

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - What is the meaning of 'lest'?

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What is the meaning of 'ballpark estimate'?

(N. Chandran, Chennai)

The expression is mostly used in American English to mean an approximate figure. When you ask a mechanic how much the repairs will cost, he usually gives you a rough estimate. The figure he quotes is called a 'ballpark estimate' or a 'ballpark figure'. In this case, it is not a wild estimate. The price he has stated will be very close to the final one that you will have to pay. There won't be too big a difference between the ballpark figure and the actual figure. The word 'ballpark' is used in American English to refer to a stadium.

*There were a hundred people at Sujatha's party. That's just a ballpark estimate.

What is the meaning and origin of 'swan song'?

(R. Harini, Bangalore)

This relatively old idiom is mostly used to refer to the final appearance of an individual before he retires or dies. Originally, the expression was used to refer to the final performance of a musician or an actor. Nowadays, of course, it is being used to refer to the final achievement or public appearance of any individual; the profession to which he belongs is no longer considered important.

*According to the legendary actor, last night's performance was his swan song.

*The completion of the project is my swan song. I retire at the end of the month.

In the old days, people believed that unlike the noisy duck, the beautiful swan remained mute most of its life. They were of the opinion that the only time the bird exercised its vocal cords was just before its death.

The expression 'swan song' alludes to the ancient belief that a swan burst into a beautiful song just before it died. Why 'swan' and not some other bird? In Greek mythology, Apollo (the God of Music and the Sun God) and Aphrodite (the Goddess of Love) considered the swan to be sacred. According to Socrates, the bird broke into a melodious song because it realised that it would soon be in the company of its master – Apollo.

Many well-known writers have been called 'swans': Shakespeare was dubbed the 'Swan of Avon', Homer was given the title 'Swan of Meander', and Virgil was called the 'Mantuan Swan'.

What is the meaning of 'lest'?

(V. Shalini, Coimbatore)

This rather literary word is mostly used in formal contexts. The word is a contraction of the phrase 'les te' meaning 'less that'. With the passage of time, the phrase was reduced to 'lest' meaning 'for fear that' or 'in order that'. The use of this word suggests that you would like to prevent something from happening. It can also be used to mean 'to avoid the risk of'. The word rhymes with 'best' and 'nest'.

*You must run away lest you be forced to marry the old man.

*The Registrar refused to step out lest the angry students beat him up.

Is it okay to say, 'I pity for him'?

(L. Ravindran, Mumbai)

We occasionally hear people say, 'I pity for him' and 'I pity on him'. Both sentences are wrong. You usually say, 'I pity him'. It is possible to 'take pity on someone' and 'feel pity for someone'.

*I took pity on Raju and helped him with the project.

*The child was full of pity for the injured dog.

"Everything comes to him who waits, except a loaned book." – **Kin Hubbard**

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