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Did you hear the cackle?

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How is the word 'abysmal' pronounced? (Eshan Srivastava, Unnao)

The vowels in the first and last syllables are like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'bys' in the second syllable is pronounced like the word 'biz'. The word is pronounced 'e-BIZ-mel' with the stress on the second syllable. It comes from the Greek 'abusos' meaning 'bottomless pit'.

The word carries with it a negative connotation. When you say that someone's performance was abysmal, you are suggesting that it was extremely bad; it was appalling. This is one of the meanings of the word.

Ashwin's performance at the interview was abysmal.

The voter turnout for the elections was abysmal.

What is the meaning and origin of 'shooting from the hip'? (K Kumar, Thiruvanthapuram)

For those of us who have grown up watching westerns (cowboy films), the expression brings to mind the duel between two gunfighters. The two men would stand at a certain distance from each other, and the aim was to 'draw' (remove the gun from the holster) and fire as quickly and accurately as possible. The quickest way to achieve this was to fire the gun from the hip - with the gun held low and to one's side. The problem was, it was not possible to be accurate when shooting in this manner. Nowadays, the expression is used figuratively to mean to act impulsively. When you shoot from the hip, you say or do things without thinking things through. Like the gunfighter, whose aim is to fire the gun as quickly as possible, your aim is to respond immediately to something someone has said or done.

As your campaign manager, I strongly advise you to stick to the prepared script. Avoid your tendency to shoot from the hip.

The star became very flustered during the interview and began to shoot from the hip.

What is the difference between 'cackle' and 'laugh'? (Ananth Rao, Bengaluru)

The first syllable in 'cackle' rhymes with 'pack' and 'back'. Of the two, 'laugh' is a general term and can be used in various contexts. There are different kinds of laughter; one can laugh loudly or softly. 'Cackle', on the other hand, suggests a particular type of laughter.

When a person cackles, he laughs in a loud manner; people around can hear the laughter and some may involuntarily shudder for it sounds rather high pitched and harsh. In our films, it is usually the evil witch who has this kind of laughter.

When you describe someone's laughter as being a 'cackle', you are showing disapproval.

As I climbed the stairs, I heard my grandmother and her friends cackling in the drawing room.

How can you marry someone who cackles like a witch?

Is it okay to say, 'He is considering to play for another team'? (R Nirmala, Chennai)

Although we hear such sentences quite frequently, careful users of the language would argue that the word 'considering' should not be followed by 'to'. It should be followed by a gerund - the 'ing' form of a verb. You always consider doing something.

Devaki is seriously considering quitting her job.

The college is considering declaring tomorrow a holiday.

I have a very strict gun control policy. If there's a gun around, I want to be in control of it. — Clint Eastwood

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