

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – Meaning & origin of 'born in the purple'

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What is the meaning and origin of 'born in the purple'?

(S. Patel, Mysore)

This is an expression that has been around for several centuries now. It was originally used to refer to babies born to the members of the royal family. The room in which a queen gave birth was usually completely covered in purple. Later, the expression included not just children of royalty, but also the children of aristocrats and high-ranking officials.

Nowadays, it refers to any infant born to a prominent couple. A child born to well-known actors is 'born in the purple'. Some people prefer to say, 'born to the purple'.

*Umesh was born in the purple. It is not surprising, therefore, that the media have spent the last five years watching his every move.

The word 'purple' comes from the Greek 'porphyra'. It referred to a kind of shellfish that yielded purple dye. The Phoenicians extracted small quantities of this rather expensive dye in the city of 'Tyre'. Since it was expensive and very few people could afford it, Kings chose to make 'Tyrian purple', the colour of royalty. They passed laws that ensured that no one other member of the society could wear clothes of this colour – only rulers could wear purple.

Is there a difference between 'to learn something by heart' and 'to learn something by rote'?

(S. Ashwin, Chennai)

Both expressions refer to an individual's ability to commit things to memory. We Indians excel in the art of learning things by heart/rote. As students, we spend a lot of our time memorising answers to questions. We take great pains trying to commit pages from our textbooks to memory; and during exams/tests, we successfully reproduce numerous paragraphs word for word. Some books on usage suggest that of the two expressions, 'learn by rote' has a slightly negative meaning. It suggests that we have memorised things without really understanding the content. The word 'rote', by the way, rhymes with 'note', 'boat', and 'coat'.

THE HINDU

(C. Harini, Coimbatore)

There seems to be two different ways of pronouncing this rather formal word. One way is to pronounce the first syllable like the word 'hay'. The other is to make it rhyme with the words 'bee', 'fee', and 'see'. The 'ou' that follows sounds like the 'a' in 'china'. The word can be pronounced 'HAY-nes' or 'HEE-nes'; in either case, the stress is on the first syllable. Heinous comes from the Old French 'hainos' meaning 'hateful, unpleasant'. A 'heinous' crime is one that is evil or wicked; it is the sort of crime that deserves our contempt.

*The soldier was accused of committing heinous crimes during the war.

What is the meaning of 'I dare say'?

(Pawan Kumar, Nagpur)

When you add 'I dare say' to a statement you have made, you are suggesting that although you are not absolutely certain, you believe the statement you have made is true. As one dictionary puts it, the expression is 'used to indicate that one believes something is probable'. The expression is always used in the first person singular. It is also possible to write 'dare say' as one word: 'daresay'.

*I dare say you are in rather serious trouble.

*It was more a marriage of convenience, I dare say.

"Nostalgia is like a grammar lesson: you find the present tense, and the past perfect!" – **Owens Lee Pomeroy**

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