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## You're on the wrong track



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**What is the meaning and origin of 'barking up the wrong tree'? (S Rajendra Prasad, Gudivada)**

The expression is mostly used in informal contexts to mean to waste one's time or effort by choosing the wrong course of action. When you tell someone that he is barking up the wrong tree, what you are suggesting is that he will not succeed because he is on the wrong track.

*If you think Mr. Srinivas will give you the job because he and your father are good friends, you're barking up the wrong tree.*

*I really thought Kamal would help. But I was barking up the wrong tree.*

According to scholars, the expression comes from the world of raccoon hunting. In the early days of colonisation in America, settlers made use of dogs to hunt these furry, nocturnal animals. Raccoons are adept at climbing trees. So, whenever dogs pursued them, they inevitably climbed one and proceeded to jump from one tree to another. The dogs usually stood under the tree that the animal had climbed and kept barking – not realising that their prey had moved on and that they were barking up the wrong tree!

### **Which is correct? He dived/dove into the pool? (KV Sreemathi, Chennai)**

There was a time when 'dived' was considered the only correct past tense form of 'dive'. But thanks to a pair like 'drive-drove', many people in the United States began to use 'dove' instead of the older past tense form 'dived'. Today, the preferred form in the U.S. and Canada is 'dove'; the British use 'dived' much more frequently. Nowadays, both forms of the verb are accepted.

*The students dived/dove off the bridge and seriously injured themselves.*

*When the police started firing at him, Nikhil dove/dived for cover.*

### **What is the meaning of 'an easy touch'? (Dheeraj Kumar, Lucknow)**

When you say that someone is 'an easy touch' or 'a soft touch', what you are suggesting is that the person can be easily manipulated. He is someone who can be easily persuaded to do whatever you want him to – for example, give you money. The two expressions are mostly limited to informal contexts.

*Shalini's mother is a tough cookie. She's by no means a soft touch.*

*I think it's about time that Ravi stopped being such an easy touch.*

### **How is the word 'sycophant' pronounced? (D Shyamkrishnan, Tiruchi)**

The 'syc' is pronounced like the word 'sick', and the following 'o' is like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'phan' is pronounced like the word 'fan'. One way of pronouncing the word is 'SICK-e-fant' with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the Greek 'sukophantes' meaning informer. Nowadays, the word is mostly used to show disapproval. When you refer to someone as being a 'sycophant', what you are suggesting is that he flatters others – especially those in power – to get what he wants. He is a like a parasite.

*Sycophants surround the new Minister wherever she goes.*

*I wouldn't take what your sycophants say very seriously.*

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*Flattery is like chewing gum. Enjoy it, but don't swallow it. – Hank Ketchman*

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