

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – What is the meaning and origin of 'sit on one's hands'?

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What is the meaning and origin of 'sit on one's hands'?

(J.V. Ramesh, Mysore)

How much work would you be able to complete if you sat on your hands all morning? Chances are, you wouldn't get anything done! The expression 'to sit on one's hands' means 'to do nothing'. Instead of extending your hand to help others or yourself, you merely sit on them – you choose to take no action.

*As Mala's brother, you need to help her. You just can't sit on your hands.

The expression comes from the world of theatre. The people sitting on their hands in this case are the members of the audience. If the people in the audience choose to keep their hands warm by sitting on them, what would be the result? The poor performers would get no applause! The original meaning of the idiom was 'to fail to applaud'.

What is the correct pronunciation of 'lieutenant'?

(Rajesh Kumar, Melmaruvathur)

The British pronounce the 'lieut' like the word 'left', and the following 'e' like the 'e' in 'sent' and 'bent'. The vowel in the final syllable is like the 'a' in 'china'. The word is pronounced 'lef-TE-nent' with the stress on the second syllable. The Americans, on the other hand, pronounce the 'lieu' like the word 'loo'. They pronounce the word 'loo-TE-nent'. This is how the main character in the movie 'Forrest Gump' keeps pronouncing the word. Lieutenant, often abbreviated to 'Lt.', is a low ranking officer in the military or the police. It comes from the French 'lieu' meaning 'position' or 'place' and 'tenant' meaning 'to hold'; the word literally means one who takes the place of another. When the superior officer is absent, the Lieutenant takes command of the men.

Why do we say 'copycat'?

(Himanshu Sharma, Patiala)

A copycat is someone who apes others; since there is nothing original about this individual, the word is mostly used to show disapproval.

*The police say that the copycat serial killer has murdered 15 people so far.

But why a 'cat' and not a 'monkey' or 'parrot'; after all, these animals are better known for their ability to ape people. According to some, the expression came into being because kittens learn by copying the behaviour of their mother. But then, this is true of most animals – dogs, foxes, apes, dolphins, etc. do the same. Others believe 'cat' was used because in the past, this animal was associated with everything evil – often, it was used as a term of contempt. Shakespeare used it in this negative sense in 'All's Well That Ends Well': "A pox upon him for me, he is more and more a Cat". Anyone who copied others was therefore contemptuously referred to as 'copycat'.

What is the meaning of 'bleam'?

(Sunil Halapeti, Belgaum)

The word does not figure in most standard dictionaries. The two that do list it give very different meanings. According to one, 'bleam' is a slang term for destroying or ruining something in an oven or autoclave (device used to sterilise equipment). "I bleamed the cake. I was talking to my friend on the phone." Another dictionary defines it as 'to transmit or send data'. For example, one could say, "Bleam me the figures." Then, of course, you have Blead, an iPhone app.

"I like the word 'indolence'. It makes my laziness seem classy." –

Bern Williams

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