

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

# Know your English – Meaning and origin of ‘not dry behind the ears’

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## How is the word ‘divorcée’ pronounced?

(K. Jayanth, Hyderabad)

The ‘I’ in the first syllable is like the ‘I’ in ‘hit’, ‘pit’ and ‘sit’, while the second syllable rhymes with the words ‘force’ and ‘course’. The British pronounce the final ‘ée’ like the ‘ee’ in ‘see’ and ‘bee’, while the Americans pronounce it like the ‘ay’ in ‘bay’ and ‘pay’. The word can be pronounced ‘di-vor-SEE’ or ‘di-vor-SAY’; in either case, the stress is on the final syllable. A ‘divorcée’ is a woman who is divorced; a man who is divorced is called ‘divorcé’. Both words are pronounced the same way, and both have an accent mark on the ‘é’ after the ‘c’.

\*Shekar didn’t know that Deepa was a divorcée.

## What is the meaning and origin of ‘not dry behind the ears’?

(Nalini Sharma, Bangalore)

This expression has the same meaning as ‘wet behind the ears’ and ‘hardly dry behind the ears’. When you say that someone is ‘not dry behind the ears’ you are implying that the individual is inexperienced. The person is young and green; since he doesn’t know the ways of the world, he is someone who can be easily duped.

\*How could you ask Prema to head such a big project? She’s not dry behind the ears.

When we enter this world of ours, we not only come out crying, but also dripping wet. Before handing us off to the anxious mother, a nurse usually takes a few minutes to dry us off with a towel – removing the amniotic fluid we’d been floating around in for nine months. In the case of animals, it’s the mother’s job to lick the new-born dry. One of the last places to eventually become dry is the area behind the ears. An animal that is still not dry behind the ears is ‘green’.

## Is it okay to say, ‘Everyone had a cell phone in their hand’?

(K. Nagarajan, Bangalore)

People who swear by the rules of grammar would frown on this sentence. They would argue that ‘everyone’ is singular, therefore the pronoun that is used to refer to it should also be

singular. According to them, the correct sentence would be 'Everyone had a cell phone in his hand'. Others who don't wish to be accused of gender bias would come up with an inelegant sentence like, 'Everyone had a cell phone in his/her hand.' It is to avoid such clumsy sentences that many native speakers frequently use 'their' and 'them' to refer to singular pronouns like 'everyone', 'someone', etc. Sentences like 'If someone calls, tell them I'm busy' and 'Everyone had a frown on their face' are quite common. As the grammarian Bryan Garner puts it, "Disturbing though these developments may be to purists, they are irreversible. And nothing that a grammarian says will change them."

### **What is the meaning of 'en bloc'?**

(Sunil Kumar, Chennai)

First, let us deal with the pronunciation. This expression of French origin is pronounced 'on BLOCK' with the stress on the second word. The literal meaning of this expression is 'in a block'. In **English**, it is mainly used to mean 'all together' or 'as a whole'.

\*The members of the Ethics Committee threatened to resign en bloc.

\*The students wanted the VC to adopt the proposed rules en bloc.

\*\*\*\*\*" *My sister is having a baby and I don't know if I'm going to be an uncle or an aunt.*" –

**Chuck Nevitt**, basketball player.

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