

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

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How is the word ‘elan’ pronounced?

(T. Vasanthi, Chidambaram)

One simple way of pronouncing this word of French origin is to pronounce the ‘e’ like the ‘ay’ in ‘pay’, ‘bay’ and ‘say’, and the following ‘a’ like the ‘a’ in ‘ant’, ‘apple’ and ‘pants’. The word is pronounced ‘ay-LAN’ with the stress on the second syllable. It is mostly used in formal contexts to mean lively and energetic. When someone dances with ‘elan’, he moves about the floor with a lot of energy and style. The word literally means ‘to dart’.

*Don’t be fooled by Nina’s lazy walk. Once she’s on stage, she dances with elan.

*After a long time, the country had a President with a certain elan.

What is the meaning of ‘furlough’?

(KV Kanchana, Erode)

First, let us deal with the pronunciation of the word. The first syllable is pronounced like the word ‘fur’ and the following ‘lough’ like the word ‘low’. The word is pronounced ‘FUR-low’ with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the Dutch ‘verlof’ meaning ‘permission’. It was originally used to refer to the leave of absence granted to a soldier; when a soldier returned home to spend time with the members of his family, he was said to be ‘on furlough’. Nowadays, the word is being used with a wide range of people – workers, prisoners, soldiers, etc.

In fact, anyone who is employed can go on furlough. Dictionaries define the word, as a period of time when someone is permitted to be absent from work.

A furlough is temporary; once the leave period is over, the individual is expected to return to duty. In the case of a prisoner, he returns to jail. The word can also be used as a verb. When a company ‘furloughs’ its employees, it tells them not to come to work – in such cases, they are usually not paid for the period of absence.

*Vikram is on a six week furlough.

*If the situation doesn’t improve, we may have to furlough many of our employees.

What is the meaning of 'Mexican standoff'?

(CR Ananthanarayanan, Bengaluru)

This is a situation we often see in our movies. 'A' has a gun pointed at 'B', 'B' has a gun pointed at 'C' and 'C' has his gun pointed at 'A'. The three keep looking at each other, but no one is actually brave enough to pull the trigger. A no-win situation like this is generally referred to as 'Mexican standoff'.

In everyday contexts, the expression can be used when only two people or two parties are involved. 'Mexican standoff' has more or less the same meaning as 'deadlock' or 'stalemate'. The expression was used quite frequently during the Cold War – when the Soviet Union and the United States eyed each other rather suspiciously.

*Neither the union nor the management is willing to compromise. It's a Mexican standoff.

Is it okay to say, 'Roses are the first thing that come to my mind when I think of Ooty'?

(J Paul, Mumbai)

You normally say, 'come to mind' and 'spring to mind'. Careful users of the language would avoid 'my', 'his', 'her', etc. in these expressions.

*What's the first thing that comes to mind when I say 'beach'?

"Dancing is like bank robbery. It takes split second timing." – **Twyla Tharp**

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