

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – meaning and origin of ‘fall off the wagon’

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What is the meaning and origin of ‘fall off the wagon’?

(J. Badrinath, Shimoga)

When you ‘fall off the wagon’, you go back to drinking alcohol in large quantities after having abstained from it for a while.

Nowadays, the expression is used to refer to the resumption of any bad activity – drugs, smoking, overeating, etc.

*When John lost his job, he fell off the wagon and gorged himself on ice cream.

The ‘wagon’ in this American expression refers to the water wagons used to sprinkle water on the streets to keep the dust down. During the times of Prohibition in the 19th century, men often climbed onto these wagons and took an oath they would give up alcohol and drink only water. This gave rise to the expression ‘to be on the water cart/wagon’; it was later shortened to ‘on the wagon’.

When these individuals broke their pledge and started hitting the bottle again, they were said to have ‘fallen off the wagon’.

How is the word ‘lambaste’ pronounced?

(RV Shalani, Kurnool)

The word can be spelt ‘lambast’ as well. The first syllable rhymes with ‘ham’, ‘dam’ and ‘Sam’, while the second rhymes with ‘paste’, ‘haste’ and ‘taste’.

The word is pronounced ‘lam-BASTE’ with the stress on the second syllable. It is also possible to pronounce the ‘a’ in the second syllable like the ‘a’ in ‘act’, ‘pact’ and ‘fact’. The original meaning of this word was to assault someone rather violently – in other words, to beat or thrash someone.

Nowadays, the verb is mostly used to refer to a thrashing of the verbal kind.

When you lambaste someone, you give him a tongue-lashing; you criticise or scold the individual/thing quite severely.

*Yadav’s first novel was lambasted by all critics.

Some of my friends can't take their eyes off the TV whenever there is an IPL match going on. Is there a term for this?

(M Bhasker, Chennai)

When they watch their favourite programme on TV, some people manage to tune out the world. They are unaware of what is happening around them, and if you disturb them, they become angry. Such people are said to be 'TV stoned'. Like a drug user, they are experiencing the effects of a drug – in this case, TV.

*Hema can't talk to you right now. She is TV stoned.

"Some people have anxiety attacks, some people have gas attacks. I have nap attacks." – **Garfield**

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