

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English — What is the meaning and origin of 'deus ex machina'?

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What is the meaning and origin of 'deus ex machina'?

(Kavita Singh, Aligarh)

First, let us deal with the pronunciation of this Latin expression. The 'de' in 'deus' is pronounced like the word 'day', and the 'u' in the second syllable is like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'ex' that follows is pronounced like the letter 'x'. The 'mach' in 'machina' rhymes with 'pack', 'back' and 'sack', and the 'i' is like the 'i' in 'bit', 'kit' and 'pit'. The final 'a' is like the 'a' in 'china'. One way of pronouncing the word is 'day-es ex MAK-i-ne' with the main stress on the first syllable of 'machina'.

The expression literally means 'god from the machine', and its use generally indicates disapproval. When used in literature, it suggests the sudden and unexpected appearance of someone and his miraculous ability to solve all problems.

*The main characters survive thanks to deus ex machina.

The expression comes from the world of Greek drama; in these plays, gods (deus) usually made an appearance in the final act and magically sorted out the problems of the main characters.

The actor playing the role of God was usually suspended from a contraption (machina) to give the impression that he was floating down from heaven.

What is the difference between 'altercation' and 'spat'?

(R Ajit, Pune)

An altercation is when two people disagree about something, and have a loud argument about it in public. It may be about something important or trivial, but it usually results in the two people not speaking to each other for some time.

*According to the coach, the altercation started in the gym.

'Spat' is mostly used in informal contexts to refer to an argument about something very trivial; it doesn't usually last for any length of time and is not necessarily loud. One usually

talks about a 'lover's spat'. The couple usually has a fight over something rather silly and they make up very quickly. It does not, as in the case of an altercation, necessarily result in a breakup.

*Sheba is in a bad mood because she had a spat with her husband.

What is the meaning of 'head' in 'head towards the lab'?

(Vidya Sagar, New Delhi)

The word 'head' can be used as a noun as well as a verb. When used a verb, it is frequently used to mean 'to move in a specified direction'. Therefore when you say that you are headed towards the lab, you mean you are moving in the direction of the lab – in other words, you are going to the lab.

It's been a long day. I think I'll head home.

Why do the English say, 'the King is dead, long live the King'?

(V. Nakul, Raichur)

It is not just the **English**, even the French have a similar saying. I understand that according to English law, the moment a King dies, the next in line becomes Sovereign. The second half of the expression (long live the King) refers to the new King – people are hoping that he will reign for a long time. 'Long live the monarchy' is what the people are saying.

"If Plan A didn't work, don't worry, the alphabet has 25 more letters." – **Heidi McDonald**

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