

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English

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What is the meaning of the word 'efficacy'?

(PR Karthic Raja, Coimbatore)

First, let's deal with the pronunciation of this word. The 'e' is like the 'e' in 'set' and 'bet,' and the 'i' and the 'y' sound like the 'i' in 'bit' and 'sit.' The 'a' is like the 'a' in 'china.' The word is pronounced 'EF-i-ke-si' with the stress on the first syllable. Efficacy comes from the Latin 'efficacia' meaning 'effectiveness.' In English, the word is mostly used to mean the ability to produce the intended or desired result.

*I'm afraid there is little or no information about the efficacy of the drug.

What is the meaning and origin of 'red herring'?

(Vivek, Kanpur)

Sometimes an argument between two friends becomes quite serious. Tempers flare, they begin to shout, and it looks as though they might start throwing punches at each other. In order to ease the tension, we might say something to divert their attention. What we say might have nothing to do with the argument the friends are having, but we succeed in changing the focus of their attention. This ploy that we use to divert the attention of our friends is called 'red herring.' It is a distractor; a red herring is something that is used to turn the focus of attention from something important to something totally insignificant. The expression has a slightly negative connotation.

*The killer was never caught because the police were busy chasing red herrings.

A 'herring' is a fish that emits a very strong smell. In the past, escaped convicts used this fish to trick the police dogs that were used to track them. While he ran, the fugitive dragged a herring along with him. After some time, he threw the fish in one direction and he ran off in the other. The chasing bloodhounds were fooled into following the scent of the herring. The original idiom was 'drag a red herring across the trail'; later, it was shortened to 'red herring.' The colour of the fish is not red, but grey. It turns red when it is 'cured' – i.e. when it is smoked and salted.

How is the word 'egalitarian' pronounced?

(N. Sukanya, Bangalore)

The 'e' and the 'i' in the third and fifth syllables are pronounced like the 'i' in 'kit' and 'pit'. The 'ga' sounds like the 'ga' in 'gas' and 'gamble', while the 'tar' in the fourth syllable rhymes with 'fare' and 'bare'. The 'a' in the final syllable is like the 'a' in 'china'. This rather formal word is pronounced 'i-ga-li-TARE-i-en' with the stress on the fourth syllable. It can be used as a noun and an adjective. An egalitarian is someone who believes in the principle of equality; he believes that everyone in a society is equally important, and therefore every individual should be given the same rights and opportunities in life.

*Rachna wants the newly formed party to adopt egalitarian principles.

Which is correct: 'I bet you Swetha is in the library' or 'I bet Swetha is in the library'?

(S. Mohana, Chennai)

Both are correct; in everyday conversation, people tend to drop the 'you'. These expressions are mostly used in informal contexts to mean 'I think' or 'It's probable that'.

I bet (you) Federer will win the title.

"A politician is a fellow who will lay down your life for his country." – **Texas Guinan**

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