

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English — 'c'est la vie'

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How is the expression 'c'est la vie' pronounced?

(B. Sowmya, Nagpur)

There are different ways of pronouncing this French expression. One way is to pronounce the 'c'est' like the word 'say'. The 'a' in 'la' is like the 'a' in 'bath', 'path' and 'pass', while the 'ie' in 'vie' sounds like the 'ee' in 'bees', 'fees' and 'geese'. The expression is pronounced 'say-la-VEE' with the stress on the third word. It means 'such is life' or 'that's life'. When things don't go according to plan, some people complain non-stop; while others accept the fact that disappointments are a part of life and get on with it. The expression 'c'est la vie' is mostly used to downplay your sense of disappointment. Its use suggests that you will be able to deal with the disappointment that has come your way.

*I can't go to the exhibition with you tomorrow because my mother-in-law is arriving in the morning. C'est la vie.

*It was a good match. Our team lost in the tiebreaker. C'est la vie.

Other expressions that have the same meaning are, 'that's the way the cookie crumbles' and 'that's the way the ball bounces'.

What is the difference between 'I met/encountered many interesting people during the trip'?

(H Jyothi, Chennai)

'Encountered' would be considered the formal of the two. The word comes from the Old French 'encontrer' meaning 'confront'. In the past, when you said that you 'encountered' someone, it meant that you met him as an adversary or an enemy; the meeting usually resulted in a confrontation. Nowadays, when used as a verb, 'encounter' means to meet someone accidentally or unexpectedly. The word 'meet' has a wider range of meanings than 'encounter'. Like 'encounter', it can be used to suggest that you ran into someone — that your coming together was an accident. Meet can also be used to suggest that the meeting was prearranged; an appointment had been made earlier.

*We have decided to meet in the library after class.

*Rama encountered an old friend of hers at the museum.

Why is television often referred to as the 'idiot box'?

(Habeeb Rahman, Madurai)

It is not because the programmes that are shown on the 'telly' are idiotic. Television is often called the 'idiot box' because people are reduced to being idiots when they watch TV programmes. What is it that we usually do when we watch TV? We remain glued to the seat and the eyes remain fixed on the screen; sometimes we are not even aware of what is happening around us. Since we remain hypnotised, we seldom think. Nowadays, TV is sometimes referred to as the 'plug-in drug'. Like any drug, it is difficult to kick the habit. A person who is completely immersed in the programme that he is watching is said to be 'TV stoned'!

There are people who go to office once a week. Most of the time they claim to be working from home. Is there a word for such a person?

(Prakash Rao, Chennai)

Thanks to the Internet, it has now become possible to work from anywhere. The word coined by Microsoft to refer to people who can get their job done from any location is 'moofer'. It stands for 'mobile out of office worker'. Are you a moofer?

"Watching television is like taking black spray paint to your third eye." — Bill Hicks

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