BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The English We Speak
Non-starter

This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Feifei
Hello and welcome to The English We Speak, where we explain phrases and expressions used by fluent English speakers so that you can use them too. I'm Feifei.

Phil
And I'm Phil.

Feifei
What are you working on there, Phil?

Phil
I've been putting together a business idea. Mail-order coffee.

Feifei
What's that?

Phil
Yeah, you could have an app, and then when you fancy a coffee, you press a button, and someone makes you one and sends it to you through the post.

Feifei
I think that's the worst business idea I've ever heard! In fact, I'd say that's a complete non-starter.

Phil
Maybe you're right. I'll have to think of something else. In the meantime, let's look at that expression 'non-starter'. Can you explain it, Feifei?

©British Broadcasting Corporation 2026

Feifei
Yes, we describe something as a 'non-starter' if we think it has absolutely no chance of succeeding. I think a mail-order coffee business is pretty much guaranteed to fail – it's a non-starter.

Phil
It's an expression that we can use to talk about a business idea, but it's also something that can be about any plan, project or initiative. We often use the expression to say that something hasn't been approved.

Feifei
Yes, so it's also what we use to reject a proposal. For example, 'I've seen your suggestions, but I'm sorry, that's a non-starter'.

Let's listen to some other people using the expression 'non-starter'.

Examples
I've got some friends who live in Scotland. They've invited me up to their house for Christmas, which is great, but they want me to go for a freezing cold swim in the sea on Christmas day, and that is a non-starter.

You want me to leave at 6.30 in the morning for this hike? That's a non-starter!

I pitched an idea at work to make a podcast series about monkeys learning English. My boss said it was a non-starter.

Feifei
We've been learning the expression 'non-starter' to mean a plan or idea that people think will definitely fail.

Phil
Yes. It might come from horse-racing, where a horse that just stays at the start line and refuses to run is described as a 'non-starter'. Literally, it didn't start the race.

Feifei
OK. That's it for this programme but join us again next time. When it comes to ideas, learning English is definitely not a non-starter – and we have lots of different ways to help you!

Phil
See you next time!

©British Broadcasting Corporation 2026

Feifei
Bye bye!

©British Broadcasting Corporation 2026