

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – meaning of 'gadfly'

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What is the meaning of the word 'gadfly'?

(Ritu Bajaj, Mumbai)

First, let us deal with the pronunciation of this word. The first syllable rhymes with 'bad', 'sad' and 'dad', while the second is pronounced like the word 'fly'. The word is pronounced 'GAD-fly' with the stress on the first syllable. A 'gadfly' is an insect which one finds near livestock; it keeps biting and irritating the poor animals.

The word has acquired a figurative meaning as well. When you call a person a 'gadfly', you mean that the individual constantly annoys others by criticising them. He makes himself a nuisance by asking many irritating questions.

*Mohini is the office gadfly that everyone avoids.

What is the meaning of 'walk the talk'?

(M. Sridharan, Chennai)

I understand that the full expression is 'talk the talk and walk the walk'. When you tell someone to 'walk the talk', you are asking him to do what he has said he would do. In other words, you want the individual to stop talking about what he intends to do, and just do it.

Politicians often talk about how they are going to put an end to corruption; they seldom follow up on the matter – they do not walk the talk. Other expressions that have more or less the same meaning are 'to put your money where your mouth is' and 'action speaks louder than words'.

*You've been telling all my friends that you will beat me in straight sets. Now walk the talk.

How is the word 'clerk' pronounced?

(Brijesh, Bangalore)

There are two different ways of pronouncing 'clerk'. The British make the word rhyme with 'park', 'dark', and 'shark', while the Americans make it rhyme with 'work', 'shirk', and 'lurk'. When

we think of a clerk nowadays, the picture that immediately comes to mind is of someone who is always surrounded by dusty files. We seldom associate this individual with scholarship or religion. In the past, however, a clerk was looked up to for he was one of the few individuals who could read and write; he was considered to be a scholar.

The word comes from the Latin 'clericus' meaning 'priest'; a 'clerk' was someone who belonged to the 'cleric'. Kings and nobles frequently hired this person as their scribe and accountant. With the passage of time, 'clerk' began to be used to refer to anyone who could read and write – not necessarily a priest – and maintain accounts.

What is the difference between 'crow's feet' and 'worry lines'?

(Mala Rao, Trichy)

These are the lines or wrinkles that begin to appear on a person's face as he begins to age. The lines that appear around the outer corner of the eye are called 'crow's feet'; some people refer to them as 'laugh lines'. Such lines are called 'crow's feet' because they resemble the footprint of a crow. The wrinkles that appear on the forehead or between the eyebrows are called 'worry lines'. They have been given this name because they usually appear when we frown or when we concentrate on something.

*People have started using botox to get rid of worry lines.

"Please don't retouch my wrinkles. It took me so long to earn them." – **Anna Magnani**

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