

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English: How is the word 'decrepit' pronounced?

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What is the term for non-stop meaningless chatter or talk?

(L. Joseph, Kochi)

If you are thinking of our politicians who frequently appear on TV in support of their colleague or party, then 'diarrhoea of the mouth' and 'verbal diarrhoea' are two expressions that can be used. A person who has 'verbal diarrhoea' talks a lot, but has nothing interesting to say: the words he utters have no substance in them. While the person with diarrhoea is unable to control his lower end, the one with verbal diarrhoea is unable to control his mouth! Another expression, sometimes heard nowadays, that has more or less the same meaning is 'blabber infection'!

*Whenever Mahesh drinks at the pub, he comes home with a blabber infection.

Sometimes, we experience 'diarrhoea of the mouse' as well. It refers to the amount of time we waste rambling on the Internet: chatting, blogging, emailing, etc.

How is the word 'decrepit' pronounced?

(Dileep Kumar, Chennai)

The 'e' in the first syllable and the 'i' in the final syllable are pronounced like the 'I' in 'bit' and 'hit'. The second syllable is pronounced like the word 'prep'. The word is pronounced 'di-KREP-it' with the stress on the second syllable. This is one way of pronouncing the word. Decrepit can be used with things and people to mean 'old' and 'run down'. When you say that a building is decrepit, you are suggesting that it is rather old and is ready to collapse. When used with people, the word has a negative connotation. It suggests that the person is old, weak and in very poor health. It comes from the Latin 'decrepitus' meaning 'very old, infirm'. You do not tell a person to his face that he is 'decrepit'.

*Mohan spends half an hour every morning trying to start his decrepit scooter.

*The decrepit old woman was toying with her dentures.

What is the difference between 'talk to' and 'talk at'?

(Sarika Rao, Bangalore)

When you 'talk to' someone, you speak to the individual; you have a conversation with him. 'Talk to' can also be used to mean to lecture or scold someone.

*I need to talk to my boss about a possible raise.

*There are lots of complaints about Ram. I'm going to have to talk to him.

Unlike 'talk to', 'talk at' has a negative connotation. It suggests that the 'talk' is going to be more like a monologue than a dialogue. When you 'talk at' an individual, you do most of the talking, and when the person does say something, you don't really pay attention. In fact, you are not interested in the person's response.

*Jyothi's classes are boring. She merely talks at her students.

Why is Christmas sometimes written as 'Xmas'?

(J. Shalini, Mysore)

Christmas is a combination of two words: 'Christ's Mass'. In ancient Greek, the letter that was used to represent the first sound in the word 'Christ' looked like the English letter 'X'. With the passage of time, the Greeks began to represent the word 'Christ' using a single letter-X (pronounced 'chi'). As early as the 16th century, native speakers of English began to write 'Christmas' as 'Xmas'. There are many people even today who object to this.

"Four stages of life: 1) You believe in Santa Claus. 2) You don't believe in Santa Claus. 3) You are Santa Claus. 4) You look like Santa Claus." – **Unknown**

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