

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - meaning of 'energise'

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What is the meaning and origin of 'Aunt Sally'?

(S.K. Sharma, Visakha- patnam)

Aunt Sally is the name of a game played in some parts of Britain where the figure of a woman's head with a clay pipe in her mouth is mounted on a pole. Players who participate in the game, stand at a distance and throw sticks or balls at the head in the hope of knocking down the pipe. This mounted head is called Aunt Sally, and the game is a regular feature in most carnivals and county fairs. Over a period of time, 'Aunt Sally' has acquired a figurative meaning. Nowadays, it is used to mean someone or something that is set up as an easy target for people to make fun of. An Aunt Sally is a scapegoat; an object or a person set up for the purpose of being knocked down.

*The politician has become everyone's Aunt Sally.

What is the difference between 'energise' and 'enervate'?

(M. Aswath, Coimbatore)

First, let's deal with the pronunciation of 'enervate'. The first 'e' sounds like the 'e' in 'end', 'bend' and 'send', while the second is like the 'a' in 'china'. The final 'vate' rhymes with 'ate', 'hate' and 'date'. This rather formal word is pronounced 'EN-er-vate' with the stress on the first syllable. Like the word 'enervate', 'energise' has the stress on the first syllable. Their meanings, however, are very different; 'enervate' is the opposite of 'energise'. When you are 'energised', you feel full of energy or enthusiasm. Your energy levels rise and you begin to feel very active.

*Rahul felt energised after his early morning walk.

*Political parties are going to have a difficult time energising the voters.

When something 'enervates' you, it exhausts you. It makes you feel tired; you feel drained mentally or physically. The word comes from the Latin 'enervare' meaning 'to weaken'.

*The enervating disease is taking its toll on Kamini.

*The game was even more enervating than Rahul had expected.

How is the word 'nuance' pronounced?

(Mahfooz Alam, Varanasi)

This word of French origin can be pronounced in different ways. One simple way is to pronounce the 'nu' like the word 'new' and the 'ance' like the 'ans' in 'answer'. The word is pronounced 'NEW-aans' with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the French 'nuer' meaning 'to shade'. In English, the word can be used as a noun and a verb to mean a slight or subtle difference in meaning, appearance or sound.

*Being unfamiliar with the nuances of the language, Sheela failed to appreciate the humour in the play.

*Dilip spent a lot of time studying the nuances of the actor's facial expressions.

What is the meaning of 'scarce as hen's teeth'?

(Meena, Mysore)

We all know that a hen does not have any teeth. Therefore, when you say that something is as scarce as hen's teeth, you are implying that it is very rare; perhaps even non-existent. It is also possible to say 'scarcer than hen's teeth'. The idiom is mostly used in American English.

*Recent events have shown that an honest politician is as scarce as hen's teeth.

*On the day of the bundh, taxis and autos were scarcer than hen's teeth.

“The magician and the politician have much in common: they both have to draw our attention away from what they are really doing.” – Ben Okri

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