

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English

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“This is indeed a big surprise! You reading something so early in the morning!”

“I can assure you that I’m not enjoying it one bit. Tell me, how do you pronounce i..m..b..e..c..i..l..e?”

“There are different ways of pronouncing the word. One way is to pronounce the ‘i’ in the first syllable and the ‘e’ in the second like the ‘i’ in ‘pin’, ‘bin’ and ‘tin’. The final syllable is pronounced like the word ‘seal’. The word can be pronounced ‘IM-bi-seal’ with the stress on the first syllable. Do you know what it means?”

“Well, in this story, the hero calls the villain ‘an imbecile’. My guess is he’s calling him an idiot. An ‘imbecile’ is probably someone who behaves rather stupidly.”

“He’s not just stupid, he’s very stupid. Don’t stand there in the pouring rain like an imbecile, Jai.”

“Velu had a little too much to drink at the party last night. After his second glass of beer, he began to behave like an imbecile.”

“That’s a good example. You know, till the late 18th century, the word was used to refer to someone who had the intelligence of a seven-year-old.”

“I see. I heard that your friend Jai is trying his hands at tennis. Is it true?”

“It is, and he seems to be enjoying it too. He says that...”

“I wish I could try my hands at tennis. It’s such a...”

“It’s not ‘hands’, but ‘hand’. You usually try your hand at something. Do you know what the expression means?”

“Of course, I do. When you try your hand at something, you try to do something for the first time. You do it because you’re keen to find out if you’re good at it or not. Shana wants to try her hand at cooking.”

“God help those around her. During the vacation, I tried my hand at crossword puzzles. I found that I was really good at it.”

“What about Jai? Is he planning to try his hand at any other game?”

“I don’t think so. In fact, he may be giving up tennis soon. Two of his senior Managers have quit. So poor Jai is in a bind. He really doesn’t...”

“In a bind? What does it mean?”

“The expression is frequently heard in informal contexts in American English. It means ‘to be in a fix’ or a ‘jam’. You have a really hard time dealing with a problem.”

“So, it has the same meaning as ‘to put someone in a tight spot’, I guess. Whenever Jai is in a bind, he usually goes to his father for help.”

“Good example. The workers’ demands have put us in a bind. We don’t know...”

“Tell me, where does the expression ‘in a bind’ come from?”

“I understand it was coined by loggers – men who cut down trees. One of the meanings of ‘bind’ is ‘hindered’ or to prevent the free movement of something. Sometimes, the saw that the loggers were using got stuck in the tree.”

“The men were in a fix or a bind because they were unable to move the saw forward or backward. They probably didn’t know what to do. They probably stood there like imbeciles.”

“I seriously doubt that. I’m sure they knew what to do.”

“When a finger points to the moon, the imbecile looks at the finger.” Chinese proverb

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