B2-C1 ENGLISH LISTENING WORKSHEET

Shoelaces: Are You Tying Them Wrong?

10 November 2026

BBC Ideas - Are you tying your shoelaces wrong? (4:46)

A shoelace knot seems simple, but science suggests many of us have been tying it the weaker way for years. Discover how knots fail, why small details matter and which inventions have tried to replace laces.

Before your lesson: Watch the video once without captions, then replay difficult sections. Answer the questions, complete the vocabulary exercises and prepare ideas for discussion.

Watch the BBC Ideas video on YouTube

Listening Comprehension

Answer in your own words, explaining causes and connections where required. Write short answers on the lines provided; use a separate notebook if you need more space.

No.	Listening question and answer space
1	What are the two knots compared in the video, and why might someone unknowingly tie the weaker one?
2	How did the Berkeley researchers investigate shoelace knots, and what two movements gradually loosen them?
3	What unusually high acceleration did researchers record, and what famous space event is it compared with?
4	What makes a granny knot less reliable, and how can you recognise one simply by looking at your shoe?
5	What are aglets used for, and why can extra weight at the ends of shoelaces have an unexpected effect?
6	What does the 5,600-year-old Armenian shoe reveal about footwear, and how was it fastened?
7	How did shoe fastening change from fashionable buckles to the design now known as Chelsea boots?
8	How did George de Mestral get the idea for Velcro, and what helped the invention eventually catch on?
9	Which two alternative knots are named before the Ian knot, and what is claimed about the Ian knot?
10	What limitation remains even with strong shoelace knots, and what alternative does the presenter suggest at the end?

Phrase Match

Match each **exact expression** heard in the video (1-10) to its contextual meaning (A-J).

Expressions (1-10)	Meanings (A-J)
1. coming undone	**A.** ultimately depend on a particular factor
2. comes down to	**B.** become widely accepted or popular
3. put this to the test	**C.** begin with the intention of finding something out
4. set out to discover	**D.** becoming loose or untied
5. part to play	**E.** the principle that using less can be more effective
6. less is more	**F.** think of or devise something new
7. makes sense	**G.** investigate a claim by trying it in practice
8. catch on	**H.** be logical or understandable
9. come up with	**I.** accept that further effort is unlikely to succeed
10. admit defeat	**J.** have a role in what happens

Synonym Match

Match each **word** heard in the video (1-10) to its closest contextual synonym (A-J).

Words (1-10)	Synonyms (A-J)
1. catastrophic	**A.** secure
2. unravel	**B.** ordinary
3. stable	**C.** ornate
4. recreate	**D.** substitutes
5. elaborate	**E.** developed
6. evolved	**F.** disastrous
7. clinging	**G.** replicate
8. alternatives	**H.** come apart
9. humble	**I.** invention
10. innovation	**J.** gripping

Use the New Language

Choose five expressions or words from this lesson and write one **original sentence** using each.

No.	Your sentence
1	
2	
3	
4	
5	

Discussion Questions

Use the video as a starting point. Give reasons, compare experiences and challenge each other's ideas.

Student A - Personal experience	Student B - Opinions and analysis
1. Have you ever discovered that you had been doing an everyday task incorrectly for years?	**1.** Should scientists spend public funding investigating apparently trivial problems such as shoelace knots?
2. Do your shoelaces often come undone? Have you found a way to prevent it?	**2.** Why do people keep old habits even when evidence suggests a better alternative?
3. What small everyday inconvenience irritates you most, and what do you do about it?	**3.** Why have shoelaces survived when so many other fastening systems have been invented?
4. When learning a practical skill, do you prefer instructions, demonstrations or trial and error?	**4.** Could making everyday life more convenient eventually reduce people's practical skills?
5. What simple invention would you find surprisingly difficult to live without?	**5.** Are traditional designs necessarily more reliable, or do we simply trust what is familiar?
6. Have you ever changed an established habit after learning a more effective method?	**6.** Should designers prioritise function and durability over appearance and fashion?
7. For a long journey, would you choose lace-up trainers, slip-on shoes or shoes with Velcro fastenings? Why?	**7.** If one way of doing something is demonstrably weaker, should schools teach the better method?
8. Have you bought something with a clever design that proved less useful than expected?	**8.** Does an innovation need to solve a major problem, or can a small improvement be just as valuable?

60-Second Argument Challenge

Should traditional shoelaces be replaced by newer fastenings? Take a position, use two details from the video, address one counterargument and include at least two expressions from Phrase Match.

Access the Video Transcript

The BBC Ideas presenter uses natural British English, scientific explanations, historical examples and dry humour. After completing the tasks, use YouTube captions or **Show transcript** to check difficult passages. Automated captions may contain technical-word errors.

Watch the video and open its YouTube transcript

Answer Key

Listening Comprehension

1. [0:08-0:23; 1:28-2:02] The stronger reef knot is contrasted with the weaker granny knot. The methods look almost identical, so people may repeat a tiny movement they learnt as children without noticing; tying both stages in the same direction produces the weaker knot.

2. [0:26-1:12] They filmed a runner on a treadmill in slow motion and used a mechanical pendulum. Foot impact stretches and loosens the knot, while the swinging leg makes the lace ends whip about until one slips through.

3. [1:18-1:27] They measured accelerations of around 7g as the shoe hit the ground, comparable to the g-forces experienced by the Apollo spacecraft during re-entry.

4. [1:28-2:02] Tying both stages of the knot in the same direction creates the weaker knot. A granny knot twists so its loops point more up and down the foot; a reef knot lies neatly across the shoe.

5. [2:02-2:28] Aglets are the plastic or metal tips that stop laces fraying and help thread them through eyelets. Extra weight at the ends makes knots more likely to fail.

6. [2:43-3:00] Lacing has been used for millennia. The Areni-1 shoe from Armenia is about 5,600 years old; a piece of cowhide was wrapped around the foot and held with a leather cord threaded through holes.

7. [3:02-3:30] Elaborate shoe buckles became fashionable in the 18th century. In the 19th, Queen Victoria's shoemaker developed elastic-sided ankle boots, which eventually evolved into Chelsea boots.

8. [3:31-4:02] After finding prickly seed pods on himself and his dog, de Mestral examined their tiny hooks and copied the fastening principle. Velcro initially struggled to catch on, but NASA used it in space; by the late 1960s it was used on shoes.

9. [4:08-4:21] The surgeon's knot (also called the Tibetan trekking knot) and the Berluti knot are mentioned. The Ian knot claims to be the fastest way to tie shoes.

10. [4:22-4:35] Even a strong knot can eventually come undone. The presenter jokingly suggests admitting defeat and getting out Velcro shoes.

Phrase Match: 1=D, 2=A, 3=G, 4=C, 5=J, 6=E, 7=H, 8=B, 9=F, 10=I

Synonym Match: 1=F, 2=H, 3=A, 4=G, 5=C, 6=E, 7=J, 8=D, 9=B, 10=I

Example Sentences With the Phrases

No.	Example sentence
1	The ribbons on the parcels kept coming undone during the journey.
2	Whether we finish on time comes down to how quickly the parts arrive.
3	The new method sounds promising, but we need to put this to the test.
4	The researchers set out to discover why the old bridge kept vibrating.
5	Even small design choices have a part to play in product safety.
6	When decorating a small flat, less is more.
7	The instructions are detailed, but the overall design makes sense.
8	The reusable packaging idea took several years to catch on.
9	Can you come up with a cheaper way of solving the problem?
10	After four attempts to repair the zip, I had to admit defeat.

Teacher note: Accept accurate paraphrases grounded in the video. Listening timestamps are approximate. All Phrase Match expressions are quoted as spoken; the ten example sentences use those phrases in the same order. Discussion and original-sentence activities are open-ended.