 a big one went through the south of the city, when I was six. It crossed my nan's road in Kings Heath.
- OLIVIA** Oh no. Was she okay?
- MARCUS** She was fine, she was at the shops. Nobody died that day, but about forty people were hurt. And the next morning there were huge trees lying across her road...
- OLIVIA** ...and little Marcus was **hooked**.
- MARCUS** Completely hooked. My mum still **blames** that tornado for everything.
- OLIVIA** Okay, but one tornado in England sounds like a freak event.
- MARCUS** Okay, guess how many tornadoes the UK gets in a normal year.
- OLIVIA** Hmm... two? Maybe three?
- MARCUS** Around thirty.
- OLIVIA** Thirty? No way.
- MARCUS** It's true! And for its size, England actually gets more tornadoes than any other country in the world.
- OLIVIA** More than Oklahoma? Come on, Marcus.
- MARCUS** For its size, yes, and there's even a Guinness World Record for it.
- OLIVIA** I'm checking that. I'm a journalist.
- MARCUS** Please do. Most of them are tiny, mind. They knock over a garden fence or take a few tiles off a roof.
- OLIVIA** So English tornadoes are polite.
- MARCUS** Very polite. They probably say sorry afterwards.
- OLIVIA** So how does a six-year-old in Birmingham end up in Oklahoma?
- MARCUS** Slowly. I studied meteorology at Reading. Then I spent all my **savings** on a storm chasing tour in Oklahoma. It was two weeks in a van with strangers.

- OLIVIA** What does something like that cost?
- MARCUS** Most tours cost about three thousand dollars...
- OLIVIA** ...for two weeks?
- MARCUS** For one week in a van, eating crisps at petrol stations. Honestly, it was the best money I ever spent.
- OLIVIA** And then you just stayed?
- MARCUS** Not quite. The next spring the tour company needed a driver, so I came back. Four years ago I moved to Norman for good, after a lot of paperwork.
- OLIVIA** Why Norman, though? It's a college town.
- MARCUS** It's basically the weather capital of the country. One building there, the National Weather Center, has the Storm Prediction Center and the local weather service office. The university's meteorology school is in the same building too.
- OLIVIA** So it's a big school for weather nerds.
- MARCUS** Pretty much. When I get my coffee over there, you can hear people arguing about clouds in the queue.
- OLIVIA** So is storm chasing your full-time job?
- MARCUS** In spring, yes. From April to June I drive for the tour company and help with the forecast. Sometimes a TV station buys my videos too.
- OLIVIA** And the rest of the year?
- MARCUS** I work in a bike shop. It's a bit less exciting.
- OLIVIA** Wait, so storm chasers aren't rich?
- MARCUS** Most chasers spend more than they earn, because petrol and tyres add up very quickly. And so do windscreens.
- OLIVIA** Windscreens? From what?
- MARCUS** Hail. I've lost three windscreens in four years...
- OLIVIA** ...oh, I actually know a hail story. In 2010 a man in South Dakota picked up a hailstone almost as big as a volleyball.
- MARCUS** Vivian! That's the record one.
- OLIVIA** Yes! Eight inches across, and nearly two pounds. He kept it in his freezer.
- MARCUS** I've seen the photos. If one of those hits your car, you'll need a whole new car.
- OLIVIA** So walk me through a normal chase day. What time do you get up?
- MARCUS** About seven. First I check the Storm Prediction Center. Every morning they publish a map with five risk levels, from marginal to high.
- OLIVIA** And you want high.
- MARCUS** Everyone wants high, but it hardly ever happens. Usually I'm happy with a slight or an enhanced risk.
- OLIVIA** What are you looking for on the maps?
- MARCUS** Two big things. You want warm, wet air near the ground, and winds that change direction higher up. That turning wind is what can make a storm spin.
- OLIVIA** And then you pick a place?

- MARCUS** We call it a target, and it's usually a small town in Kansas or the Texas Panhandle. Then we drive...
- OLIVIA** ...how far?
- MARCUS** Sometimes four hundred miles in one day.
- OLIVIA** And when you get there?
- MARCUS** We wait, usually at a petrol station, eating crisps.
- OLIVIA** The crisps again.
- MARCUS** The crisps are a big part of the job. Then late in the afternoon the storms go up, and if you're lucky you get a supercell.
- OLIVIA** That's the rotating kind, right?
- MARCUS** Exactly, a thunderstorm with a huge spinning column of air inside. They look like a spaceship coming down to land.
- OLIVIA** And every supercell makes a tornado?
- MARCUS** No, most of them don't. Only about one in five produces a tornado.
- OLIVIA** So how often do you actually see one? Half your chase days?
- MARCUS** Oh, much less than that. On my first tour we saw zero tornadoes in two weeks.
- OLIVIA** Zero! After three thousand dollars?
- MARCUS** Well, it was two weeks, so it was six thousand, actually.
- OLIVIA** Marcus!
- MARCUS** I know. But we saw giant hail and the most amazing skies. Chasers call a day without a tornado a bust, and you get used to busts.
- OLIVIA** Okay, it's a good day. Where do you park?
- MARCUS** Most storms here move toward the northeast, so you want to be southeast of the storm.
- OLIVIA** Why there?
- MARCUS** The tornado usually forms near the back of the storm. North of that is the heavy rain and the big hail. We call that part the core.
- OLIVIA** And you stay out of the core.
- MARCUS** You try to. Some chasers drive straight through it to get closer, and we call that core punching...
- OLIVIA** ...which sounds like a terrible idea.
- MARCUS** It often is, because sometimes the tornado is hidden inside all that rain. Chasers call that area the bear's cage.
- OLIVIA** The bear's cage? Who names these things?
- MARCUS** Tired chasers at two in the morning, I reckon. It makes sense, though. The tornado is the bear, and you don't want to drive into its cage.
- OLIVIA** So what's the most dangerous part of the job? The tornado itself?
- MARCUS** Honestly? The driving. You're tired and the roads are wet, and everyone is looking at the sky instead of the road.
- OLIVIA** That's so boring. I wanted a scary answer.

- MARCUS** It's scary on the road, trust me. On a big day there can be hundreds of chasers on the same small country roads. Then there's lightning, and lightning doesn't care how good you are.
- OLIVIA** Water scares me more. I was reporting in Louisiana once, and a flash flood turned the road into a river.
- MARCUS** What did you do?
- OLIVIA** I backed up very slowly and cried a little.
- MARCUS** Good choice. Floods on the roads kill people here too.
- OLIVIA** I have to ask about El Reno. For a lot of Americans, that name means something terrible.
- MARCUS** Yeah. It was the 31st of May, 2013, near El Reno in Oklahoma. It became the widest tornado ever recorded.
- OLIVIA** How wide?
- MARCUS** Two point six miles across. And it changed direction and suddenly got much faster, so some chasers were caught right in its path.
- OLIVIA** And some didn't make it.
- MARCUS** A man called Tim Samaras died, with his son Paul and his colleague Carl Young. They were researchers, and everyone knew them as very careful people. They were the first storm chasers known to die in a tornado.
- OLIVIA** Were they the only ones?
- MARCUS** No. A local man who followed the storm died too, and four other drivers, so eight people in total. I was fourteen, reading about it in Birmingham, and I couldn't sleep that night.
- OLIVIA** And only eleven days earlier, there was the Moore tornado...
- MARCUS** ...on the 20th of May, yes.
- OLIVIA** It was an EF5, the strongest level, and twenty-four people died. Seven of them were children at an elementary school.
- MARCUS** That's the one people here still talk about very quietly.
- OLIVIA** But the warning came about sixteen minutes early, and experts think that saved many lives.
- MARCUS** And that's a big part of our job, actually. We report what we see to the National Weather Service, because radar can't see everything near the ground.
- OLIVIA** Hmm... I'll be honest, though. After El Reno, part of me thinks chasing is a bit selfish.
- MARCUS** Selfish? How?
- OLIVIA** More cars on the roads, and people driving toward the danger while everyone else drives away.
- MARCUS** Okay, that's fair. Some chasers are reckless, and they do block roads. But good reports help the warnings, so I'd rather have careful chasers out there than none.
- OLIVIA** Careful. Says the man who got stuck in the mud.
- MARCUS** Right, fair enough, you got me there.
- OLIVIA** So tell me about the mud.
- MARCUS** Three years ago in May, on my day off, I went out alone. That was big mistake number one.
- OLIVIA** I'm guessing mistake number two was a shortcut.
- MARCUS** Exactly, a dirt road through the fields in western Oklahoma. The mud there is bright red clay, and after rain it's as slippery as soap.

- OLIVIA** And you slid into a ditch.
- MARCUS** Straight in, with the front wheels in the water and the back wheels in the air. The storm was about two miles to the west...
- OLIVIA** ...and coming straight at you?
- MARCUS** It was moving toward the northeast, so it was coming close, but hopefully a bit north of me.
- OLIVIA** Hopefully! That's a big word, Marcus.
- MARCUS** A massive word. Then my phone died, so I had no radar at all.
- OLIVIA** What did the sky look like?
- MARCUS** Dark green and black. Then the rain stopped suddenly and the wind turned really warm, and I knew exactly what that meant...
- OLIVIA** ...that it was close.
- MARCUS** Very close. I saw the tornado come out of the rain about a mile north. It was grey and wide, with bits of fence flying around it.
- OLIVIA** What do you even do in that moment?
- MARCUS** The rule is to find a ditch and cover your head, but my ditch was full of water. So I stayed in the car with my seatbelt on and my head down below the windows.
- OLIVIA** Some people hide under bridges, don't they? Is that...
- MARCUS** ...no, never, that's a famous myth. The wind gets faster under a bridge, and the flying rubbish comes with it.
- OLIVIA** So you're lying down in the car...
- MARCUS** And the car is shaking like an old washing machine. After maybe a minute, everything went quiet.
- OLIVIA** Wow. And then?
- MARCUS** Then a farmer came along on his tractor, and he didn't look surprised at all. He looked at me, looked at the car, and said, "You're not from around here, are you?"
- OLIVIA** Because of the accent or the ditch?
- MARCUS** Both, I reckon. He pulled me out and gave me a bottle of water. I still send him a Christmas card.
- OLIVIA** And your mum? Did you tell her?
- MARCUS** Not for a whole year. She found out when I told the story at my sister's wedding...
- OLIVIA** ...in front of everyone?
- MARCUS** In front of everyone. Now every time Oklahoma is on the BBC News, she texts me, "Are you dead?"
- OLIVIA** Just that?
- MARCUS** Just that, three words and no hello.
- OLIVIA** By the way, I checked while you were talking. You're right. Guinness says England has the most tornadoes for its size.
- MARCUS** Told you.
- OLIVIA** I still think Oklahoma tornadoes are scarier.
- MARCUS** Oh, much scarier. The English ones just have better manners.

- OLIVIA** Last question. Someone listening wants to try storm chasing. What do you tell them?
- MARCUS** Go with people who know what they're doing, and stay off red dirt roads after rain. And remember that the best view is often from ten miles away. From there you can watch the whole storm turning slowly in the evening light. That's the picture I keep.
- OLIVIA** That's lovely. Marcus, thank you so much for this.
- MARCUS** Cheers, Olivia, I really enjoyed it.
- OLIVIA** Now something for everyone listening. Would you pay three thousand dollars for a week in Marcus's van, knowing it could be a bust? Let us know down below.
- MARCUS** I'd say yes, obviously.
- OLIVIA** If you want Marcus's stories on paper, there's a free PDF in the video description. And for more guests like him, subscribe.
- MARCUS** Right, I'd better text my mum before she texts me.
- OLIVIA** Tell her you're alive. Goodbye, all!

Did you understand?

Choose the correct answer.

1. How did Marcus first get interested in tornadoes?

- ☐ He watched a film about American storm chasers at school.
- ☐ A tornado crossed his nan's road in Birmingham when he was six.
- ☐ His father worked as a weather reporter on TV.

2. What does England have a Guinness World Record for?

- ☐ The strongest tornado ever recorded in Europe.
- ☐ The most people who watch storms as a hobby.
- ☐ The most tornadoes for the size of the country.

3. What happened on Marcus's first storm chasing tour?

- ☐ He saw zero tornadoes in two weeks.
- ☐ He saw three tornadoes on the first day.
- ☐ The tour van broke down in Kansas.

4. What was special about the El Reno tornado in 2013?

- ☐ It was the first tornado with a sixteen-minute warning.
- ☐ It hit an elementary school in the town of Moore.
- ☐ It was the widest tornado ever recorded.

5. What did Marcus do when the tornado came close to his car?

- ☐ He ran to hide under a bridge near the dirt road.
- ☐ He stayed in the car with his head below the windows.
- ☐ He lay down in the ditch and covered his head.

Exercise 1. Who said it?

Complete the quote with a word from the list. Then guess who said it: Olivia or Marcus?

1. "and little Marcus was _____."

Who said it? Olivia / Marcus

2. "My mum still _____ that tornado for everything."

Who said it? Olivia / Marcus

3. "Chasers call a day without a tornado a _____, and you get used to busts."

Who said it? Olivia / Marcus

4. "After El Reno, part of me thinks chasing is a bit _____."

Who said it? Olivia / Marcus

5. "The mud there is bright red clay, and after rain it's as _____ as soap."

Who said it? Olivia / Marcus

Exercise 2. Word partners

Match each phrase with the word from the list that often goes with it. Two words are extra.

1. to spend all your _____
2. a five-day weather _____
3. to take a _____
4. the costs quickly _____
5. an early _____
6. to slide into a _____

- a) add up
- b) ditch
- c) forecast
- d) hail
- e) savings
- f) selfish
- g) shortcut
- h) warning

Marcus took a shortcut and ended up in a ditch. Use one pair in a sentence about your own life.

Exercise 3. Your turn

Would you pay three thousand dollars for a week in Marcus's van, knowing it could be a bust? Write three or four sentences. Use at least two words from the list.

Answer key

Check your answers after you finish the activities.

Did you understand?

1. A tornado crossed his nan's road in Birmingham when he was six.
2. The most tornadoes for the size of the country.
3. He saw zero tornadoes in two weeks.
4. It was the widest tornado ever recorded.
5. He stayed in the car with his head below the windows.

Exercise 1. Who said it?

1. hooked (Olivia)
2. blames (Marcus)
3. bust (Marcus)
4. selfish (Olivia)
5. slippery (Marcus)

Exercise 2. Word partners

1. to spend all your savings
2. a five-day weather forecast
3. to take a shortcut
4. the costs quickly add up
5. an early warning
6. to slide into a ditch

One winter I took a shortcut across a frozen field, and I slid into a ditch in front of my whole family.

Exercise 3. Example answer

I would say yes, and I would happily spend my savings on it. Even if the trip was a bust, I could watch the hail and the amazing skies. I would be careful and never take a shortcut on a muddy road. And of course I would text my mum every evening so she doesn't think I'm dead.