

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

# Know your English – How is the word ‘payola’ pronounced?

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SEPTEMBER 24, 2012 20:48 IST

UPDATED: OCTOBER 18, 2016 14:57 IST

## What is the difference between ‘phlegmatic’ and ‘mercurial’?

(P. Divyashree, Bangalore)

Both words are used to refer to the temperament of a person. A ‘phlegmatic’ individual is someone who does not show his emotions; he seldom gets excited or angry about anything. Since he is not easily upset and remains calm, he is the ideal person to have in a crisis. The ‘ph’ in the word sounds like the ‘f’ in ‘fish’ and ‘fan’, and the vowel in the second syllable is like the ‘a’ in ‘act’ and ‘bat’. The word is pronounced ‘fleg-MA-tic’ with the stress on the second syllable.

A ‘mercurial’ individual, on the other hand, is rather unpredictable. His mood changes very quickly and very often; he is happy one minute and angry/sad the next. He is also someone who frequently changes his opinion about things. Unlike the phlegmatic individual, he wears his heart on his sleeve.

\*Ramesh's colleagues avoid him because of his mercurial temperament.

\*The phlegmatic CEO patiently listened to the outburst of the angry workers.

## What is the meaning and origin of ‘set the cat among the pigeons’?

(D Ananthapadmanabhan, Coimbatore)

If you were to deliberately put a cat inside a cage full of pigeons, what would be the reaction of the poor birds? They would panic and create a lot of commotion flying from one part of the cage to the other, trying to keep the cat at ‘paw’s length’! When you ‘put’ or ‘set’ the cat among the pigeons, you are saying or doing something that makes a lot of people angry or worried. Very often, this is done deliberately. The idiom is mostly used in British English.

\*Tell the students they have a test tomorrow. That should set the cat among the pigeons.

## How is the word ‘payola’ pronounced?

(B.L. Arun, Trichy)

The first syllable sounds like the word ‘pay’ and the following ‘o’ like the ‘o’ in ‘so’ and ‘no’. The ‘a’ in the final syllable sounds like the ‘a’ in ‘china’. This rather old-fashioned word that

is mostly used in American English is pronounced 'pay-O-le' with the stress on the second syllable.

It refers to the 'bribe' paid to someone; a concept that all Indians are familiar with.

\*The Minister was accused of accepting payola from several American firms.

In the 1930s when music became the staple diet of the radio in the U.S., gramophone companies did everything possible to promote their records/songs. Some of them bribed the disc jockeys working for popular radio stations into playing their records repeatedly.

The word is a combination of 'pay' and 'ola': the second half of the word comes from 'Victrola'; a gramophone company that was well known in the early 20th century.

### **Why is the place where grain is stored spelt 'granary' and not 'grainery'?**

(S. Mohanan, Chennai)

English has borrowed extensively from many languages. The word 'grain', for example, has been borrowed from the French 'graine'. The place where grain is stored, on the other hand, has been borrowed from the Latin 'granaria'. It is from this word that we get 'granary', and it originally meant 'storehouse for corn'. Nowadays, a granary is used to store any grain. By the way, while the 'a' in 'grain' is like the 'ay' in 'bay' and 'day', the first 'a' in 'granary' is like the 'a' in 'cat' and 'bat'.

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*"A diet is the penalty we pay for exceeding the feed limit."* – **Unknown**

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