

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

# Know your English — What is the difference between 'blackmail' and 'extortion'?

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**What is the difference between 'blackmail' and 'extortion'?**

(Anurag Lasne, Pune)

The two words have a negative connotation. In both cases, you are trying to forcefully take or get something from someone through illegal means – it could be anything: money, property, etc. 'Extortion' is the formal of the two, and it was originally used to refer to a crime committed by a public official; a person who worked for the government and misused his position. A politician demanding money from a businessman before granting him a licence for his new business or a clerk asking for money to 'move the file' are examples of extortion. Nowadays, the word is used to refer to crimes committed by non-public officials as well. A criminal forcing shopkeepers to pay 'protection money' would be an example of extortion. According to some books on usage, 'extortion' suggests there is a threat of violence – either to the person or property. When you are 'blackmailed', a person threatens to go public with information that may be potentially damaging or embarrassing for you. In this case, however, there is no physical threat involved. In the eyes of the law, both are punishable acts.

**What is the meaning of 'success has many fathers, failure is an orphan'?**

(BC Koshy, Bangalore)

Usually, when an organisation plans an event and it becomes a huge success, everyone tries to take credit for it. Each person would like to have his fifteen minutes of fame. But should the same event turn out to be a disaster, no one will take responsibility for it; each man will point a finger at someone else. When you say that "success has many fathers, failure is an orphan", you mean that while many people take credit for the success of something, few will accept responsibility for any failure. No one wants to be associated with failure; like an orphan, it always stands alone. I understand the original Latin expression was "victory has a hundred fathers, while no one acknowledges a failure."

\*After the trouncing, no Minister from the party was willing to talk to reporters. You know what they say, success has many fathers, failure is an orphan.

## How is the word 'soiree' pronounced?

(TS Karthik, Chennai)

The 'soi' in the first syllable is pronounced like the 'swa' in the Indian name 'Swathi'; the second syllable sounds like the word 'ray'. The word is pronounced 'SWAA-ray' with the stress on the first syllable. The Americans, on the other hand, tend to put the stress on the second syllable. 'Soiree' comes from the French 'soir' meaning 'evening'. This rather formal word is used to refer to an evening get-together where elegantly dressed individuals eat lots of good food and listen to some wonderful music.

## What is the meaning of 'knee-jerk reaction'?

(S Mohan, Alappuzha)

Your knee-jerk reaction to something is your immediate response to it; in most cases, it is automatic, and there is little or no thinking involved.

\*Whenever Rahul says 'yes' to something, his wife says 'no'. I think it's a knee jerk reaction.

\*When a doctor taps you on your knee with a reflex hammer (rubber hammer), the leg automatically shoots up. You have no control over this reaction.

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*"The advantage of growing up with siblings is that you become very good at fractions."* – **Robert Brault**

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