

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

# Know your English – How is the word ‘ignoramus’ pronounced?

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## What is the difference between ‘student’ and ‘pupil’?

(K. Sankaranarayanan, Madurai)

The word ‘student’ comes from the Latin ‘studiare’ meaning ‘to study’. Therefore, anyone who is studying can be called a student. It could be a four year old who is in kindergarten or a forty year old attempting to do a PhD. ‘Pupil’, on the other hand, comes from the French ‘pupille’ meaning ‘orphan child’.

The word is limited to British English, and it is used to refer to a school going child. Those who are enrolled in college/university are called ‘students’ and not ‘pupils’. Books on usage suggest that pupil is old fashioned.

\*I have several naughty pupils in my class.

\*The students had a great deal of admiration for Prof. Ramdas.

## What is the meaning of ‘pushing the envelope’?

(T.S. Karthik, Chennai)

This particular expression is mostly used in informal contexts; in fact, there was a time it was considered slang. When you ‘push the envelope’, you go beyond what is currently possible; as one dictionary puts it, you attempt to ‘stretch the boundaries’ of something.

\*As a teacher, he is always experimenting – always trying to push the envelope.

\*Many believe Apple is a company that is constantly pushing the envelope.

I understand that the expression was first used in the 1940s by U.S. Air Force test pilots. Even today, when a pilot tests an aircraft, he usually pushes the envelope; in other words, he deliberately performs dangerous manoeuvres to see how much the aircraft can take.

He goes beyond the limits prescribed by the manufacturer in order to determine what the plane can do.

The expression became a part of everyday language when Tom Wolfe's novel 'The Right Stuff' was made into a movie in 1983!

### **How is the word 'ignoramus' pronounced?**

(L Lavanya, Mysore)

Thanks to Girish Karnad, this word recently made the headlines in several newspapers. The well-known actor and writer called his critics 'ignoramuses'. The 'ig' in the first syllable sounds like the 'ig' in 'pig', 'fig' and 'dig', while the following 'o' and the final 'u' are pronounced like the 'a' in 'china'. The third syllable is pronounced like the word 'ray'. The word is pronounced 'ig-ne-RAY-mes' with the stress on the third syllable. It is mostly used to mean a stupid or an ignorant person.

\*How could you hire an ignoramus like Mala for the job?

Ignoramus is an example of how the meaning of a word can change over time. It was originally an expression used in law to mean 'we don't know'. But when George Ruggle wrote his play 'Ignoramus' in the early 17th century, the word acquired its present meaning. The main character in the play was a lawyer named Ignoramus who knew little or nothing about law.

### **What is the meaning of 'bromance'?**

(J Krishna, Chennai)

The word 'bro' is frequently used in informal contexts in American English to refer to a male friend that one is rather close to. It is the shortened form of 'brother' and it rhymes with the words 'pro' and 'crow'. 'Bromance' is a combination of 'brother' and 'romance', and it refers to a close relationship between two men. The relationship is Platonic and not sexual in nature.

\*Ram and Keshav. The office bromance everyone is talking about.

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*"... no amount of learning can cure stupidity and formal learning positively fortifies it."* — **Stephen Vizinczey**

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