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For Advanced English Learners

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Table of Contents

■ Words & Their Stories (205 articles)

1. 'Carrying a Torch for Someone' Can Hurt A Lot (690 words)
2. Freeze! (686 words)
3. 'One-Trick Pony' Has Limits (613 words)
4. When You 'Raise the Bar,' Things Get Hard (597 words)
5. Is There a 'Pot of Gold at the End of the Rainbow'? (654 words)
6. 'Green-Eyed Monsters' and Other Uses of 'Green' (772 words)
7. What Is NIMBY? (709 words)
8. Making Things 'from Scratch' (663 words)
9. 'Climbing the Ladder' to Success (634 words)
10. Time to 'Get Your Hands Dirty' (657 words)
11. Be Brave: 'Go Out on a Limb'! (634 words)
12. What It Means to Be a 'Stick in the Mud' (680 words)
13. Special Saying for Mother's Day (558 words)
14. Don't Get Caught in a 'Whirlwind' (606 words)
15. What Happens When Insects Get in Our Idioms? (741 words)
16. Deciding by a 'Flip of a Coin' (661 words)
17. Falling 'Down the Rabbit Hole' (601 words)
18. 'Stepping-Stone' Is a Way Up and Out (515 words)
19. Funny, Or Not So Funny, Things Dad Say (785 words)
20. You Don't Have to Sing to 'Preach to the Choir' (539 words)
21. It's Time for Your 'Day in the Sun' (609 words)
22. Time to Get 'Back on That Horse' (708 words)
23. What 'Strikes a Chord' with You? (563 words)
24. Summer Fun with Family Expressions (667 words)
25. Start Off on the Right Foot (713 words)
26. Expressions for Getting Things Done (621 words)
27. What Does It Mean To Be 'On the Nose?' (649 words)
28. Don't Sweat It and Other Sweaty Expressions (779 words)
29. 'Heyday' Is The Best of Times (445 words)
30. Bed Expressions (737 words)
31. 'That Train Has Left the Station!' (or...It's too late) (718 words)
32. Time Wasters: Lollygag and Dillydally (727 words)

33. **Monkeys Cause the Best Kind of Trouble** (598 words)
34. **The 'Burn Everything' Policy** (570 words)
35. **A Leopard Doesn't Change Its Spots** (794 words)
36. **Have Your 'Chickens Come Home to Roost?'** (498 words)
37. **It's Nothing but Trouble to 'Let The Genie out of the B...** (538 words)
38. **Eek! Ghosts in our Expressions** (606 words)
39. **455 New Words Added to Dictionary** (564 words)
40. **Let's Talk About Our Shadow** (704 words)
41. **Dots and Spots** (874 words)
42. **It's OK to 'Take a Page from Someone Else's Book'** (754 words)
43. **Vaccine or Vax for Word of the Year** (683 words)
44. **Expressions to Help You Stay Healthy** (749 words)
45. **'Omicron' and 'Eilish' Among Most Mispronounced Words o...** (621 words)
46. **Boxing Day and Box Expressions** (524 words)
47. **'Trash Talk' and Other Trashy Expressions** (910 words)
48. **Doctors and Nurses** (843 words)
49. **Is It Time to 'Clean House'?** (617 words)
50. **Sometimes It Is Better 'To Let Sleeping Dogs Lie'** (636 words)
51. **Do You Feel Stuck in 'Groundhog Day'?** (560 words)
52. **Let Something 'Pull at Your Heartstrings'** (631 words)
53. **'Sugarcoat' Pills and Bad News** (750 words)
54. **Learn to Be Careful with the Alphabet** (630 words)
55. **Two Gold Expressions** (560 words)
56. **Do You Believe the 'Grass Is Always Greener'?** (586 words)
57. **Are You a 'Big Fish in a Small Pond'?** (570 words)
58. **Hope Springs Eternal** (550 words)
59. **'Fresh As a Daisy,' Other Daisy Expressions** (446 words)
60. **'April Showers Bring May Flowers'** (447 words)
61. **What Does It Mean to 'Get the Greenlight'?** (656 words)
62. **Are You Guilty of 'Sitting on the Fence'?** (608 words)
63. **What Does It Mean to 'Hit the Nail on the Head'?** (549 words)
64. **Let's Get to the 'Root of the Problem'** (574 words)
65. **You 'Hit the Jackpot!'** (422 words)
66. **'Airbrush' Your Way to Perfection** (547 words)
67. **Do Your Best with This Car Expression** (487 words)
68. **Describing Things That Happen Very Fast** (732 words)
69. **Use the 'Ocean' to Express Big Thoughts** (446 words)
70. **'Full Steam Ahead!'** (540 words)
71. **English's 'Mile' Expressions Are a Mile Long** (592 words)
72. **Use a Sledgehammer to Crack a Nut** (535 words)

73. Got Something to Hide? Try 'Sweeping It Under the Rug' (741 words)
74. Solving Problems with Sleep Expressions (802 words)
75. Let the 'Doors of Opportunity' Open Wide! (548 words)
76. Stay on Time with Clock, Watch Expressions (786 words)
77. Learn How to 'Read the Room' (595 words)
78. Problems Happen When You Are 'Asleep at the Wheel' (762 words)
79. 'The Road to Hell Is Paved With Good Intentions' (455 words)
80. Blaming Others With a Goat: A 'Scapegoat' (569 words)
81. Where Is the 'Wrong Side of the Tracks'? (810 words)
82. Who Would 'Bring Sand to the Beach'? (607 words)
83. This Is 'The Best Thing Since Sliced Bread!' (673 words)
84. The Best Way Is 'Tried-and-True' (515 words)
85. 'All Over the Map' Can Be Good and Bad (626 words)
86. What Does It Mean 'To Push Someone's Buttons'? (774 words)
87. What Is the 'Straw That Broke the Camel's Back'? (695 words)
88. 'Bury Your Head in the Sand' to Avoid Difficulty (621 words)
89. Have Your Cake and Eat It Too (695 words)
90. How Dirty Is 'Greasing Someone's Palm'? (457 words)
91. 'To Have a Monkey on Your Back' Is No Laughing Matter (445 words)
92. Scrabble Dictionary Adds 500 New Words (618 words)
93. Have You Felt the 'Walls Are Closing in on You'? (582 words)
94. Cornucopia: So Much of a Good Thing! (439 words)
95. What Is Your Word of the Year? (822 words)
96. 'Having Skin in the Game' Is Not as Painful as It Sounds (601 words)
97. 'Set in Stone' (523 words)
98. Inside Baseball, Other 'Inside' Expressions (719 words)
99. Expressions for Celebrating the Holidays (790 words)
100. Dreamy Expressions (632 words)
101. Things Are Serious If You 'Cross the Rubicon' (511 words)
102. Raise a Red Flag (442 words)
103. First Dibs (494 words)
104. Footloose and Fancy-free (529 words)
105. Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire (632 words)
106. Have You 'Ruffled Any Feathers' Recently? (648 words)
107. Expressions for a Full Meal (738 words)
108. Ups and Downs, Highs and Lows (685 words)
109. Par for the Course (770 words)
110. 'Holding Down the Fort' Is a Big Job (579 words)
111. Low-hanging Fruit (690 words)
112. It Is Not Nice to 'Dump on' Others (561 words)

- 113. 'Light at the End of the Tunnel' (541 words)
- 114. Are You a 'Bull in a China Shop'? (649 words)
- 115. Why Is This Bird a 'Burden'? (546 words)
- 116. Oil and Water Do Not Mix (540 words)
- 117. 'Housekeeping' and 'Clean House' Mean More Than Cleaning (782 words)
- 118. Does a Good Luck Charm 'Work Like a Charm'? (769 words)
- 119. 'Watch My Dust!' (502 words)
- 120. 'Clean As a Whistle' (563 words)
- 121. Let's 'Zero in' on Number Expressions (637 words)
- 122. Are You Prepared 'to See How the Sausage Is Made'? (592 words)
- 123. 'In The Hot Seat' Is Not Where You Want to Be (745 words)
- 124. 'All Thumbs' (494 words)
- 125. American vs. British English (887 words)
- 126. Differences Between Board, on Board, Aboard (566 words)
- 127. 'To Sink or Swim' Is Up to You (605 words)
- 128. Seeing 'Double'? (702 words)
- 129. 'Beating a Dead Horse' Is Pointless (562 words)
- 130. 'Run Something Up the Flagpole' to Test an Idea (568 words)
- 131. Learn When to Wear 'Kid Gloves' (564 words)
- 132. Make Your Home 'Spick-and-Span' (398 words)
- 133. What Does 'On a Shoestring' Mean? (640 words)
- 134. Explore from Your 'Armchair' (629 words)
- 135. What Is 'Empty Nest Syndrome'? (452 words)
- 136. 'Icing on the Cake' Is As Good As It Sounds (553 words)
- 137. No Need to 'Gild the Lily' (687 words)
- 138. 'Boilerplate' Language Is All Business (466 words)
- 139. How Do You Stay 'In Shape'? (602 words)
- 140. The Bad Side of Roses (586 words)
- 141. How Do You Define Success? (648 words)
- 142. 'Birds of a Feather ...' (499 words)
- 143. 'Straight from the Horse's Mouth' (535 words)
- 144. Are You 'Sitting Pretty'? (410 words)
- 145. Older, More Diverse America by the Year 2100 (549 words)
- 146. 'State-of-the-Art' Is the Best of Its Time (500 words)
- 147. Take a Moment to 'Count Your Blessings' (790 words)
- 148. Merriam-Webster Chooses 'Authentic' as Word of the Year (653 words)
- 149. It's Time to 'See the Light' (718 words)
- 150. AI, Hallucinate, Authentic or Rizz for Word of the Year (642 words)
- 151. When Does a Problem 'Snowball'? (542 words)
- 152. 'Tis the Season! (698 words)

153. The World in Other Words in 2023 (780 words)
154. Goal! Do You Have One for 2024? (518 words)
155. Do You Color Inside or Outside the Lines? (495 words)
156. Walk Before You Can Run (495 words)
157. Marathon or Sprint? (557 words)
158. Snow Day? Don't Be 'Left Out in the Cold' (653 words)
159. Do You Have a 'Doppelgänger'? (621 words)
160. Why Do Married Couples 'Tie the Knot'? (533 words)
161. US Presidents Like to Make Up Words, Expressions (738 words)
162. Influence Others from a 'Bully Pulpit' (582 words)
163. Read the Riot Act (469 words)
164. 'Dip Your Toes' or 'Take the Plunge'? (495 words)
165. When Do You 'Go Against the Grain'? (541 words)
166. When Is Something 'Ancient History'? (474 words)
167. What Are Your 'True Colors'? (599 words)
168. Is It Real or Bogus? (501 words)
169. Many People 'Thank Their Lucky Stars' (592 words)
170. Are You the Windshield or the Bug? (538 words)
171. To Pull or Not to Pull Punches (776 words)
172. What Good Comes from 'Casting a Wide Net'? (641 words)
173. It's Time to 'Separate the Wheat from the Chaff' (539 words)
174. Ways to 'Divide and Conquer' (641 words)
175. Many Handy 'Hand' Expressions (762 words)
176. Be Bold. 'Break the Mold'! (479 words)
177. Are You Strong 'Out of the Gate'? (523 words)
178. Being 'Put Through the Wringer' Is Not Fun (496 words)
179. It's Showtime! (552 words)
180. Learn Some 'Wave' Expressions (711 words)
181. Partners in Crime (585 words)
182. What Gives You 'Food for Thought'? (560 words)
183. Be Careful What You 'Bank On' (580 words)
184. Let's Talk about 'Going South' (661 words)
185. When Is Two Too Many? When It's a 'Double Whammy'! (530 words)
186. One Person's Trash Is Another Person's Treasure (499 words)
187. Sometimes Help Is Just 'A Phone Call Away' (664 words)
188. Reaching the 'Tipping Point' (395 words)
189. An Eye for an Eye (549 words)
190. 'Dead Giveaway' Is Not as Dark as It Sounds (501 words)
191. What Is Your 'North Star'? (682 words)
192. How to Use 'Swimming' to Deal with Life's Situations (668 words)

- 193. Keep Your Nose to the Grindstone (737 words)
- 194. Expressions for New Year's Resolution (677 words)
- 195. 'Kicking Off' a New Year (803 words)
- 196. The Story of Jack Frost (670 words)
- 197. Knee Jerk and Gut Reactions: When We Are Not in Control (494 words)
- 198. Sometimes We 'Spread Ourself Too Thin' (411 words)
- 199. 'Kitchen-Table' Is a Type of Politics (474 words)
- 200. What Does It Take to Be a 'Power Couple'? (534 words)
- 201. Don't Miss a Thing With 'Eagle Eyes' (670 words)
- 202. The Importance of Being 'Dialed In' (507 words)
- 203. How to 'Dish Up' Something Good (408 words)
- 204. Green Means Spring and Other Things (497 words)
- 205. 'Watching the Grass Grow' Is Not Fun (355 words)

Total: 205 articles | 125,036 words

Words & Their Stories

205 articles

Article 1: 'Carrying a Torch for Someone' Can Hurt A Lot

Date: 2021-02-13T21:59:14+00:00 | 690 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

February 14 is Valentine's Day in the United States!

For many people, it is a romantic day. It's the day to show your love for that special someone in your life, usually a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband or wife.

Of course, you should do that every day. But on Valentine's Day there is a special pressure to do so with a gift. Popular gifts for this holiday include flowers, candy and a card or maybe a nice dinner out in a restaurant.

Some people use Valentine's Day to declare their love for someone. Just be careful. A declaration of love is a serious move. And, if the person you love is also a friend, you may put your friendship at risk. There is no turning back once you say the words, "I love you." In other words, there is no putting that genie back in the bottle.

Or maybe it happens the other way around for you. Maybe Valentine's Day is the day you find out that you have a secret admirer. That happened to me once and it was very awkward.

One Valentine's Day many years ago, an old flame of mine showed up at my door unexpectedly, out of the blue. In one hand he had chocolates, in the other some beautiful flowers. He told me that he never stopped thinking of me and that he still loved me. I was shocked. I had not seen him in over a year. Then my shock turned to pity because I did not feel the same way. While he had carried a torch for me for all those months, I had gotten over him a long time ago.

Still, I invited him in for a cup of tea. After all, he had just flown into town. When I told him that I did not feel the same way, he did not waste a minute. He turned to my roommate, handed her the flowers and asked, "What about you?"

Both of us shouted the same thing.

So, I guess he wasn't carrying a torch for me after all.

British "torch" not the same as American "torch"

In British English, a torch is a simple flashlight. But in the U.S., a torch is fire, or a flame, on a stick. If you say you carry a torch for someone, you mean you are carrying a flaming love for them in your heart. But usually, you secretly love them from a distance. And often, those strong feelings are not returned.

We have a special way to describe this type of heartbreak — unrequited love. That is an advanced way of saying unreturned love -- which we don't really say. I like to describe unrequited love as love traveling in one direction down a dark, lonely, dead-end street, going nowhere.

People started using the idiom "to carry a torch for someone" in the early 1900s. Around the same time, "torch song" and "torch singer" also became common terms. Many of us have carried a torch for someone. That is why torch songs became common.

Torch singers sound as if they are filled with pain as the unrequited flame of love burns deeply inside them. Torch songs are filled with yearning --wishing and hoping with all your heart that the person you love will love you back.

And that is all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

romantic— adj.of, relating to, or involving love between two people

declare— v.to say or state (something) in an official or public way : to say (something) in a strong and confident way

put the genie back in the bottle— phraseTry to suppress something that has already been revealed or done

secret admirer— n.someone who shows that he or she thinks highly of a person (as by sending flowers) but keeps his or her identity a secret from that person

awkward— adj.likely to embarrass

old flame— n.a former lover

pity— n.sympathetic sorrow for one suffering, distressed, or unhappy

carried a torch— phrase: To be in love with someone, especially secretly and/or unrequitedly.

Article 2: Freeze!

Date: 2021-02-20T22:00:11+00:00 | 686 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

In many places around the world, wintertime brings snow, ice, and really cold temperatures. Some places can even experience a deep freeze!

But even if you do not live in an area with really low temperatures, you can still use "freeze" idioms and expressions.

For example, you could use them at work.

During the coronavirus pandemic, many workplaces have put in place hiring freezes. With a hiring freeze, you are not able to hire more people. The hiring process is not moving. It is frozen.

During the pandemic, many businesses and companies also faced financial uncertainties. And some were not sure they would survive. So, many places may have put a freeze on wages. When your wages are frozen, they stay at the current level.

There is another way we “freeze” money. If you are having legal or financial trouble, the courts might freeze your bank accounts. When this happens, you cannot use money in a frozen account.

Now, “freeze” is one of those verbs that changes with every preposition you add to it. Let’s start with “out.” It makes the verbal expression “freeze out.”

Sometimes in business dealings, some people or groups may get frozen out by others. If you are frozen out of a business deal, you are not involved. You don’t have a seat at the table.

If you are a cold, unfeeling person, you may want to isolate someone socially. You don’t invite them to parties. You don’t tell them about fun events. You are trying to freeze them out of a group.

But this seems mean and childish. Freezing people out is something we might have done as children. If you ever have had a friend try to freeze you out of a group, it can hurt -- even years later. That memory can be frozen in your mind. It is unchanging and unaffected by the passing of time.

Now let’s talk about the verbal phrase “freeze up.” If something “freezes up” it stops working. An engine, for example, can freeze up – meaning it stops running.

People can also freeze up. If a person freezes up, they are so afraid or worried, they are unable to speak or move. For example, if I am afraid of public speaking, I might freeze up while speaking in front of a large group of people. I’m not able to say or do anything. Sometimes we can also just say “froze.” I was so afraid that I just completely froze.

Of course, the word “freeze” also describes some weather conditions. The verbal “freeze over” is usually used to describe a body of water. If a lake has frozen over it is completely frozen. You can safely walk or skate on it.

But before we leave “freeze over,” there is another way we use that expression. For example, if something is never going to happen, like not a chance, I can say “when hell freezes over.” Hell is supposed to be a hot place. So, if it freezes over, you know things are bad.

Hey, Alyssa I got my boating license yesterday. How about you join me on the river sometime?

Sure ..Bradley ... when hell freezes over!

Aw come on! It’ll be fun! Why not?

First, I can’t swim.

That’s okay. You can stay in the boat.

That’s cold, Alyssa. Real cold.

So, it’s a funny way to say “never.” We use it jokingly. Personally, I would not use it in any serious situations, such as during a job interview or when meeting someone’s parents for the first time.

And that's all the time we have for this Word and Their Stories.

If you know friends who might like this show, don't freeze them out! Invite them to listen.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Bryan Lynn was the editor.

wage— n.a payment usually of money for labor or services usually according to contract and on an hourly, daily, or piecework basis —often used in plural

isolate— v.to set apart from others

skate— v.to move or glide over a surface on skates

Article 3: 'One-Trick Pony' Has Limits

Date: 2021-02-27T22:00:10+00:00 | 613 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's program, we talk about an animal idiom. What do you think it means to be a one-trick pony?

Let's start with a pony. That is a small horse. And one definition of a "trick" is a special act or skill. So, pony tricks can be fun to see. But who would want to watch a pony that does the same trick over and over?

A one-trick pony is a person that has only one skill. So, the term is an insult. A one-trick pony is of low value. A one-trick pony can also describe a person who has had success only once.

So, for example, let's say you know a champion weightlifter. He is big and strong and successful in the sport. But it is the only thing he does: He eats, drinks, and sleeps weightlifting. You could truthfully tell him he is a one-trick pony. But, be prepared to run away as soon as the words leave your mouth. He probably won't be very happy.

Some word experts say the idiom "one-trick pony" comes from the circus. A circus pony that can only do one trick is not going to entertain a crowd for very long.

The term "one-trick pony" appeared around the turn of the twentieth century. Within about fifty years, the term had become an idiom. Note that one-trick is usually hyphenated. And if you have more than one, you have one-trick ponies.

Now, a one-trick pony usually describes a person. But sometimes it can describe other things, such as a company. If a company only does one thing such as make ice cream cones, it might be called a one-trick pony. However, that usage is less common.

Now, let's hear two friends use the expression in a conversation.

A: Guess who will perform at my outdoor party next week? Sam the Entertainer!

B: Please, not Sam the Entertainer! He's anything BUT entertaining.

A: What do you mean? He has such energy!

B: He may be "energetic," but he's a one-trick pony.

A: Sam is the best bagpipe player around.

B: But that's ALL he does. I hope your guests like loud bagpipe music.

Now, keep in mind that people who specialize in a certain area of their work are not called one-trick ponies. They are specialists. For example, I would never call a doctor specializing in children's illnesses a one-trick pony. She is a specialist and has many skills to do her job.

And we here at VOA Learning English specialize in using stories to teach English. But I hope you don't consider us one-trick ponies.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time...I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Caty Weaver was the editor.

idiom— n.an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but that has a separate meaning of its own

insult— n.a rude or offensive act or statement : something that insults someone

champion— adj.first among all contestants or competitors

eats, drinks, and sleeps— idiom: to have a strong passion for something; to think about it constantly

circus— n.a traveling show that is often performed in a tent and that typically includes trained animals, clowns, acrobats, etc.

entertain— v.to perform for (an audience) : to provide amusement for (someone) by singing, acting, etc.

hyphenated— adj.containing or linked with a hyphen

conversation— n.a talk between two or more people : the act of talking

Ren-Fest— n.■short for Renaissance Festival : A festival held to recreate the arts and history of the Renaissance. Generally held outside and on weekends and people usually dress up for it in period clothing.

Article 4: When You 'Raise the Bar,' Things Get Hard

Date: 2021-03-06T22:00:07+00:00 | 597 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in American English. Today we talk about a common idiom from sports: To raise the bar.

To raise the bar means to set a high standard and to raise expectations. It can also mean to set higher goals.

You can raise the bar for yourself or for others. But we often use this expression when someone's performance is much better than others.

When you raise the bar, you increase the expectations of people who have settled into a way of doing things. For example, let's say a person is really good at playing a video game. If he joins a team game, his skill level will raise the bar. The other players will have to play better to come up to the new level of competition.

When you use the expression, you can sometimes put a word before "bar." This will describe the situation better.

For example, when a new intern started at VOA Learning English for his fall semester, he would wear a suit during online video meetings. Most of us who had been working at home for many months, did not dress up. We looked presentable, but our clothes were not formal. So, he really raised the clothing bar for our weekly meetings.

Here is another example.

Let's say you are invited to go to a potluck party. At a potluck party, everyone is supposed to bring one thing to drink or eat. You make a very tasty cake with four layers and fancy decorations. The host might say, "Wow you really raised the potluck bar for the rest of the people at the party."

Word experts say people began using the idiom "raise the bar" around the turn of the twentieth century.

It comes from the sport of track and field, specifically the high jump and the pole vault events.

These events involve raising a bar incrementally, or a little at a time, to see how high the athletes can jump or vault over a bar.

Now let's hear these two friends use the expression together.

A: How's the new job going?

B: Great! I go into the office an hour early every day and stay late almost every night. Plus, I get all my work done days ahead of my deadlines.

A: Aren't you worried that you might be raising the bar a bit too high?

B: No way! If other people can't perform as well, that's good for me, right?

A: Well, you don't want to raise the bar SO high that one day YOU have trouble getting over it.

B: You know, that's a really good point. I never thought of it like that.

A: That's what friends are for.

B: Maybe I'll ease up a little bit...

And that brings us to the end of this week's Words and Their Stories. When it comes to teaching American English, we hope we raise the bar just a little bit higher for English learners.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

idiom—n.an expression that cannot be understood from the meaning of its separate words

standard—n.a level of quality or performance that is considered acceptable or desired

semester—n.one of two, half-year periods that make up an academic year at a school or college

pole vault—n.an athletic event in which people compete by using a pole to jump over a bar this is high above the ground

incrementally—n.a small amount by which something is made larger, greater or higher

Article 5: Is There a 'Pot of Gold at the End of the Rainbow'?

Date: 2021-03-13T22:00:52+00:00 | 654 words | Source

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And now, welcome to Words and Their Stories.

On March 17 in many places around the world, people celebrate Saint Patrick's Day.

Encyclopedia Britannica says St. Patrick is the patron saint of Ireland. "Born in Roman Britain in the late 4th century, he was kidnapped at the age of 16 and taken to Ireland as a slave. He escaped but returned to convert the Irish to Christianity."

Irish people and Irish-loving people everywhere celebrate St. Patrick's Day with religious services, parades, big meals and even bigger parties.

Decorations usually include green four-leaf clovers. The small plants are said to bring good luck. Another decoration is the Leprechaun. A Leprechaun is a trouble making creature in old Irish stories. He looks like a very small man. And he knows where to find gold.

Some experts say that, in Irish folklore, it is believed that Leprechauns can reveal the hiding places of treasures.

The Encyclopedia Britannica explains that as far back as the 17th century the Irish would say a person "was as likely to find a pot of gold as to find the end of a rainbow." A colorful rainbow appears in the sky when the sun shines through water droplets.

Keep in mind that there is no real "end" to a rainbow. And that brings us to our idiom: the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

The “pot of gold at the end of the rainbow” is something you really want to have or you really want to achieve. Finding your pot of gold at the end of a rainbow – or just “pot of gold” for short – feels like the realization of your hopes and dreams.

For example, let’s say someone loves animals and hopes to live out in the country. They could describe their pot of gold at the end of the rainbow as a owning a working farm with cows, horses, dogs and goats!

Finding the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow can also be used to talk about actual money. When we use it this way, we usually mean that wealth has come suddenly. It means you have come into a huge windfall – which means a lot of money! For example, I found my pot of gold after winning the lottery! But sadly, that is just an example.

However, finding your pot of gold may not be likely or even possible. Because of the unrealistic nature of the pot of gold, this expression is often used in the negative form.

For example, a friend of mine was always unhappy. She moved a lot looking for happiness. Her father told her that she was looking for a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. “It doesn’t exist,” he warned. “You must find a way to be happy wherever you are.” But she ended up moving anyway. Some lessons we have to learn on our own.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time...I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

patron saint– n.a saint who is believed to protect a particular place or type of person

decoration– n.something that is added to something else to make it more attractive

parade– n.a public celebration of a special day or event that usually includes many people and groups moving down a street by marching or riding in cars or on special vehicles (called floats)

folklore– n.traditional customs, beliefs, stories, and sayings

treasure– n.something valuable (such as money, jewels, gold, or silver) that is hidden or kept in a safe place

idiom– n.an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but that has a separate meaning of its own

achieve– v.to get or reach (something) by working hard

lottery– n.a drawing of lots in which prizes are distributed to the winners among persons buying a chance

negative– adj.harmful or bad : not wanted

Article 6: 'Green-Eyed Monsters' and Other Uses of 'Green'

Date: 2021-03-20T21:59:51+00:00 | 772 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Colors are often connected to the feelings we have. Many expressions in English link colors and emotions. Take for example, the color green.

Green can be a symbol for many things. In other words, it can represent many different ideas, qualities, or objects in our lives.

One of these is money. For example, a greenback is a common expression for a dollar bill...because it is green.

Here is another example: green represents environmental causes. So, if a company goes green, they probably have changed to cleaner technology to produce their products.

Green is also a sign of a beginner. If someone is green to a job or activity, they are new to it. So, for example, if I am green at cooking, I haven't been cooking for very long. So, I'm probably not very good at it. Just ask my family.

Green can also mean other things -- bad things.

Historians say long ago the Greeks connected a green color on the face with sickness. They might have thought the color came from an overproduction of bile in the body.

Now, we say that if someone looks "green around the gills," they look sick or they could be sick at any moment. Gills of a fish are the organs it uses to breathe instead of lungs. In this expression, why we say "gills" is not exactly clear. But maybe it is used as a funny replacement for the word "mouth."

For example, if your friend drinks too much alcohol at a party or eats too many sweet foods and does not feel well, you might say he looks green around the gills. People who get seasick might look green around the gills when they are sailing on rough waters in a boat.

The Greeks also linked green to jealousy. Today, we use green to describe people who are very jealous or envious. One of the expressions is very simple: We say they are "green with envy."

Let's say I really want something that you have -- like a beautiful apartment. You could say that I am green with envy about your apartment.

Envy usually has two parts. You feel unhappy over another person's luck, but you also want to have the same luck yourself.

It does not feel good to be green with envy. In fact, feeling envious or jealous is unpleasant. But these feelings are natural. We all probably have felt these emotions at some point in our lives.

But some people get so jealous of others that it begins to affect their lives. In that case we can say they are "consumed with envy" or "eaten up by jealousy." We can also say "the green-eyed monster" has a hold of them.

The green-eyed monster is jealously imagined as a beast that attacks people. It takes over their minds and tries to destroy their lives.

Now, let's hear two friends use some of these expressions.

So, have you talked to Randy recently?

Yes, I ran into him at a party last weekend and couldn't believe how different he seemed.

Let me guess...ALL he talked about was the job he didn't get and the woman who did get it.

Yes! How did you know?

Oh, I've been hearing that story for months now. He claims this woman, Jessica, stole his idea and then got the job instead of him.

Yep, that's the same story he told me...for 40 minutes! The green-eyed monster has really got a hold of him and will not let go. It's kind of sad.

You're telling me! I told him that he really needs to get over it. How did you handle it at the party?

I told him I had to use the bathroom and just never came back.

Good move. Until he's no longer green with envy, it's probably better to avoid him.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories!

Until next time...I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

bile—n.a yellow or green fluid made in the liver that helps the body digest fats

jealous—adj.an unhappy or angry feeling of wanting something that someone else has; anger or worry that someone else will take what you have

envious (envy)—adj.feeling or showing a desire to have something that another person has

consumed—adj.to take all of a person's attention, energy, or time

monster—n.a strange or horrible imaginary creature; something that cannot be controlled and that causes many problems

Yep—informal response: yes

handle—v.to deal with or act on

bathroom—n.a room where you can wash up, usually has a sink and toilet

Article 7: What Is NIMBY?

Date: 2021-03-27T22:00:57+00:00 | 709 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today, we are going to talk about the idea of community and neighborhoods.

Where we live can make a difference in our happiness. Some people love their neighborhoods just the way they are. They do not want them to change.

For example, let's say a city council decides that they want to build a big waste treatment plant into a quiet, beautiful neighborhood. A waste treatment plant would be loud. It would bring lots of big trucks through the neighborhood streets. And it would probably smell bad. All these things could lower the quality of living and the property value of the neighborhood's houses.

So, people in the neighborhood hold protests. They collect signatures to show the city council that the neighbors do not want the waste treatment plant in their neighborhood. They know the plant is necessary. But they want it built somewhere else – not near their homes.

And that brings us to our word for today: NIMBY.

NIMBY is an acronym. It stands for: Not In My Backyard. Usually the word “backyard” means the area behind a house. But in this case, it means the whole neighborhood. If you look it up on the internet, NIMBY describes an opposition to putting something considered undesirable in one's own neighborhood.

When describing a person, a NIMBY is someone who opposes some form of new development in their community or neighborhood. Their way of thinking is sometimes called NIMBYism.

Now, our first example was a waste treatment plant. But many other facilities can bring out a person's inner NIMBY -- for example, prisons. They may be necessary, but they are not desirable to some people. Some may think that they could bring unwanted problems to their neighborhood, like crime.

But a person may be a NIMBY to other kinds of development too – like big stores or sports stadiums. They may bring business to a city, but they also bring more traffic and noise to the neighborhood they're in.

For example, let's say a brand-new food store is coming to your neighborhood. You are very happy. Finally, you won't have to go far to buy food! But some of your neighbors do not share your happiness. They fear the new store will bring many more people, many more cars, and big trucks to their quiet streets. They may not be able to park their cars easily. So, they try to stop the development from happening.

Maybe we all have a little NIMBY in us. Maybe we do not know it until our city wants to build a trash processor next to our home.

Now let's hear NIMBY used at this neighborhood party.

A: Hey did you hear? The city council is voting on the new trash treatment facility tomorrow.

B: I know. And I will be there with about 50 neighbors to protest.

A: Oh, are they thinking of building it in your neighborhood?

B: Yes. And it just doesn't make sense!

A: Are you sure this isn't just a NIMBY reaction?

B: Maybe a little. But it really **WOULD** be cheaper to build it in another part of town.

A: And what part of town would that be?

B: Near the railroad tracks. Nobody lives around it. Plus, that location already has an old trash treatment plant. That will save a ton of money.

A: Those are actually pretty good reasons.

B: Yeah, I figured if we didn't bring some good reasons to the fight ... we would just sound like big NIMBYs.

A: Now you sound just like little NIMBYs.

B: I can live with that.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time...I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

signature—n.a person's name written in their own handwriting

acronym—n.a word formed from the first letters of each one of the words in a phrase

inner—adj.existing as a part of a person's character

stadium—n.a very large building that has an open area surrounded by many seats that is used for sports, musical and other big events

park—v.to put a car or vehicle in a particular place

facility—n.a building or group of structures that is built for a specific purpose

Article 8: Making Things 'from Scratch'

Date: 2021-04-03T22:00:47+00:00 | 663 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Some people get great joy and satisfaction from doing things by themselves. That is why DIY, or do-it-yourself, projects are so popular.

Such projects became even more popular during the coronavirus health crisis. Another activity became popular --baking.

I am not talking about opening a box of cake mix, stirring in some water and baking it in the oven. I'm sure that it would still taste good. But it would not be completely homemade. You used a cake mix you bought at the store. In other words, you did not make the cake "from scratch."

That is the expression we are going to talk about today – from scratch!

Let's continue with another baking example. I love to make bread from scratch. I measure out the flour, salt, sugar and yeast. I add some water and then knead the mixture into dough, which is the word for uncooked bread. It is so much fun. And, in my opinion, making it from scratch creates the tastiest bread.

To create something from scratch is to make it without any ready-made ingredients or materials.

Let's say you want to build a greenhouse for your plants. You could buy one. But it might cost a lot of money. So, you decide to build it from scratch. You build it from the ground up with the most basic materials.

Starting from scratch can also mean starting something over from the beginning. For example, a group of people want to start a reading program for children. But after hours and hours of planning, they have not decided anything. They thought of many good ideas, but those ideas do not seem to work well together. And the heart of the project has been lost. So, someone suggests, "Hey, why don't we start from scratch and simplify our ideas."

Starting from scratch is often the only way to move forward once a project gets really complex.

You can start many things from scratch – from a reading program to your career. If you start your career from scratch, you start over and do something new. After many years of being a lawyer, my friend started her career over from scratch and became a video game developer.

Or you could continue the same career but in a new way or in a new place.

Here's another example. A friend of mine wanted to re-start his singing career. He was living in Chicago but did not find success there. So, he moved to Pittsburgh and started his singing career over from scratch. It seems to have worked because he is doing really well in that city.

Some word experts say the expression "from scratch" comes from foot races.

The "scratch" used to mean the line scratched in the ground as the starting line for the race. All the runners would begin with their toes on the scratched line.

The term also is used in cricket and boxing. In fact, it may have been used in those sports first.

Experts often do not agree on word origins. But don't let that stop you from using "from scratch." Use the expression the next time you talk about doing something yourself or starting something from the beginning.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time -- I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter Jr. was the editor.

bake--v.to cook in an oven using dry heat

cake mix--n.a mixture bought at a store for making cake

stir--v.to mix together in a circular movement

yeast--n.a kind of fungus used in making bread and alcoholic drinks

knead--v.to prepare dough by mixing flour and water with your hands and pressing it together

ingredient--n.one of several materials used to make a kind of food

greenhouse--n.a structure with clear, glass or plastic, walls used for growing plants

career--n.a job or profession that someone has for a long time

origin--n.the point or place where something begins or is created

Article 9: 'Climbing the Ladder' to Success

Date: 2021-04-10T22:00:04+00:00 | 634 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in American English.

Today we talk about a tool for reaching high places – a ladder.

Ladders are made from two long pieces of wood, metal, or rope with a series of steps, called rungs, between them. We climb the rungs to reach higher up.

But we can also climb a different kind of ladder. When we climb the ladder in our job to reach a higher level, we are climbing the ladder of success.

When we speak of a ladder this way, it represents a series of steps or stages that leads to a higher or better position. As you climb the ladder, you become more powerful and more successful.

Take, for example, the corporate ladder:

The website Investopedia defines the term “corporate ladder” as a way of thinking about a company's employment hierarchy. Hierarchy here means the jobs in a corporation that go from the bottom to the top. So, beginning, or entry-level, jobs are the bottom rungs of the ladder and the supervisory positions are the top rungs of the corporate ladder. “Climbing the corporate ladder,” then, describes a person's movement higher in a company's leadership.

Some people are very ambitious. They want to get ahead, so they work hard at their career. They think about it seriously and have a plan. Most people who succeed have some level of ambition.

But some people use “climbing the ladder” in a negative way. Let's say on your way up the ladder of success you step on others or try to push them off their ladders. This might mean you are so ambitious

that you forget to treat people well. Getting ahead in your job is the only thing you see as you climb up your ladder.

However, as some people climb, they reach down and help up those on the lower rungs. Or, if someone on a rung above them is having trouble, they help them.

You can use the expression “climb the ladder” with or without the word “success.”

Hey, how are you? I haven’t heard from you in such a long time!

I’ve been good! I’ve been taking a lot of online classes. So, I just finished a business degree.

Good for you! I’ve been spending too much time at home watching Netflix.

Well, that can be fun too. But I have some career goals that I need to meet by the end of the year.

You are way more ambitious than me. I’m not really interested in climbing any career ladders.

You’re on your own. I have older parents to take care of. So, for me climbing a few more rungs on the ladder means more money and more security.

That is such a good point. But you still need to have fun. Why don’t we celebrate your new degree with a hike in the mountains this weekend?

That sounds perfect!

If knowing English helps you move up the ladder in your career, keep coming back to VOA Learning English!

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

stage—n.a point or period in the growth or development of something; a step in a series or process

hierarchy—n.a system in which people or things are ordered in a series of levels with different purposes and importance

entry-level—adj.at the lowest level, the level of someone just starting a job or career

ambition—n.a desire to be successful, powerful or famous

career—n.a job or profession that someone has for a long time

negative—adj.not good, not wanted

degree—n.an official document and title that is given to someone who has successfully completed a series of classes at a college or university

hike—n.a long walk, especially for pleasure or exercise, often in a natural place

Article 10: Time to 'Get Your Hands Dirty'

Date: 2021-04-17T22:00:29+00:00 | 657 words | Source

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And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in American English. Today, you might want to roll up your sleeves. We are going to get our hands dirty!

Figuratively, that is.

Playing in mud is a popular activity for many children all around the world. What child doesn't love mixing just the right amount of water and dirt to get the perfect mud?

If you want to go farther, you can make mud pies! Shape the mud into circles and then decorate them with little sticks and stones, flowers, and leaves – basically any small item you find on the ground.

Or perhaps making mud pies is not your thing. Maybe just digging in the mud is more your speed, or to your liking.

The feel of mud in your hands can be good for adults too. In fact, many people pay a lot of money for face and body mud treatments.

Maybe that is one reason people like to garden or make things from clay. You must get your hands dirty.

And that is our expression for today.

"Getting your hands dirty" is a useful expression. And it has two very different uses.

The first one is for honest, hardworking people. If I am willing to get my hands dirty, it means I am willing to do the hard work of a project myself. I do not give the dirty work to others.

Now, that "hard work" could deal with actual dirt or it could just mean the hard parts of a project. It just means that you are willing to roll up your sleeves and do whatever hard work is needed to finish a job.

For example, let's say my good friend is running for mayor. There is a lot of hard work needed to win an election. So, I help gather signatures to get her on the election ballot. I walk around neighborhoods and pass out information to hundreds of voters. She does too. She is not afraid to get her hands dirty and neither is her team of volunteers. When she wins, she thanks us all for our hard work.

Okay, now it is four years later. My friend has been in office and has become very powerful. In fact, you could say that power has gone to her head. She is not thinking clearly ... or legally when she asks me to do her a favor.

That brings us to the other way we use the expression "get your hands dirty." This way is for dishonest people.

Let's imagine that my friend, the Mayor, calls me into her office and asks me to do something for her – something illegal. She wants me to ask a building developer for money for her re-election campaign. In

return she will give him some city business.

She promises me that nothing will happen. But she simply can't risk getting her hands dirty. I tell her that I really can't risk going to jail. I also tell her that we are no longer friends.

And that is the end of this Words and Their Stories!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

figuratively— adv.used with a meaning that is different from the basic or literal meaning and that expresses an idea by using language that usually describes something else

decorate— v.to make (something) more attractive usually by putting something on it

thing— n.something (such as an activity) that makes a strong appeal to the individual

speed— n.someone or something that appeals to one's taste

clay— n.an earthy material that is sticky and easily molded when wet and hard when baked

roll up your sleeves— idiomatic expression

signature— n.the name of a person written by that person

ballot— n.a ticket or piece of paper used to vote in an election

favor— n.a kind or helpful act that you do for someone

Article 11: Be Brave: 'Go Out on a Limb'!

Date: 2021-04-24T22:00:10+00:00 | 634 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in American English.

For half the planet, it is springtime. That means warmer temperatures and new growth on plants and trees.

Trees are amazing and do so much for our environment. The basic parts of a tree are the trunk, the roots, branches, and limbs.

Today we are going to talk about limbs.

If you like watching squirrels play in trees as much as I do, you may have noticed something. They jump from one limb to another. They are fearless even as they walk out on the weakest-looking limb. They are simply not afraid.

And that is our expression for today -- “to go out on a limb.”

When you “go out on a limb” you take a risk. You take a chance. You are brave by doing something that could hurt you. You know, when you climb out onto a tree limb you could fall and get hurt.

But here’s the thing with this expression. More often than not the risk is an emotional, social, or political one. It is usually not a physical risk – like the ones our squirrel friends take.

It means you put yourself out there and open yourself up to criticism or judgement.

Let’s say I have a friend, Jake. Well, Jake just lost his job, and he is really upset about it. However, he has a plan. He plans to go to his ex-boss’s office unannounced and explain all the reasons why she should give him another chance.

I think ... no, I know this is a terrible idea. But Jake does not want my suggestions. In fact, he gets very upset when I warn him.

So, I say to Jake, “Look, this might upset you, but I’m going to go out on a limb. I think it’s a really bad idea to visit your ex-boss at her office. Really bad. Why don’t you just call instead? A call is better. And a call won’t get you arrested for trespassing.”

Here is another way to use it.

Let’s say I put in a good word for Jake with my boss. This means I speak highly of him. As a result, he ends up getting a job interview. I really went out on a limb for Jake. I know he’s not that great of a worker. But he promised to do better. Still, my relationship with my boss is on the line. This means it is at risk of being damaged. I went out on a limb for Jake. I really hope I don’t regret it.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories!

I am going to go out on a limb myself and say that VOA Learning English is THE best place for you to reach your English-learning goals. This is a risky thing to say. One. I don’t know your English-learning goals. And two. There are a lot of other English-teaching shows out there. But I really wanted to finish the show with another example for you.

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo!

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

trunk– n. the thick main stem of a tree

limb– n. a large branch of a tree

branch– n. a part of a tree that grows out from the trunk

chance– n. an opportunity to do something; an amount of time or a situation in which something can be done

brave– adj. feeling or showing no fear; not afraid

trespass– v. to go on someone’s land without permission

put in a good word– phrase: to say something good about someone

interview— n.a formal meeting with someone who is being considered for a job or other position

regret— n.a feeling of sadness or disappointment about something that you did or did not do

Article 12: What It Means to Be a ‘Stick in the Mud’

Date: 2021-05-01T22:00:04+00:00 | 680 words | Source

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And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

In many places in the world, spring brings a lot of rain. And this can lead to a lot of mud. So today, let's talk about a mud expression!

What do you think a stick in the mud is? Well, I'm sure you can imagine a wooden stick ... stuck in the mud. But in American English, a stick in the mud is far more than that.

A stick in the mud is a boring or uninteresting person. They do not try anything new. They are not willing to take a risk. They also could be slow and old-fashioned.

Sometimes sticks in the mud have unpopular or outdated beliefs. They are not progressive. Or it could be a combination of all or some of these things.

So, a person could be called a stick in the mud for many reasons. But we always use this expression to show disapproval. So, it's an insult.

However, keep this in mind. A person does not always have to be a stick in the mud to be called a stick in the mud. I should explain.

Let's say you are at a party with friends. Now, usually in your friend group, you are the life of the party. This means you are the one at the party who is having the most fun. You also create fun for others. You join whatever game or activity is happening.

But at this party, maybe you don't feel well. Or maybe you just received some bad news. Perhaps you need to be up early the next day for an important test. Whatever the reason, you are sitting in the back of the room and are not really talking much to anyone. So, you are not acting like your usual self. And you haven't told anyone why. So, you should not be surprised when your best friend asks you, "Why are you being such a stick-in-the-mud?"

Maybe next time you should tell your best friend when something is bothering you or when you are not well.

We have other names for a stick-in-the-mud person.

We could call them a stuffed shirt. This means they are all business, all the time. They are no fun at all. If you like words that rhyme, you could call them a fuddy-duddy.

Fuddy-duddies are different from stuffed shirts, though. A fuddy-duddy would be the old-fashioned, doesn't-like-change type of stick in the mud. A stuffed shirt is the

always-very-serious-and-business-minded type of stick in the mud.

You can also use stick-in-the-mud as an adjective before a noun. For example, a friend of mine always does as she is told, never tries anything new or takes any risks. She has a bit of a stick-in-the-mud personality.

Or you could say someone has a stick-in-the-mud attitude. A person who always has a stick-in-the-mud attitude could also be called a downer. This means they bring people down.

Some word experts say this expression comes from an image of feet or the wheel of a horse carriage stuck in mud. Both are unable to go anywhere. They cannot progress. So, in early days the term stick in the mud, usually described someone who remained in a difficult situation, either by choice or because they were stuck.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter was the editor.

boring— adj. dull and uninteresting

old-fashioned— adj. from or like that of an earlier time

outdated— adj. no longer useful or acceptable: not modern or current

progressive— adj. moving forward : a person who favors new or modern ideas especially in politics and education

stuffed shirt— n. a smug, conceited, and usually pompous person often with an inflexibly conservative or reactionary attitude

fuddy-duddy— n. one that is old-fashioned, unimaginative, or conservative

personality— n. the qualities (as moods or habits) that make one human being different from others

attitude— n. a mental position with regard to a fact or state : the way you think and feel about someone or something

carriage— n. a wheeled vehicle, especially: a horse-drawn vehicle designed for private use and comfort

Article 13: Special Saying for Mother's Day

Date: 2021-05-08T21:59:26+00:00 | 558 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Mothers have been celebrated around the world since the days of ancient Greeks and Romans.

In the United States, Mother's Day became a national holiday after an effort by Anna Jarvis "as a way of honoring the sacrifices mothers made for their children." U.S. President Woodrow Wilson signed a measure in 1914 to officially set Mother's Day on the second Sunday of May.

Americans celebrate mothers by buying them gifts, taking them out for a meal, or surprising them with their favorite treat. Mother's Day cards, either bought or made, are a big part of this special day.

Mothers are important in so many ways, too many to count. In some families, the mother is the leader. She is called the matriarch.

The importance of mothers can be seen in words like mother tongue. This is the language you speak at home. And your mother country is the country where you were born. Sometimes, we also call this the motherland.

Then there is Mother Nature, Mother Earth, and Earth Mother. We use these words to describe the beginning and the guiding force of the whole world – humans included.

There is even a saying "necessity is the mother of invention." It means that new ways to do things are found or created when there is a strong need for them.

In any culture, the worst thing you could do would be to insult someone's mother, especially calling her ugly. That could get you into a fight very quickly.

In the U.S. a children's rhyme goes this way: "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." It means if you step on a crack, for example on the sidewalk, it will cause your mother's back to break. Nobody would want that. So, children turn this rhyme into a game and jump over cracks on the sidewalk.

For this Mother's Day, we will learn another saying that uses the word mother: "Diligence is the mother of good luck."

First, what does diligence mean? Diligence is careful and continued hard work. So, this saying means that hard work produces chances for success – not luck.

Let's hear it used in this example:

Did you hear the great news! Sam's book is going to be published this summer!

That is wonderful. He is SO lucky.

In his case, diligence is the mother of good luck. He spent two years non-stop writing that book.

Oh. I guess, luck had little to do with it.

So, if someone you know has had success after working diligently, you can use this saying. It's like telling them that their hard work has paid off.

For example, if you got a great job using your wonderful English and a friend says to you, "Wow, you're really lucky." You can say, "Diligence is the mother of good luck."

After all, your speaking English has nothing to do with good luck, but rather your hard work.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this report for Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

matriarch—n.a woman who controls a family, group, or government

rhyme—n.one of two or more words or phrases that end in the same sounds

crack—n.a thin line in the surface of something that is broken but not separated into pieces

diligence—n.careful and continued hard work

Article 14: Don't Get Caught in a 'Whirlwind'

Date: 2021-05-15T22:00:15+00:00 | 606 words | Source

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Now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

When we talk about weather, a whirlwind is a very strong wind that moves in a spinning or swirling motion. Whirlwinds can cause great damage to trees, buildings, and other types of property. They can be violent. But they can also happen in a limited area and for a limited time.

We can use whirlwind to describe things in our lives, too. These things happen in a confused rush. For example, a whirlwind day is filled with back-to-back activities. And all those activities happen very quickly. It is a frenzy! Let's say your life has suddenly become very busy. You can say, "Lately, my life has been a whirlwind!"

This can be good or bad.

In life, whirlwinds involve many quickly changing events and feelings. Again, it is hard to keep track of everything that is happening.

Sometimes we use whirlwind with other words, such as activity. For example, during elections the senator's office was always a "whirlwind of activity." You can also make that activity specific. You can say, "The office was a whirlwind of political activity."

Let's say you had a day filled with a whirlwind of meetings. You had SO many meetings that the day is a blur. All the meetings happened quickly and seemed to run together.

You can also use this word as an adjective. It describes something that is like a whirlwind especially in speed or force. So, if you find success as a singer, you may find yourself having a whirlwind, world-wide tour one day.

One day, you may also find yourself in a whirlwind romance. This type of romance happens fast and is very exciting. Whirlwind romances usually are good subjects in movies. In real life, they may happen fast, seem crazy, and then end just as fast – like a weather whirlwind. (That is quite a tongue twister --

weather whirlwind!)

Here's another example. I don't really like shopping – unless it's for food. But once, I had to go shopping to prepare for a friend's wedding. I had to buy a fancy dress, fancy shoes, and other fancy things to look, you know, fancy. I went to a big department store and was a whirlwind of careless shopping. After I left, every area was a mess!

A whirlwind can also describe something that happens violently and causes damages. Let's say I have a friend who is beautiful, but is also a bit of a mess. Things always seem to go a little crazy with Cornelia. But you can't tell men that. They just don't listen. So, I've stopped trying. When men want to date her, I've learned just to mind my own business and watch the craziness happen.

So, a whirlwind can be both a good or bad rush of activity. We here at VOA Learning English are a whirlwind of English teaching programs. Hopefully for you ... that's a good thing.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo!

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

spin– v.to turn or cause to turn round and round rapidly

swirl– v.to move in circles or to cause (something) to move in circles

rush– v.to move or do something very quickly or in a way that shows you are in a hurry

frenzy– n.great and often wild or disorderly activity

track– v.to follow and find (someone or something) especially by looking at evidence

blur– v.something that is difficult to remember

tour– n.to make a journey or trip through an area or place

romance– n.to have or try to have a romantic relationship with (someone)

crazy– adj.wild and uncontrolled

fancy– adj.not plain or ordinary:very expensive and fashionable

Article 15: What Happens When Insects Get in Our Idioms?

Date: 2021-05-22T22:00:46+00:00 | 741 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Insects -- or bugs as we generally call them -- are of course necessary in the natural environment. But they are everywhere! They get into our homes. They invade our outdoor parties. So, of course, we have expressions that use insects or bugs.

The first one is really simple. If I say to someone: “You are bugging me!” it means the person is annoying, like a bug! Bugs can be pests, too. So, when someone is really, really annoying, we could say “stop pestering me!”

Ants can also be pests. They are so small that they can get everywhere. In fact, if we sit too long on the ground, they may even get in our pants. If you get ants in your pants, you may move or dance around to get them out. So, the expression to have ants in your pants means you cannot sit still. You are constantly moving around.

Here is an example. My friend Sylvia is full of energy. I don’t think I have ever seen her sit down for longer than 10 minutes. This makes some people nervous. “Sit down, Sylvia! It’s like you have ants in your pants!” they might say. We often use this expression for children ... and Sylvia.

Now, for some of our listeners, the weather is not getting warmer but rather colder. In those places, if you are warm and comfortable usually under many blankets, you can say you are snug as a bug in a rug.

Wow, the wind is really blowing out there.

And the temperature has dropped ten degrees since this morning.

So, do you still want to go out to a movie?

You know, I would love to. But right now, I am snug as a bug in a rug with a cup of tea and a great book.

Doesn’t sound like you’re going anywhere tonight!

Maybe to the kitchen for more tea but NOT outside.

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This English in a Minute explains the expression “fly on the wall.”

In places where the weather is getting warmer, insects like flies may be coming out to annoy you.

Sometimes their presence means that something bad or unpleasant is nearby. So, we can say a fly in the ointment to point to something bad that ruins something else. Ointment is a type of medicine that you put on your skin. If a fly lands in it, you really can’t use it as medicine.

Let’s hear that expression used in a couple of sentences.

Her surprise party for her husband’s birthday was nearly ready. The food was ordered. The cake was made. And all his friends were hiding in their house. Then came the fly in the ointment. His flight was canceled, meaning he would miss his party.

Having a wedding on board a boat, sailing along the blue sea seemed like a great idea. The weather was beautiful, and everyone was happy. The only fly in the ointment was the boat’s loud engine. Nobody could hear a thing – not even “I do!”

Now, flies are everywhere. And we really do not think twice about killing them. So, if someone is very gentle with no violent feelings at all, we could say that person would not harm a fly.

Now, let's talk about another flying insect. This one is not annoying but rather very important. Bees are always working and make wonderful honey. So, you may have heard the expression to be as busy as a bee.

But did you know that if you have a bee in your bonnet, you are angry about something? Something is annoying you. Maybe you haven't heard it. The expression is a bit old. After all, a bonnet is a type of hat worn by women as early as Medieval times. But sometimes we use this expression when we want to make fun of someone who is acting angry but for no good reason.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories! Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

annoying— adj.causing slight anger

pest— n.an animal or insect that causes problems for people especially by damaging crops :informal: a person who bothers or annoys other people

comfortable— adj.allowing you to be relaxed:causing no worries, difficulty, or uncertainty

wedding— n.a ceremony at which two people are married to each other

onboard— adj.carried or happening on a vehicle

Article 16: Deciding by a 'Flip of a Coin'

Date: 2021-05-29T22:00:20+00:00 | 661 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we talk about words and expressions from the English language. We also give examples on how to use them.

Today, we are going to talk about coins! Coins are small, flat and usually round pieces of metal issued by a government as money. In the United States we have coins for dollars, half dollars, quarters, dimes, five cents or nickels, and one cent or a penny.

There are two sides to a coin. For example, the U.S. quarter has an image of George Washington on one side and an eagle on the other side. So, naturally, we call the Washington side head and the other side tail.

And that brings us to our first expression: Two sides of the same coin. If two things are two sides of the same coin, they are closely related even though they seem different.

Experts often consider mental health issues and homelessness to be two sides of the same coin.

In other words, there is often a connection or relationship between the two.

Now, we use coins to buy things. We also use coins to decide between two choices.

We flip a coin and call heads or tails. “Heads you win.” or “Tails I win.” Whichever call matches the side of the coin showing is the winner. This is what we mean by winning a decision by a flip of a coin or a coin toss.

In many sports, deciding who gets the ball first or takes the field first is sometimes done by a coin toss.

There is a certain amount of luck involved in a flip of a coin. You have a 50/50 chance of winning. For some things, those odds may not be good enough.

When the stakes are very high, meaning when you could lose a lot, you might not want to flip a coin. For example, it would not be a good idea to bet double or nothing of your entire life’s savings by flipping a coin. There is a 50/50 chance of your losing everything.

If the two choices are both good and nearly equal, a coin toss might be the perfect way to come to a decision. Let’s say you and your best friend want to go out for dinner. She wants Italian. You want Korean. You both like the two restaurants. So, a coin toss is a perfect way to decide.

We also use this expression to describe a situation where two outcomes, usually opposites, are likely to happen. And they will be decided by chance, not by reason or scientific research. To some degree, the results are out of your hands.

It’s out of your hands whether the rain will come today.

It’s a coin toss whether the rain will come today.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Whether or not we will be back next week will not be decided by a flip of the coin. We will definitely have a new program for you. On that you can bet your bottom dollar!

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

flip— v.to toss so as to cause to turn over in the air :flip— n.the act of flipping something;a quick turn, toss, or movement

toss— v.to throw with a quick, light, or careless motion or with a sudden jerk :toss— n.a deciding by chance and especially by flipping a coin

odds— n.the possibility that something will happen;the chance that one thing will happen instead of a different thing

stakes— n.something (such as money) that you could win or lose in a game, contest, etc.

double or nothing— adv.with the result that a gambler either wins two times as much money as he or she has already won or loses all of the money

out of your hands— phrases not within one's control

bet your bottom dollar— phrases to be certain that something will happen

Article 17: Falling 'Down the Rabbit Hole'

Date: 2021-06-05T22:00:20+00:00 | 601 words | Source

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And now, welcome to Words and Their Stories, a program that explores words and expressions in the English language. On this program, we give examples and notes on usage. And when available, we sometimes explain where they come from.

On today's program, we are going to talk about rabbits.

Rabbits, like many other animals, dig holes and complex underground passages, like tunnels, to build their homes. So, when rabbits want to go home, they must go down the rabbit hole. And that may lead to other holes, tunnels, and paths, or even other rabbit homes.

In English, we use the expression down the rabbit hole when we get so caught up in the search for something – like an answer to a problem – that we end up somewhere totally different.

The Internet is an easy way to get lost down the rabbit hole.

For this Words and Their Stories, my search for “down the rabbit hole” returned the video game “Down the Rabbit Hole.” The animation was so beautiful! I had to find out more about who drew the images for the game.

A few more clicks led me to a website about learning how to draw children's books. Let's talk about children's books. Do you know there is a famous book festival in the Italian city of Bologna? After an hour and many more clicks, I found myself watching a YouTube video on how to make the meat sauce Bolognese.

In other words, I had fallen down a rabbit hole and wasted an hour. But, at least, I got an idea for dinner!

Here are some notes on usage.

We often describe what kind of rabbit hole we get lost in. For example, if you get completely overtaken by your research on climate change, you could say you “went down an environmental rabbit hole.”

There are many verbs that you can use along with “rabbit hole.” You can get lost, fall down or get stuck in a rabbit hole.

But where did this come from?

Well, the expression comes from the book *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* written by Lewis Carroll in 1865. Alice, the girl in the story, begins her adventure by falling and falling and falling down a very long rabbit hole. She falls slowly and sees things on the way down – strange things. And when she

arrives at the bottom things only get stranger.

And that is another way we use this expression. It can describe a completely strange situation or an all-consuming situation. By all-consuming, I mean a situation where you lose touch with reality. You lose yourself a bit.

For example, once on a trip to Coney Island, New York, I got lost and ended up in a very strange place. There was a play going on and everyone was dressed up. A band was playing strange music and the lights were all different colors. I had definitely fallen into a rabbit hole! But this time it was Anna's Adventures in Wonderland!

And that's all the adventure we have for you today.

Until next time... I'm Anna Matteo!

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

animation— n.a way of making a movie by using a series of drawings, computer graphics, or photographs of objects (such as puppets or models) that are slightly different from one another and that when viewed quickly one after another create the appearance of movement

click— n.the act of selecting something on a computer screen by pressing a button on a mouse or some other device

climate change— n.significant and long-lasting change in the Earth's climate and weather patterns

adventure— n.an exciting or remarkable experience

Article 18: 'Stepping-Stone' Is a Way Up and Out

Date: 2021-06-12T22:00:17+00:00 | 515 words | Source

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And now, welcome to Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English. On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language.

Today we begin our story in nature.

Imagine you are walking in the woods, and you come to a little creek. You look over the water and spy some fat, ripe blackberries, wild grown, and ready for harvesting.

You can't believe your good luck to find your favorite fruit, free for the taking, just a few meters across the creek. But then you look down and realize you're wearing your favorite shoes. A walk through the water will ruin them! But you are also very, very, berry-hungry.

Stepping-stones are what you need. In a creek or river, stepping-stones are rocks with flat tops that sit above the water line. You can cross a creek by stepping from one rock top to another.

However, the term ‘stepping-stone’ is not only for creek-crossings. It is often used figuratively. A worker, for example, can use stepping-stones to reach a higher level or position in their company.

Let’s say it is your dream is to become the chief financial officer of a profitable and powerful investment firm. Your first stepping-stone on that path might be admission to a respected university. After completing your studies, you step to another stone, maybe it’s a job as a teller at a small bank. Some time later, the bank offers you a supervisory position. That promotion is a third stepping-stone. All of them are helping to make your dream come true.

Stepping-stones can be used to reach any kind of goal. But not every stepping-stone is a good place to land.

For example, some goal-seekers treat people as stepping-stones. And let’s face it, most people do not enjoy being stepped on. They may be happy to provide a stepping-stone but usually do not want to serve as one.

Using someone as a stepping-stone could be seen as stealing help.

There is another way we use the term ‘stepping-stone.’ Stepping-stones can be parts of a process within a larger operation. For example, learning how to write code is a stepping-stone for many app developers.

Now, if your goal is to master the English Language, feel free to use any VOA Learning English stepping-stones on your path.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Caty Weaver was the editor.

creek— n.a small stream

figuratively— adv.in a figurative way:with a meaning that is different from the basic or literal meaning and that expresses an idea by using language that usually describes something else

teller— n.a member of a bank's staff concerned with the direct handling of money received or paid out

promotion— n.the act of moving someone to a higher or more important position or rank in an organization

code— n.to change (information) into a set of letters, numbers, or symbols that can be read by a computer

master— v.to learn (something) completely:to get the knowledge and skill that allows you to do, use, or understand (something) very well

Article 19: Funny, Or Not So Funny, Things Dad Say

Date: 2021-06-19T21:59:38+00:00 | 785 words | Source

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And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English! On this program we explore words and sayings in American English.

In the United States, we celebrate Father's Day on the third Sunday in June. So, for today's show we will celebrate fathers, too!

Now, being a father is no easy task. To make it easier, some dads like to make jokes.

Jokes, of course, are supposed to be funny. But Dad jokes are known for being ... not funny. They are corny. They often result in eye rolls from the children who hear them. Many children are embarrassed when they and their friends are subjected to fatherly humor!

In the way of the television

For example, here is a joke my father used to make when I was a child. He loved to watch baseball on television. If I came between him and the TV, he would say, "You make a better door than you do a window." In other words, "I can't see the TV. Move!"

Little did I know, he is not the only dad to say this. To research this story, I searched the web and found several sites that gather dad sayings. A list on BoredPanda.com included "you make a better door than you do a window."

Now, let's enjoy some other common and corny sayings among fathers.

Now, let's talk about work. Dads love to say this to any worker in any kind of workplace: "So, are you working hard or hardly working?" Many, many, many, many children have been embarrassed at stores, restaurants, repair shops ... just about anywhere with that joke.

Dads have a few sayings they find funny about money. If your father gives you a little money, not a lot, he might say, "Don't spend it all in one place!" Or he might tell you to "keep the change!" when in fact, there is not much money left over.

When it comes to paying a bill, dads' corny side really shines through. Before even looking at a bill, they might say something like, "What's the damage?" Or they might look at their young children and say, "I hope you brought your money!"

In life there are few guarantees. Thankfully, you can count on a father for many things. They are usually there for their children through good and bad times, or through thick and thin.

You can also count on many fathers to say the same things when they see another man washing a car. It is almost guaranteed that he will say one of two things. He will either say, "Hey, you can do mine next." or "You missed a spot! Ha, ha ...!"

Oh dad, that's a good one.

Now, let's talk about departures. When it's time to leave, why just say, "Come on. Let's go...?"

Dads have so many interesting and really corny ways to say, "It's time to go." Here are just a few:

“Ready to skedaddle?”

“Let’s rock and roll!”

“Time to hit the road.”

Some fathers also like to talk as if they were cowboys of the Old West. They might say, “Saddle up partners!” “Time to hit the trail!” Another cowboy favorite is, “Let’s get the heck out of Dodge!”

The saddle is a seat for a horse rider. So, to saddle up means to get ready to go.

And the saying, “Let’s get the heck out of Dodge!” means to escape a place quickly. Dodge City is a town in Kansas created in the 1800s. The frontier town saw lots of danger and action in its early days, including shoot-outs between lawmen and criminal groups passing through.

However, Dads who have never been on a horse nor have been to Dodge can use these expressions.

And remember, you don’t have to be a father to use any of these expressions. Just know that if you do, expect a few eye-rolls in your general direction.

And that’s it for this Words and Their Stories. Time for us to skedaddle!

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Do you have common “dad expressions” in your language? Do you have a favorite dad joke? Share them in the Comments Section.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Caty Weaver was the editor.

corny— adj.so simple, sentimental, or old-fashioned as to be annoying

eye roll— n.an upward turning of the eyes especially as an expression of annoyance, exasperation, disbelief, etc

embarrassed— v.feeling or showing a state of self-conscious confusion and distress

guarantee— n.a promise that something will happen or be done

departure— n.the act of leaving a place especially to start a journey

skedaddle— v.to leave immediately

trail— n.a route that someone follows to go somewhere or achieve something : a path through a forest, field, etc.

Article 20: You Don't Have to Sing to 'Preach to the Choir'

Date: 2021-06-26T22:00:29+00:00 | 539 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language.

Today, we talk about a type of shared belief. Often in our lives, we come together with others because of a shared belief or purpose. That group can sometimes be called a choir.

A choir can describe a group of instruments of the same type, for example a brass choir.

A choir can be used to describe an organized group of persons or things. For example, many rich, famous people travel with a choir of assistants.

A choir is also a group of organized singers in a church. This is the most common definition. For today's expression, we will focus on the church choir. The expression is "preaching to the choir."

Church leaders preach. That's why they're called preachers. But the word "preach" is not only used in a church.

You can preach about something you believe to be good or necessary. However, people who preach to others, speak to them in an annoying way about the right way to behave. They may sound as if they think they know better. And books that try to teach a moral lesson could be criticized for being too preachy.

But now, let's get back to our expression "preaching to the choir."

One online dictionary gives this definition: If I am preaching to the choir, I am presenting an argument or opinion to people who already agree with it. So, I am not looking to convince them. Perhaps, I am just looking to feel good about my idea.

When you preach to the choir, you are sharing your opinion with people who already agree with you. They are already on your side. You don't need to convince them. So, sometimes it means you are wasting your breath, like in this example.

You know, we need a park in our neighborhood.

I couldn't agree more.

The empty property at the end of the street would be perfect. And it's near the woods. So, it'll be very quiet.

You don't have to sell me on your idea. I brought up that same idea years ago.

It would be great not just for the kids, but for everyone! It could be a gathering place and a place for community activities.

I already know all this! Now, you're just preaching to the choir. What you need to do is to talk to all the other neighbors on this street and get them on board. A few were against the idea years ago.

Here is another example. If I said to you that learning another language can be good for you in so many ways, and you should try it – you could say, "Anna, you are preaching to the choir! We're already doing that."

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

annoying— adj.causing slight anger

moral— adj.of or relating to principles of right and wrong in behavior

convince— v.to cause (someone) to agree to do something

on board— verbal phraseto agree with something or someone : to be part of a team or organization

Article 21: It's Time for Your 'Day in the Sun'

Date: 2021-07-03T22:00:26+00:00 | 609 words | Source

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And now, welcome to Words and Their Stories.

On this show we explore words and expressions in American English. We sometimes explain where they come from. We give examples and notes on usage.

Today we talk about that huge, burning star in the sky – the sun!

If you spend all day out in the sun without proper protection, you might get sunburned. But other than that, spending time outdoors in the sun can be a wonderful thing. To feel the sun's rays on your face can feel really good especially for those who have been inside for long periods of time.

And that brings us to today's expression -- to have your day in the sun. We use it a couple of different ways.

When you have your day in the sun, you have achieved the highest possible level of success. You are at your peak. You are having a heyday. You are at your pinnacle or zenith of success. These words are all synonyms: They mean nearly the same.

In terms of meaning a period of success, to have a day in the sun can be more specific. It can be a brief period of time when a person becomes very successful or popular compared to the rest of their otherwise not-very-successful or popular life. So, something new has happened to throw them into the spotlight, or rather ... sunlight.

Sometimes these periods of time are much shorter than a day. They last for only a moment. So, with this expression, you can also say "a moment in the sun."

For example, recently many people found their moment in the sun by sharing funny videos on YouTube or Tik Tok.

Sometimes when we use this expression, we do not specify the amount of time. We simply say, "to have your time in the sun." This usually means the person is young or successful.

For example, once a young man was very successful as a music producer. He was so successful that many people became jealous. But he had worked hard for it. And now, it was simply his time in the sun.

Now, let's hear this expression used in a short conversation.

Hey, did you hear the news? Clara is moving to Chicago! She just accepted a job as vice president for a Fortune 500 company.

Wow! That IS big news! Good for her. She has been working hard for years now.

She has. It's time she had her moment in the sun.

I think it's going to be longer than a moment. She has always been very ambitious.

Everyone should have their moment in the sun. American artist Andy Warhol famously said that everyone has 15 minutes of fame. Those 15 minutes would be their moments to shine. They would be their moments in the sun. I hope all of our listeners have their day in the sun.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

ray—n. one of the lines of light that you can see coming from an object

peak—n. the highest level or degree of excellence, quantity, activity,

heyday—n. the time when someone or something is most successful, popular, etc.

pinnacle—n. the best or most important part of something; the point of greatest success or achievement

zenith—n. the strongest or most successful period of time

spotlight—n. the area of light created by a spotlight

jealous—adj. feeling or showing an unhappy or angry desire to have what someone else has

conversation—n. an informal talk involving two people or a small group of people

ambitious—adj. having a desire to be successful, powerful, or famous

Article 22: Time to Get 'Back on That Horse'

Date: 2021-07-10T22:00:24+00:00 | 708 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. Sometimes we explain where they come from and how to use them.

Today we talk about horses. They are strong, fast, and beautiful animals. Many years ago, in many places around the world, people used horses to get around. These days, horseback riding is done for

sport. It is a good way to get exercise outdoors. However, it is not the easiest sport to enjoy.

First of all, horseback riding can cost a lot. You need a horse, the right equipment, a place for it to live, called a stable, and a lot of land to ride it on. Those things can cost a lot of money. So, many people just rent time on a horse. But that can cost a lot too.

Then there is the learning curve. This is the time it takes to learn how to do something. Horseback riding has a pretty steep learning curve. Most people need to do it a lot to feel safe on a horse. So, people who did not take lessons when they were young, may have a harder time learning when they get older.

That is because there is also some danger with horseback riding. You could get seriously hurt if a horse throws you from its back. If that happens, people say it is important to get back on the horse as soon as you can. (Of course, after you get checked for injuries.)

If you do not get back in the saddle, you may be afraid to ever ride a horse again. But if you climb right back on the horse, you might forget about falling off.

That is where we get two expressions: “back in the saddle,” and “If you fall off a horse, (you) get right back on.”

Now, a saddle is the leather seat that you put on horse’s back. It secures a rider to the horse. When we say we are getting “back in the saddle,” we are doing something that we have not done in a while or something we think we no longer do well.

For example, let’s say I get fired from my job. It not only upsets me, but it also hurts myself-confidence. So, my friends could say to me, “Anna, It’s time you get back in the saddle! Go find another job!”

“If you fall off a horse, you get right back on” is the same advice. It means: To return to an activity that you have failed at or had trouble with. But not just any activity. If you did something that you didn’t enjoy and failed, there is really no need to do it again.

For this expression, the activity is usually something that you like or that is important to you for some reason.

For example, a friend of mine is a piano player. Once he wrote a piece of music and played it for a room full of people. But they did not really like it. So, he got upset and wanted to quit playing.

I told him, “You have to get right back on that horse. Go back home right now and write another song.” And he did! He is still trying, but he is not afraid of playing in front of people.

So, if you need to tell someone to get over their fears and try something again, you can use one of these expressions.

If you make mistakes speaking English to a room full of people, just forget about it. My advice is: “Get back in the saddle!” as soon as possible.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

rent— v.to pay money in return for being able to use (something that belongs to someone else)

learning curve— n.the course of progress made in learning something

steep— adj.going up or down very quickly

saddle— n.a leather-covered seat that is put on the back of a horse

self-confidence— n.feeling good about oneself and in one's powers and abilities

song— n.a short piece of music with words that are sung

Article 23: What 'Strikes a Chord' with You?

Date: 2021-07-17T22:00:07+00:00 | 563 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples that show how to use them. And sometimes we explain where they come from.

Today, our expression comes from music. A chord is three or more musical notes sounded at the same time. The word “strike” means to hit. But when we play a note on a musical instrument, we can also say we struck a note.

So, our expression for today is to strike a chord.

In its most general definition, to strike a chord means something relates to you somehow. It resonates with you. If something strikes a chord with you, it is familiar to you in some way, for better or for worse.

Something can strike a positive chord. It is familiar to you in a good way. It creates good feelings or thoughts. For example, a love song struck a deep chord with James. It is the song he sang to his wife at their wedding. Or maybe the song was playing on the radio when she left him. In that case, the song would strike a negative chord with James.

As you can see from those examples, you can add other words to describe what type of chord is being struck – a deep chord, a negative chord.

Here are some other examples.

A teacher's advice can strike a responsive chord with students. And a politician's speech can strike an empathetic chord with voters. Those two words – sympathetic and responsive – are commonly used with this expression.

You might hear people say something “struck a familiar chord.” But to me, this sounds a bit unnecessary. If something strikes a chord, it means it is familiar in some way. So, we don’t need to add the word “familiar” to the expression. But I have heard it used that way before. Maybe it means something is really familiar.

Sometimes we use to strike a chord this way: If something creates strong feelings or thoughts, it strikes a chord. And that “something” could be unfamiliar to the person.

Here is another situation where we use this expression: If something strikes a chord with you, you approve of it. You agree with it. For example, during the election the politician’s position on the economy and jobs must have struck a chord with voters because she won easily.

Let’s talk for a minute about sentence structure.

If you look back at our examples, most if not all of them use the word “with” —with James, with students, with voters. But you can use this expression without the word “with.” In this way, “strike a chord” means it caused a strong emotional reaction to something. For example, that movie must have really struck a chord. Everyone came out of the theater crying.

Hopefully learning English continues to strike a chord with all of you ... a positive one!

And that’s the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

resonate— v.to have particular meaning or importance for someone; to affect or appeal to someone in a personal or emotional way

positive— adj.good or useful

negative— adj.a part of something which is harmful or bad

responsive— v.react in a desired or positive way : quick to react or respond

sympathetic— adj.having or showing support for or approval of something

Article 24: Summer Fun with Family Expressions

Date: 2021-07-24T22:00:02+00:00 | 667 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. And we often explain where they come from and how to use them.

In the summer months, we often get together with our family members who live far away. If you listen in as people talk with and about their families, you might hear some interesting expressions.

Like many idioms, it is often difficult to understand these expressions simply by knowing the meaning of individual words and the grammar of the sentence in which they appear. This week we will explore a few of these expressions, so you will understand them better when you hear them.

While watching television with your family in a crowded room, you might hear, "Your father was not a glass blower."

Of course, it is impossible for a person to be made of glass. That expression really means you are blocking the view of someone else, and they want you to move.

A similar expression is, "You make a better door than a window." It also means, "Please move out of the way."

When a child starts to act just like the parent, we say, "He's a chip off the old block." This suggests the image of an artist making a statue of someone from a block of stone. It can mean that the child is made of the same material as the parent. In a similar way, we may think that a child's action can show how they will act as an adult. To express this idea, we use the phrase, "The child is father to the man."

Lighting a fire for a family barbecue is a job that can be easy, with the right tools. After she lit the barbecue grill, I heard my sister say, "... and Bob's your uncle, there's the fire." This expression means something is easy. It describes how those in high positions may sometimes give jobs to family members, making their lives easier.

There are other expressions that have to do with money in the family. Someone who starts out life in a wealthy family was "born with a silver spoon in their mouth." And an adult may warn a child, "A fool and his money are soon parted." In other words, do not make a bad investment or spend money unwisely. And a child who is not given an inheritance is said to be "cut off without a penny."

My younger brother liked to play with the boys on our street who always caused trouble. Mom told him to stay away from the troublemakers with this expression: "Birds of a feather flock together." She meant that, if he does not want people to think he is one of the troublemakers, he should not spend time with them.

Speaking of animals, our cat is going to have kittens soon. A friend who saw her said she was "in a family way." Soon, the cat will have her own family to care for.

Finally, when a group of people live or work closely together, they might say, "We are like one big happy family – we argue all the time!" This expression could mean that the group is happy to be so close; or, if said with irony, it means the group is not happy to work together.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Dr. Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

view—n. the things that can be seen for a particular place

statue— n. a figure usually of a person or animal that is made from stone, metal, or wood

grill—n. a device used to cook over an open fire or hot coals

inheritance—n.money, property, or the like that is received from someone when that person dies

reputation—n.the common opinion that people have about someone; the way people think about someone

irony—n.the use of words that mean the opposite of what you really think especially to be funny

Article 25: Start Off on the Right Foot

Date: 2021-07-31T22:00:38+00:00 | 713 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about something that you might take for granted. You might not them or appreciate their value and worth. Your feet! We just expect them to be there when we need them.

But our feet are important. And they have managed to walk right into many English expressions. Let's talk about some.

First, let's put our best foot forward.

This means you act in the best possible way to show your best possible self. Sometimes we do this to impress others. But sometimes we just want to do the best job we can or be the best person we can.

At work, people who put their best foot forward, work fast and do the job well.

Here's another foot expression: To start off on the right foot.

If something starts off on the right foot, it means it starts off in a good way. For example, you can start your day off on the right foot. You can start a class off on the right foot. If you start or get off on the right foot, you immediately have success when you begin an activity, a project, a job, or even a relationship.

For example, when you are starting a new job, you want to start off on the right foot with your new coworkers. And if you have a new boyfriend or girlfriend, you really want to start off on the right foot with their parents. Maybe you just met a new friend. You also want to get off on the right foot with their group of friends.

All of this means that you want to leave a good impression -- especially when you first meet. In fact, we have a special saying about that: "You don't get a second chance to make a first impression."

If you make a bad first impression, you have started off on the wrong foot. And it is harder to repair relationships when they start off poorly. Also, it is harder to get a project back on track if it started on the wrong foot.

Some word experts say that ancient superstition thought that the right foot was luckier than the left. So, it was good luck to start off with the right foot instead of the left.

Now let's hear two friends use some of these expressions.

A: Wow! You look great! Is that a new business suit?

B: No. I've had this suit for years. But I think I've gained some weight during the pandemic.

A: Well, it DOES look a little tight. Maybe try unbuttoning the jacket.

A: Your hair cut looks great too. So, where are you going all dressed up?

B: Today I start a new job ... in a new office ... with new people.

A: That's a big deal. I mean we've all been working from home for more than a year.

B: Tell me about it! It feels strange to wear a suit. But with my new job ... I REALLY want to start off on the right foot. You know what they say: You don't get a second chance to make a first impression.

A: In that case, maybe you should wear REAL shoes. It's hard to put your best foot forward wearing your houseslippers.

A: Looks like you have to choose: Start off on the wrong foot by showing up late or by wearing slippers.

A: Just stay at your desk as much as you can. Good luck!

B: Thanks! See you later!

Hopefully you started your day off on the right foot with some English lessons from VOA Learning English!

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

impress— v.to affect strongly or deeply and especially favorably

chance— n.an opportunity to do something: an amount of time or a situation in which something can be done

superstition— n.a belief or way of behaving that is based on fear of the unknown and faith in magic or luck:a belief that certain events or things will bring good or bad luck

slippers— n.a light, soft shoe that is easily put on and taken off and that is worn indoors

Article 26: Expressions for Getting Things Done

Date: 2021-08-07T22:00:51+00:00 | 621 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language.

Our goal is to teach you American English by any means possible – in other words, by hook or by crook.

"By hook or by crook" is a very old expression that is still used today. It means to try to reach a goal by any method or any means possible.

For example, a friend of mine really wanted to get a job at this marketing company. He said he would do anything to get it. His exact words were: "I am going to get that job by hook or by crook." He is the most hardworking and determined person I know. So, one way or another he will definitely get that job.

Today, "one way or another" is a more common way to say the same thing as "by hook or by crook."

Here is a language secret. Some people like to use double negatives to express the idea of determination. A double negative happens when there are two negative words in the same sentence. Negative words include no, not, and nothing.

Strictly speaking, double negatives are not correct grammar. But we still use them to intensify a statement. For example, you might hear, "There is no way he is NOT getting that job." Which means...he is definitely getting that job.

Now, let's get back to "By hook or by crook." It is believed to have appeared in Britain in the late 1300s. No one is sure where exactly it comes from. But some word experts say the expression is about a problem faced by common people who would take wood from the forests of the king.

The law said they could only take as much as their tools would allow. And those tools were called a shepherd's crook, a long, rounded stick, and a billhook, a cutting tool. So, if you could collect the wood with your hook and crook, it was yours.

Here is another similar expression: come hell or high water.

This means that you will get something done no matter how difficult or no matter what happens. No difficulties or obstacles will stop you.

For example, let's say my best friend just moved to Washington, D.C. She has a great job but is having trouble finding a new apartment. I know the city well. So, I make it my mission to help her. Come hell or high water I will find her an apartment. No matter the difficulties, I will do everything in my power to try to make this happen.

Experts say this expression comes from overcoming destructive forces of fires or floods. Some say its first recorded use in the United States was in 1915. But others say it is older.

If you do something "come hell or high water," you are determined to do it. You will do it despite the difficulties involved.

"By hook or by crook" means you will find any method to succeed. "Come hell or high water" means you will find a method to overcome a barrier.

We here at VOA Learning know that our listeners want to learn English very badly. By hook or by crook and come hell or high water...you will!

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time...I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

determined—adj.having a strong feeling that you are going to do something

definitely—adv.without doubt; in a way that is clear

obstacle—n.a barrier; something that makes it difficult to do something

mission—n.a task or job that someone has given you

despite—prepositionwithout being prevented

overcome—v.to successfully deal with; to defeat; to be strongly or severely affected by something

Article 27: What Does It Mean To Be 'On the Nose?'

Date: 2021-08-14T21:59:54+00:00 | 649 words | Source

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Now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Our bodies give us so many expressions. And today we talk about the facial feature that sticks out the most...your nose!

Well, unless you are wearing a mask, which covers the mouth and nose. But most of the time our noses are noticeable. You can see them clearly. And that fact gives us this expression: "as plain as the nose on your face."

This describes something that is very clear, easy to see or understand. It is obvious.

Here is one way to use it.

My friend Marina liked my other friend, Christopher, a lot. She never told me, but I could tell. Every time he entered the room she acted differently. She talked faster and fixed her hair a lot. And she laughed at every joke he made, even the ones that were not funny. So, to me she obviously liked him.

When I asked her about it, she said, "How did you know?"

"Marina, I said, 'it's as plain as the nose on your face. Which means...he probably knows too!'" Her face turned deep red from embarrassment.

Imagine we all have to wear masks all the time for years and years. If that happens, this expression might change. But for now we still use it.

Here is our next expression. It's an easy one: on the nose. This expression has two very common meanings.

If something is "on the nose," it is exactly right. It is accurate. For example, his guess about the new company succeeding was right on the nose. After only a year, it is making a lot of money.

“On the nose” also means something happens at the exact set time. For example, Marjorie’s work day starts at 10am. And she arrives to the office every day at 10am on the nose.

But being “on the nose” and on time doesn’t mean you have to do it every day. It just means you agreed to be somewhere at a certain time and you are there.

Some word experts say this usage of “on the nose” comes from radio. When recording a radio show, the voice performers are in a recording room. They are separated from the producers and sound experts by glass. Oftentimes, the recording could not be interrupted. So, if a show was running on time, the producer would put a finger on his or her nose to let the performers know.

Here is our last expression.

One thing noses do is smell things. The nose can help us find food. Sometimes it can help us detect danger, like smelling smoke. This is a valuable ability.

So, if you have a special ability for something, we can say you “have a nose” for it. For example, a good detective has a nose for solving crimes. They can sniff out hidden clues. To sniff is to breathe in quickly, like this: (sniff sniff).

If you have a nose for news, you are good at finding news stories. It’s like you can sniff out an interesting story.

Many of our listeners definitely have a nose for learning English.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories! Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Learn more "nose" expressions in this earlier Words and Their Stories.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

mask— n. a covering used to protect your face or cover your mouth

obvious— adj. easily discovered, seen, or understood

embarrassment— n. the state of feeling foolish in front of others

accurate— adj. free from error especially as the result of care

interrupt— v. to cause (something) to stop happening for a time

detect— v. to discover or notice the presence of (something that is hidden or hard to see, hear, taste, etc.)

sniff out— v. to inhale through the nose especially for smelling

clue— n. something that helps a person find something, understand something, or solve a mystery or puzzle

Article 28: Don't Sweat It and Other Sweaty Expressions

Date: 2021-08-21T22:00:37+00:00 | 779 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Sweat. Those tiny drops of perspiration that make up part of our bodies' cooling system.

We sweat when we do hard physical work. We sweat when we exercise. In these situations we can say we “work up a sweat.” For example, running is a great way to work up a sweat.

We also sweat when it is hot outside. But we wouldn't say we worked up a sweat. We didn't do any work. We just got sweaty by being hot.

We often use another verb when talking about sweating: break. For example, when I helped my friend move to her new apartment, I barely broke a sweat. That is because she doesn't own very much. I just needed to help her move some books, kitchen items, a box of clothes, and a cat.

Now, there are other situations when people may sweat. When we are very scared, nervous, worried, or simply uncertain about something, we could sweat. If any of these feelings go to an extreme, we might say we “broke out in a cold sweat.”

For example, people who do not like to speak in front of strangers might break out in a cold sweat if they have to talk to a large crowd of people.

Sweating can also be a sign that you are unsure of your ability. That is why one popular advertisement for underarm deodorant had this famous expression: “Never let them see you sweat.”

Sweating could also be seen as a sign that you are lying -- or at least not telling the whole truth. If you watch crime shows, sweating is one thing police look for when they question a suspect of a crime.

Now, sometimes we use the word sweat in a strange way. Let's say you help someone do something. But it was really not a big deal for you. The person thanks you. And you can say to them, “No sweat!” This just means it was easy for you to do. But I would only use this with someone I know fairly well.

Here is another strange expression: “Don't sweat it.” This is a way of saying “no problem” or “don't worry about it.”

Here's a quick story. One time, my roommate and I decided to have a stoop sale. This is a fun way to get rid of stuff and make a little money. It also gives you a chance to see people in the neighborhood because the stoop is the front area of a building -- the part with the steps.

In the morning, we worked up a sweat carrying all the items down. But once things were set up, we could relax and talk to people who stopped by. It was really fun to get rid of things we no longer wanted. And by the end of the day we had earned nearly \$100 to spend on a little party for everyone.

It was a really hot day and during the sale, I sweated up a storm. So, I took off my favorite jacket and set it aside. By the end of the morning, I couldn't find it. My roommate asked me, “Was it the black jacket with lightning on it?” “Yes,” I answered. She quietly said, “I think I sold it.” I could tell that she felt badly. So, to make her feel better I said, “Don't sweat it! It's not a big deal. Come on, let's order pizza and drinks!”

Inside, though, I must admit ... I was a little upset. It was my favorite jacket. But those feelings did not last long. There are too many serious problems in life. So, it is important to not get upset about small things. In other words, don't sweat the small stuff.

Here is my last note is on usage.

While “sweat” and “perspiration” are physically the same thing, the two words are often not used the same way. We do not say “perspiration” in the same informal way we say “sweat.”

So, with all of the expressions we heard today, we only use the word “sweat.” We would not say we “worked up perspiration” or “broke perspiration.” And we definitely would not say, Don't perspire the small stuff.

But if you make a mistake ... don't sweat it!

And that's it for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

perspiration— n. the clear liquid that forms on your skin when you are hot or nervous

stoop— n. a porch, platform, or stairway at the entrance of a house or building

informal— adj. suitable for ordinary or everyday use

Article 29: ‘Heyday’ Is The Best of Times

Date: 2021-08-28T22:00:35+00:00 | 445 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore terms and expressions in the English language. And today we talk about a word that will help you talk about the best of times. That word is heyday.

If you are in your heyday, you are in your prime. You are at the peak of your abilities. You are having your best days ever!

Some people had their heydays when they were young, maybe in college or high school. They consider themselves past their prime. They might talk about those past experiences only and not plan for new experiences in the future. These people might be stuck in their glory days.

Other things besides people can have a heyday. If you are at the pinnacle of success, you could say your career is having a heyday.

Also, a place, like a city, can have a heyday and so can an industry.

For example, I grew up in the rust belt of West Virginia. In its heyday, my hometown was known for its steel industry. In fact, every man in my family worked in the steel mills. But when the industry shrank, the steel factory jobs disappeared. The city fell on hard times and today is still trying to recover.

However, many other parts of West Virginia are having atourismheyday because of the beautiful natural environment.

So, where does the word heyday come from?

Some word experts say that it first appeared in English in the 16th century as an interjection. An interjection is a word or cry (such as "ouch") that expresses a sudden or strong feeling. So, "heyday" was used to express extreme happiness or wonder.

Around the same time, "heyday" was also used as a noun meaning "highspirits."

Meriam-Webster online dictionary says it was not until the 18th century that the word was used to mean "the period when one'sachievementor popularity has reached itszenith."

Usually, we use heyday in the singular form. Saying the plural is a little less common.

And that's all the time we have for thisWords and Their Stories.Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Caty Weaver was the editor.

heyday– n.the time of greatest strength, popularity, or success

prime– n.the period in life when a person is best in health, strength, etc.:the most active or successful time of a person's life

peak– n.at the highest point or level

pinnacle– n.the best or most important part of something:the point of greatest success or achievement

glory days– n.a time in the past that is remembered for great success or happiness

spirit– n.a lively or brisk quality

zenith– n.the strongest or most successful period of time

Article 30: Bed Expressions

Date: 2021-09-04T22:00:17+00:00 | 737 words | Source

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And now,Words and Their Stories,from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we even use them in a short story.

For this week, we talk about something that we all use – a bed!

So, today, we talk about beds. We have several expressions that use this word.

The first one we will talk about involves a flower -- the rose. Imagine sleeping on a bed of roses. Roses smell nice. So, that could be very pleasant, indeed. Well, as long as the roses do not havethorns. Ouch!

Well, if a bed of roses is nice, then “no bed of roses” is not. If something is “no bed of roses,” it is difficult or really unpleasant. And we have all had those experiences. I know I have.

Once, I was asked to sing and play the ukulele for a special event. The event was to raise money for a homeless shelter. So, I was happy to volunteer. I did not know the organizer well, but what could go wrong? The ukulele is such a happy instrument.

Well, as it turned out, a LOT could go wrong.

The organizer was actually kind of mean and bossy. First, she picked all the songs, and they were not that great. So, when we suggested other songs, she would yell. She also would yell at us if we played poorly. And this happened often because many of us were just beginners.

Then on the night of our performance, it rained and was very cold. So, only a few people came to hear us play. This put her in a very bad mood. But then something happy happened. Someone in the crowd joined in by playing the flute. But then she yelled at them too!

In the end, I got sick and lost my voice for about a month. So, let me tell you, the whole experience was no bed of roses!

Now, if this woman had been unkind just once, I could say that maybe she “got up on the wrong side of the bed.” This means you are in a bad mood. You feel irritable. But it’s not your usual way of feeling. Perhaps you just didn’t get enough sleep.

However, this woman was unpleasant at every practice. So, it was more than just waking up on the wrong side of the bed. She was just no fun.

Well, months later she needed ukulele players to help in another performance. But none of us joined. Playing the uke, as it is sometimes called, is something we do for fun. And we did not want to get yelled at again.

So, this woman played alone and continues to play alone. You could say, “she made her bed, now she must lie in it.” This means that a person has made a difficult situation and then must deal with the results, or consequences.

Usually we say this to someone who has put themselves in the difficulty and then complains about it.

When you use this expression, you can also use the word “sleep.” “She made her bed, now she must sleep in it.”

And you do not have to say the whole thing. Simply saying, “You made your bed ...” is quite enough.

Finally, bed is where we end up after finishing a long day. So, it is not surprising that we also have a “bed” expression for finishing a project or task. When you “put something to bed” you finish it.

In fact, we are done with this Words and Their Stories. So, it’s time to put this episode to bed ... until next time.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

thorn— n.a hard sharp leafless point on the stem or branch of a plant (as a rose bush)

ukulele— n.a small guitar of Portuguese origin popularized in Hawaii in the 1880s and strung typically with four strings

mood— n.a person's emotional state

flute— n.a musical instrument that is shaped like a thin pipe and that is played by blowing across a hole near one end

irritable— adj.easily made angry or annoyed

consequence— n.something produced by a cause or following from a condition

complain— v.to say or write that you are unhappy, sick, uncomfortable, etc., or that you do not like something

episode— n.a television show, radio show, etc., that is one part of a series

Article 31: 'That Train Has Left the Station!' (or...It's too late)

Date: 2021-09-11T22:01:56+00:00 | 718 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples, notes on usage and sometimes we use them in a short story.

Today we talk about transportation expressions involving ships, boats, and trains.

A train ride can be a wonderful adventure.

Imagine that you are in your final days of study in Budapest. You have lived there as a student for over a year but have never traveled to Prague. So, on your last weekend, you plan a train trip from Budapest to Prague. But you only have a couple of days to make the trip.

You buy a ticket leaving late on a Friday night. You plan to catch the train after your last class. You are so excited! But after class your professor offers to buy you dinner. He wants to send you off with a celebration. You don't want to be rude. So, you agree, but your eye is always on the clock.

Dinner takes longer than you thought it would and soon it's nearing your time to catch the train. So, you thank him and say you have a train to catch. But he insists that you stay for a quick dessert and offers to drive you to the station. You do the time math in your head and figure that if he drives you, you will have just enough time to catch your train. But then, after dessert, he remembers, "Oh I didn't drive. How silly of me!" You tell him, "Thanks. I really have to go!"

You rush to the station! But by the time you get there the station, the train – your train -- is pulling away. And there won't be another one until the next night. You have missed your train and your chance to see

Prague before returning home!

And that brings us to our expression for today. “That train has left the station.”

It means you have missed an opportunity. The chance to do something – something you really wanted to do – has passed.

We say this when a process is already underway. The time for discussion is over. It’s too late to change your mind. And it’s too late to make changes. Some possibility or choice is no longer available or likely.

If you like boating expressions, you can also say: “That ship has sailed,” or that someone has “missed the boat.” They are all used the same way.

Besides missing an opportunity, all of these expressions could be used in another situation: When events have been put into place and there is no stopping them.

For example, let’s say your mother wants to fix you up with the nice child of her boss. She arranges the whole date without talking to you first. You don’t want to go, but she has already told her boss that you would.

If you were to tell me about it, I would probably say to you: “Sorry. But that train has already left the station. You must go on that date.”

Usually when we use “that train has left the station” or “that ship has sailed” it means events are going forward and you can’t stop them.

Now, here is a note on usage. Simply put, these sayings mean, “It’s too late. So, save your breath.” So, they could sound rude or thoughtless. And they are informal.

So, I would say them to a friend and co-worker. But I wouldn’t say them to my boss or my professor – although it was his fault that I missed my train in the first place!

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this program for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter Jr. was the editor.

adventure–n.an exciting or dangerous experience

rude–adj.not showing concern or respect for others

insist–v.to demand that something happen or that someone do something

dessert–n.a usually sweet course or dish (as of pastry or ice cream) usually served at the end of a meal

silly–adj.having or showing a lack of thought, understanding, or good judgment

opportunity–n.an amount of time or a situation when something can be done

boss–n.a person whose job it is to tell others what to do; chief

informal–adj.not suited for serious or official speech and writing

Article 32: Time Wasters: Lollygag and Dillydally

Date: 2021-09-18T22:01:36+00:00 | 727 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language.

Today, we begin with a story about two good friends: Caleb and Corrine. They have a lot in common. They like the same books, enjoy the same movies and play the same sports.

But, the friends are also quite different in the way they live their lives.

Corrine is a planner. She always has a schedule. And she likes to make lists. She is always on time and knows exactly where she is going.

Caleb is a free spirit. He likes things unplanned and likes to see where the road takes him. In fact, sometimes he does not know exactly where he is going.

One day, these two friends decided to go shopping together. You might find it surprising that something like shopping would test their friendship. But it did.

To Corrine shopping is an unpleasant task. So, she does it as quickly as possible. She goes to stores as soon as they open. And she buys only what she needs.

To Caleb shopping is an adventure! He likes to linger in front of store windows. He looks at the objects for sale for a long time without even stepping inside the store. This activity, that is popular with some, is called window shopping.

Caleb does not pay much attention to his shopping list. In fact, he usually doesn't have one. He likes to browse. And he says that browsing has resulted in some of his best purchases.

Well, he calls it browsing. Corrine calls it dawdling, or wasting time. And that is where their problems started.

The two had decided they would have a party. They had to shop to buy party equipment, like pretty dishes and tablecloths. They also needed to buy flowers, balloons and other decorations.

This meant going to several different stores. Caleb wanted to browse to help him get ideas for the party. Corrine just wanted to buy what they needed and leave. It was not going well.

Finally, when Caleb lingered too long at a window display, Corrine said, "Can you please stop dillydallying. You've been lollygagging this whole time and I just want to go home!"

Caleb turned to her and said, "I am not dillydallying. Nor am I lollygagging. This is how I shop. If you feel like this is wasting time, then you can go home."

Corrine thought about it and said, "That is the best idea I have heard all day!" While Caleb shopped, Corrine could start making food for the party.

It was a good idea to separate and do different tasks. The party was a success, and their friendship survived.

Now, back to our words: Lollygag and dillydally. They are funny sounding words.

People who fool around during tasks can be said to “lollygag.” People who “dillydally” move or act slowly.

And as we said earlier, these words also mean “dawdle.”

Lollygaggers, dillydalliers, and dawdlers all waste time. We usually use these words to describe people who move or act slowly to avoid doing something unpleasant.

Here's another example. A parent might accuse their child of lollygagging on their way to school. Or a teacher might accuse a student of dillydallying before starting a test or homework. Sometimes we just say dally. So, a parent could warn a child, “Don’t dally at the playground after school. Come straight home!” Although, that usage is a little less common.

And please note when you say someone is dillydallying or lollygagging, as Corrine did with Caleb, they might take offense.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Caty Weaver was the editor.

schedule— n. a plan of things that need to be done and the times they will be done

free spirit— adj. a person who thinks and acts in an uninhibited way without worrying about normal social rules

adventure— n. an undertaking usually involving danger and unknown risks

linger— v. to be slow to act : to move slowly

browse— v. to look at many things in a store, in a newspaper, etc., to see if there is something interesting or worth buying

dawdle— v. to spend time wastefully : DALLY : to move slowly and without purpose

decoration— n. something that is added to something else to make it more attractive

Article 33: Monkeys Cause the Best Kind of Trouble

Date: 2021-09-25T22:01:19+00:00 | 598 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program we will explore English expressions. On today's program we talk about animal expressions!

English has many animal expressions – too many to name. Also, in English, as in many other languages, some animals have come to have certain reputations. That is to say, they are known for certain behaviors.

For example, dogs are loyal. We often call them “man’s best friend.” Cats are independent and mysterious. In old stories, snakes and foxes are not to be trusted. Turtles do things slowly. While rabbits are full of energy.

Then there are monkeys.

Monkeys have a reputation for being silly and causing trouble. Good words for that are naughty and mischievous.

Monkeys are especially known for being fun. And if one monkey is fun, just think how much fun many monkeys would be! If an activity or event is super fun, we can say it is “as fun as a barrel of monkeys.” Even a fun person can be described as a barrel of monkeys.

While we are on the subject, keep in mind that fun and funny are used differently. If something is funny it makes you laugh. If something is fun it is simply enjoyable.

For example, last weekend I went to a party and it was really fun. At the party, my friend told me a funny story, and I laughed out loud.

Some word historians think that the expression “barrel of monkeys” was first recorded in 1895. It describes the playful behavior of these primates. We use it to describe any type of fun of activity or person.

To call something a barrel of monkeys is definitely informal. You could call a really fun event a riot. Where I grew up in West Virginia, people might call something really fun a hoot. That is also informal and a bit rural.

Now, monkeys do more than have fun. Because they are also smart, they are known for causing trouble. So, it is not surprising that we have monkey expressions that describe causing trouble.

The first is to simply “monkey around.”

To monkey around means to goof around or cause harmless trouble. But it could lead to more serious trouble. So, a parent may warn a child, “If you monkey around someone could get hurt. So, stop it!”

If I make a funny joke at a work meeting, someone could tell me to stop “monkeying around and get serious.”

Our last expression is “monkey business.”

Monkey business usually means dishonest activities. For example, most people expect a little monkey business in politics. It just seems to come with the territory, as we like to say.

Here at VOA Learning English, we don’t monkey around with English. We take it very seriously. We are all business. But not, you know, monkey business – that would be bad.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

reputation— n.the common opinion that people have about someone or something;the way in which people think of someone or something

loyal— adj.having or showing complete and constant support for someone or something

silly— adj.having or showing a lack of thought, understanding, or good judgment:foolish or stupid

naughty— adj.behaving badly

mischievous— adj.showing a playful desire to cause trouble

primate— n.any member of the group of animals that includes human beings, apes, and monkeys

informal— adj.characteristic of or appropriate to ordinary, casual, or familiar use

hoot— n.something or someone amusing

goof around— v.to spend time doing silly or playful things

Article 34: The 'Burn Everything' Policy

Date: 2021-10-02T22:00:34+00:00 | 570 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today, we talk about burning and the effects of extreme heat. There is a special word for this. Scorch is a damaged area or mark that is caused by burning.

Scorch is also a verb. When we scorch something, we burn it. But scorch sounds more serious than a burn. For example, I would not say I scorched dinner. I would say I burned it.

Sometimes we use it to describe a verb meaning to produce extreme heat. For example, the sun scorched the bare earth.

And that brings us to today's expression – scorched-earth.

Scorched-earth describes a kind of policy or way of doing something. For example, it is a kind of military policy. This policy makes sure that all resources – houses, food crops, factories, vehicles – are destroyed before an enemy can use them. You destroy all things of value so that they cannot be used against you.

A scorched-earth approach is also used in the world of business. It is similar to the military policy. A scorched-earth approach is when a company gets rid of the best parts of its business during a hostile takeover. This is to make it less appealing to another company that might want to buy it.

In both military and business, a scorched-earth approach is often a last-ditch effort. We turn to a last-ditch effort when everything else has failed. Everything. Once everything is destroyed ... there is no going back. It is a “point of no return.”

Burning bridges is a related expression. We wrote about this in an earlier Words and Their Stories. This expression is often used in personal relationships. If you burn your bridges, you destroy your relationships. Again, there is no going back and saying you are sorry.

However, when you burn bridges, relationships with others is the only thing you are destroying. So, these two expressions – burning bridges and scorched-earth are not interchangeable.

But they have a similar goal -- destruction.

Let's say a friend of mine, Georgina, was a talent agent. She represented many successful writers, artists and musicians in a large city. When the business got too big, she opened an agency with her friend, Stephanie. They grew the company, and it was very profitable. Georgina had all the contacts, but Stephanie knew how to oversee a company -- maybe too well.

One day, Georgina arrived to the office to find herself locked out! Her “friend” had tricked her into signing away her rights to the company.

Georgina was out. She found that legally there was nothing she could do. So, she did the only thing she could do. She took a scorched-earth approach.

Georgina knew the most valuable things the company owned were the contacts she had. So, she burned all her bridges and destroyed the relationships with all those contacts. It took her awhile. But, in time, the agency failed.

Stephanie is still looking for work. But Georgina moved to a beautiful island and opened a restaurant.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

bare— adj. having no covering

approach— n. a way of dealing with something; a way of doing or thinking about something

last-ditch— adj. made as a final effort especially to avert disaster

effort— n. energy used to do something : a serious attempt

talent— n. a special ability that allows someone to do something well

agent— n. a person who acts or does business for another

Article 35: A Leopard Doesn't Change Its Spots

Date: 2021-10-09T22:00:08+00:00 | 794 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about change. The world changes. Situations change. But what about people? Do we ever really change?

To answer this, we turn to the animal world to describe changes in personality and behavior.

A common expression states that as we get older it gets harder to change and harder to learn new behavior. That expression is: You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

This expression does not mean that it is impossible for an older person to learn something new. Anyone can learn a new skill later in life -- from speaking a new language to playing an instrument.

But sometimes as a person gets older, they get used to doing things in a certain way. It is more difficult for them to learn a new way of doing things.

Some people, this expression claims, get very set in their ways. They do not like to change. They like to wake up at the same time, eat the same thing for lunch, and watch the same news program. People who fit this description take comfort in routines.

Of course, this is not true for everyone. Many older people adapt and change very easily to new situations. But perhaps they were always like that, even when they were younger. They are just staying true to their nature.

And that brings us to our next expression: A leopard doesn't change its spots

This expression means that a person will stay true to their nature. They are who they are and cannot change -- even if that person claims otherwise.

We often use this expression when talking about someone who says they have changed their ways. They no longer do something bad that they used to do.

Here is a very short story using these expressions. Listen for other expressions that relate to a person not changing.

Years ago, I lived in a beautiful apartment. But it was too big for me. So, to save some money, I invited a woman to move in. She was a friend of a friend of a friend. So, I did not know her. But I was told she would be a very good roommate.

And at first, she was. Then her "true colors" came out.

First, she was messy. She left her stuff everywhere. When I told her to pick up after herself, she just laughed and said. "I was messy as a little girl, and I'm still messy. You know what they say, 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks.'"

Well, I didn't think that was very funny. Besides she was too young to be an "old dog" stuck in her ways.

Then she started doing other things -- worse things. She would take my stuff and lie about it. She would eat all of my food and not buy any food herself. Finally, she started throwing loud, all-night parties and inviting all kinds of strange people to the apartment.

That was the last straw! I had had enough. I told her she had to find a new place to live.

Well, after only a week of looking she said she could not find one. This I found hard to believe. There were always “apartment for rent” signs around town. But we had a serious talk and she promised me that she would change her ways. She would turn over a new leaf. She would clean up her act, so to speak.

So, I let her stay. That was a mistake. She soon fell back into her old ways. It turns out the old saying is true: A leopard doesn’t change its spots.

In the end, I found her another place to live. She is now living with that friend of a friend of a friend. Problem solved!

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

personality— n. the qualities (as moods or habits) that make one human being different from others

comfort— n. a state or situation in which you are relaxed and do not have any physically unpleasant feelings caused by pain, heat, cold, etc.

routine— n. a regular way of doing things in a particular order

adapt— v. to change your behavior so that it is easier to live in a particular place or situation

apartment— n. a usually rented room or set of rooms that is part of a building and is used as a place to live

roommate— n. one of two or more persons sharing the same room or living quarters

messy— adj. not clean or tidy

last straw— expression the last of a series (as of events or insults) that brings one beyond the point of endurance

turn over a new leaf— expression turn over a new leaf

Article 36: Have Your ‘Chickens Come Home to Roost?’

Date: 2021-10-16T21:59:04+00:00 | 498 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Like many languages, English loves to use animals in expressions. So, today let's talk about chickens!

English has several chicken expressions that describe human behavior.

For example, if you are an early riser, we might say you wake up with the chickens.

If you are fearful of something, you might be called a chicken.

And if you run around in a crazy way -- or just very busy -- you are said to be running around like a chicken with its head cut off.

But today we are going to explore an expression with a little more meaning.

Today, we talk about our past mistakes and sins— the bad things we have done. We all have them. But the question is: Will they come back to haunt us? Will they cause us problems?

But what does our past sins have to do with chickens?

The answer is found in this expression: “Your chickens have come home to roost.”

For a chicken, to roost means to settle down for rest or sleep. For us, however, the expression is not at all restful. When our chickens come home to roost, it means our past mistakes or wrongdoings have come back to cause us problems.

This happened with a man named Alex. He was very good at one thing – lying. He lied to people at work. He lied to every woman he met. He lied to his neighbors and even to his family.

Then one day, he got into serious trouble with the police. He was accused of stealing from his workplace. And this time, he was not guilty. But no one believed him, and no one came to help. After years of lying to people, his chickens had finally come home to roost. He was on his own.

This expression is also used another way. Bad things might happen to you if you wish for bad things to happen to others. When used this way, we say, “Curses, like chickens, come home to roost.” A curse is like a wish for something bad to happen to someone else.

Let’s say two friends named Karen and Daniel have a falling-out— a big fight. Their relationship is really damaged and probably will not be repaired. When telling the story of the fight to his brother, Daniel says, “I hope Karen loses her job or something else really bad happens to her.”

Daniel’s brother warns him, “You should be careful what you hope for. You know, curses, like chickens, come home to roost.”

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand and Ashley Thompson were the editors.

sin— n. an action that is or is felt to be bad

haunt— v. to eventually cause problems for (someone) as time passes

to roost— v. to settle down for rest or sleep

falling-out— n. a serious argument or disagreement

Article 37: It's Nothing but Trouble to 'Let The Genie out of the Bottle'

Date: 2021-10-23T21:59:41+00:00 | 538 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

The words we say are weightless sounds in the air. But they are powerful. What we say can greatly affect people, situations -- just about everything.

That is why, sometimes, it is a good idea to walk away from a heated argument. If we feel angry, we might say something we regret.

Perhaps anger is not the problem. Maybe your thoughts on a situation or issue are not fully formed. But you speak anyway.

Or maybe you simply have a secret -- one that you are dying to share!

Whatever the reason, sometimes we speak when maybe we shouldn't. And once those words are out there, there is no taking them back. The damage is done.

Or, we could say: the genie is out of the bottle.

Let's take apart this saying.

A genie is a trouble-causing spirit with magical powers from Middle Eastern folktales. Some experts say this expression may be connected to the centuries-old stories of Aladdin. He is a young man who releases a genie trapped in a small container. That's the bottle. Once out, the genie is powerful and tricky. The result? A lot of trouble.

So, if you "let the genie out of the bottle," undesirable results, or consequences, will follow.

"To let the cat out of the bag" has a similar meaning. The cat is in the bag for a reason. When you let it out, there will be consequences. And both the genie and the cat, as well as the words we say, cannot be recaptured.

But how do we use these expressions? Here is one example:

The politician says she misspoke about her plans to run for president. But the press had already reported on it. The genie was out of the bottle and could not be put back in.

Here is another example. Two co-workers use both expressions.

A: Tony really let the cat out of the bag at work today. He told everyone that Mary found another job and was leaving the company next month.

B: What?? But she hasn't told management yet!

A: I know. So, they fired her.

B: That's awful. That means she'll lose a whole month's pay.

A: He apologized but there is no putting THAT genie back in the bottle.

B: I bet Mary would like to put Tony in a bottle.

A genie is far more dangerous than a cat and harder to catch. So, the two sayings are not always interchangeable.

Some experts say social media is damaging users, especially children. But the technology and its appeal is here to stay. No one can put that genie back in the bottle.

In that example, you would not use "let the cat out of the bag." Instead, use it when someone has said something that was supposed to remain a secret. You can't take words back and you can't re-hide a secret. Something has been done and can't be undone.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Thanks for listening!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

century— n.a period of 100 years

consequence— n.something that happens as a result of a particular action or set of conditions

Article 38: Eek! Ghosts in our Expressions

Date: 2021-10-30T21:59:52+00:00 | 606 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

In the United States, October 31 is Halloween – the night when magical, frightening creatures and ghosts, the spirits of those no longer with us, walk the land!

Okay, not really. But it is fun to make believe.

To mark the day when children dress up frightfully to collect candy from their neighbors, our program today will be haunted by ghost – expressions!

For example, did you know that the word “ghost” is also used as a verb? But it does not mean to haunt a place.

When you ghost an event, like a party, you leave without saying goodbye to anyone – even the host! You just disappear into thin air ... like a ghost! But unlike a ghost, you do reappear later, at work, for example, or your exercise class.

Some people even ghost a relationship. They simply leave the person without any explanation. That could haunt someone for a long time. It could leave them wondering, “What happened? What did I do?”

But dear listeners, I would never do that to you. We are in this English learning effort together. There is not a “ghost of a chance” I will leave. I will keep with it to the end.

Did you catch our next ghost expression? If something doesn’t have a ghost of a chance, it is extremely unlikely that it is going to happen.

Our next ghost expression has to do with towns -- empty towns.

If everyone leaves, a town becomes a “ghost town.” It is a place that no longer has any people living in it or at least very few. It is abandoned. The businesses have all closed and the people no longer have a way to make a living. So, they leave.

To me, an abandoned ghost town is a much sadder, emptier place than a town full of ghosts would be. Ghost-hunting tourists would probably enjoy visiting a town populated only by ghosts, especially on Halloween!

But even a ghost town can be a good place for some workers. For example, writers. A writer just needs a computer.

This would be especially good for ghostwriters. A “ghostwriter” writes books or stories for someone else using that person’s name, not their own.

Let’s say one of the ghost-hunters wants to write a book about her ghost-hunting adventures. But she is not a very good writer. She could pay a ghostwriter to help her write her ghost stories!

Now, let’s imagine that their writing partnership did not go well. Maybe the ghostwriter did not get paid. And the ghost-hunter just ghosted! Then years later they run into each other again at a ghost convention. For the ghostwriter seeing the ghost-hunter is not a pleasant experience. It is like seeing a ghost from the past.

A “ghost from the past” is something unwanted or haunting from your past that comes back to you. Here is another example. If that man or woman who ghosted you years ago, comes back into your life -- they would definitely be a ghost from the past - someone you don’t want to see again.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo. Happy Halloween!

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

haunted—adj. lived in or visited by ghosts; troubled or upset

host—n. a person (especially a man) who is entertaining guests socially or as a job

abandoned—adj. left by the owner; left without the needed protection or care

tourist—n. a person who travels to a place for pleasure

convention—n. a meeting of people for a common purpose

Article 39: 455 New Words Added to Dictionary

Date: 2021-11-06T22:00:14+00:00 | 564 words | Source

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So, do you think learning all 1,500 words in the VOA Learning English Word Book is hard?

We have got news for you.

American publisher Merriam-Webster announced it has added 455 new words to its dictionary for October 2021.

The publisher said, “Just as the language never stops evolving, the dictionary never stops expanding.” The 455 new words came from what the publisher called “extensive and established use.”

Merriam-Webster said the quick and informal nature of messaging, texting and tweeting online has increased during the pandemic. That, in turn, has given rise to a vocabulary filled with shortened forms of words and expressions.

Person A: “Our social media professional just asked me what FTW is.”

Person B: “TBH, an expert in social media should really know the meaning of FTW, amirite?”

FTW is an abbreviation for “for the win.” It is often used to express approval or support on social media. TBH is short for “to be honest.” And the word amirite is a shortened way to spell “am I right?”

The COVID-19 pandemic that started in early 2020 gave us terms like contact tracing, flattening the curve, and social distancing.

Even with record-setting vaccination programs, we know the pandemic is still not over. And new pandemic-related words have been added to our daily vocabulary.

Here are some of those phrases that Merriam-Webster has added to its dictionary:

Tech, Science, Culture, etc...

Digital technology has helped many of us continue with our daily lives during the pandemic. The use of technology has led to new ways to describe technology-related risks. When digital information in an image or audio recording cannot be read, it is called *abirrot*. And *zero-day* is a term to describe weakness in computer systems that cybercriminals discover.

From political events, we have *whataboutism*. This is “the act or practice of responding to an accusation of wrongdoing by claiming that an offense committed by another is similar or worse.” And *vote-a-rama* describes the unusually large number of debates and votes that happen in one day in the United States Congress.

Other new words come from foods and drinks. One such word is *fluffernutter*. This is a sandwich made with peanut butter and marshmallow between two pieces of white bread. Another is *horchata*—a cold drink made from ground rice or almonds, with spices like cinnamon or vanilla.

Eating too many fluffernutters could give you a bit of a dad bod. The dictionary publisher describes a dad bod as the body of an average father, especially, it says, “one that is slightly overweight and not extremely muscular.”

In today’s program, we have only had time to tell you about 16 of the 455 new words from Merriam-Webster. And this is not even the first time this year it has added hundreds of new words. Last January, the dictionary publisher added 520 new words. That is a lot of new vocabulary for you to study.

Hai Do wrote this story for VOA Learning English with information from Merriam-Webster Dictionary. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

evolve- v. to change or develop slowly

informal- adj. relaxed in tone and not suitable for serious speech or writing

abbreviation- n. a shortened form of a word or name that is used in place of the full word or name

respond- v. to do something as a reaction to something that has occurred

sandwich- n. two pieces of bread with something in between

marshmallow- n. a soft, white, sweet food made of sugar and eggs

spice- n. a substance that is used in cooking to add flavor

Article 40: Let's Talk About Our Shadow

Date: 2021-11-13T21:59:10+00:00 | 704 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Let’s start today’s program with a riddle.

What follows you all day long, but when the night or rain comes, it is gone?

If you said your shadow, you are right!

This dark, flat image of yourself can seem huge and threatening, although you know it holds no power. But that image helps to explain this saying: someone is afraid of their own shadow.

We use this expression to describe someone who is afraid of everything, even very small things. So, this expression is a little bit of an insult.

First let’s hear two friends use this expression.

Hey, can you help me with something? I need to plant some flowers at a grave, but I need to do it tonight.

That’s a strange request and usually I say “yes” to those. But I’m busy tonight. What don’t you ask Beth?

Beth? Are you serious?

What's wrong with Beth?

Beth is afraid of her own shadow! There is no way she is going to help me plant flowers at night in a cemetery.

Good point. Okay, I can move some things around and help. What time should I meet you at the cemetery?

Midnight? At the cemetery? Now I'm feeling afraid of my own shadow.

In English, a shadow can also be considered a weak form of ourselves. So, when someone is a weaker version of what they used to be, we can say they are a "shadow of their former self."

On the other hand, a person who is "larger than life" casts a big shadow. In this case, the shadow is not from their actual bodies but from their personality and successes. To "cast" in this case means to send something out or forward.

Children of very successful people often have problems. They "live in the shadow" of their parents and can feel not successful by comparison. We could also say that the successes of the parents "cast a shadow" over the lives of the children.

Something else that can cast a shadow is our sins—actions considered to be bad. Here is another expression "old sins cast long shadows."

Think about your shadow on a sunny day. The shadow you cast can be long and far-reaching. The same can be said for our past mistakes and sins. They can reach far into the future. They affect our present-day situation.

So, the saying "old sins cast long shadows" means that the wrong things we do early in our lives can have long-term effects.

I like to read mysteries. And often, the sins of one person come back to cause them great problems. In one mystery, a jewel thief double-crossed her partner. She kept the jewels they stole together for herself. She changed her name and moved to a quiet English village. She thought she had gotten away with it. But her partner in crime found her ... and eventually so did the police. In the end, they were both arrested. When the police came to take the jewel thief away, she said, "How did you find me? My crime was so long ago." The detective answered, "Old sins cast long shadows."

"Old sins cast long shadows" also can be used in another way. It can be used to talk about other people's sins and how they affect us. It means that sometimes people suffer from the sins of others.

As far as usage, please note that the verb "cast" is often used with shadow and shadow expressions.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Bryan Lynn.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand and Ashley Thompson were the editors.

riddle—n.a puzzling question to be solved or answered by guessing

shadow—n.a dark shape that appears on a surface when someone or something moves between the surface and a source of light

grave—n.a burial place

cemetery—n.a burial ground

former—adj.coming before in time

cast—v.to send or direct (something) in the direction of someone or something

sin—n.an action that is or is felt to be bad

double-crossed—v.an act of betraying or cheating an associate

detective—n.a police officer whose job is to find information about crimes that have occurred and to catch criminals

Article 41: Dots and Spots

Date: 2021-11-20T22:00:40+00:00 | 874 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about dots and spots.

Now, both “dot” and “spot” can be used as a verb or a noun. And both have several meanings and can be used several ways.

Here is the most common definition of a dot: a small, perfectly round circle. A spot is small part of something that is different from the main part.

Recently, we learned on this program the idiom “a leopard never changes its spots.”

Now, spots on a leopard are not perfect circles. They are small areas on the animal that are a different color. If we said the leopard had dots, it would mean the animal was covered in perfect, small circles. It would look as if it were wearing polka-dotted clothing. Clothing with polka dots are marked with little circles. But there is no such as thing as polka spots.

However, both words are used with “on the” – “on the dot” and “on the spot.” But they mean totally different things.

If you are “on the dot,” you arrive someplace at exactly the time you were expected to arrive.

“On the spot” means right away. For example, if you are hired for a job on the spot, you are hired immediately.

Spot can also mean a certain place. For example, many people remember the exact spot of their first kiss. That is ... if it was a good one.

“X marks the spot” means an exact place you want something or where something is to be found. You might see this on a treasure map. The X on the map marks the spot where the treasure is buried. So, that definition is important to know.

Sometimes the spot is in our bodies. For example, if something like food or drink “hits the spot,” it is much needed and comes at the perfect time. Other things can hit the spot. A warm room when you are cold or a night out with friends when you have been unhappy could both hit the spot. You needed them both.

However, more often than not, we use “hit the spot” for food and drink. For example, if you have been walking in the desert you might really need some water. In that case, a big drink of water would really hit the spot. And again, we do not say hit the dot.

But we do say “connect the dots.” This means to understand something by piecing together little bits of information. You figure out something by connecting the dots. This expression comes from a children’s activity called, not surprisingly, connect the dots. You draw lines connecting numbered dots, and a picture starts to appear.

Finally, a dotted line is made up of very small dots. And when you sign on the dotted line, you officially agree to buy something or do something by signing a document. So, read a document carefully before you sign on the dotted line.

Now, let’s hear some of these expressions used. Since we already talked about treasure maps, let’s stick with that situation.

Two friends are out in the woods looking for a buried treasure.

How long have we been walking in these woods?

I don’t know. Just keep walking.

How much farther does the map say to go?

We started up here near on this hill. This map says the treasure is buried on the other side. So, we have to keep walking.

Look at the map! X marks the spot ... right there!

I think we passed that spot an hour ago.

No we didn't. We have to keep walking north.

Then drink some water and stop complaining.

Ahhh! That water really hit the spot.

Don’t drink all your water! We still have hours of walking to do.

Hours! We told Jimmy we would be at the secret meeting spot at 10pm on the dot.

I did not agree to a specific time. So, Jimmy is just going to have to wait.

You know, I don't care if Jimmy leaves. We're doing all the work out here ... walking in the woods ... looking for a buried treasure. You know what I think?

I think if we find the treasure ... we should just keep walking. Keep it for ourselves!

I don't know. If Jimmy goes back to the boss without us and without the treasure ... I think he'll be able to connect those dots pretty quickly. And then we're dead!

Good point. Man! Why did we sign on the dotted line and agree to do this?? There has got to be an easier way to make a buck.

Yeah. Maybe we could open a bookstore or something.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. She recorded the sound effects around her home. Susan Shand was the editor.

polka-dot– n.a dot in a pattern of regularly distributed dots in textile design

treasure hunt– n.an act of searching for treasure

thirsty– adj.needing water

complain– v.to express grief, pain, or discontent

boss– n.the person at a job who tells workers what to do

buck– n.a sum of money especially to be gained

Article 42: It's OK to 'Take a Page from Someone Else's Book'

Date: 2021-11-27T22:00:18+00:00 | 754 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's program, we talk about expressions related to books.

Books are simple. They are made up of two main parts. The cover is on the outside, and the pages are on the inside.

You may have heard this saying: "You can't judge a book by its cover." That means you cannot judge a person by the way they look.

While that idea may be good, people in the book industry may not agree. These days, much time, thought, creative energy and money are spent on some book covers. And book cover reveals are big events for the writer, the artist or designer and the publisher.

But today, we are not talking about the cover of the book. We are going to talk about its content – the pages.

Our expression today is: “to take a page from someone else’s book.” This means to do the same thing that someone else has done. You do what they did.

For example, let’s say there is a young man who really wants to play on a college basketball team. But his skills are not as good as many of the others trying out. So, he works hard day and night to get better. Even when he misses basket after basket, even when he is so tired he could barely walk -- he never gives up. Finally, all his work pays off and he makes the team! We could all take a page from his book and not give up either.

Here is a great word that means almost the same thing –emulate. If you emulate someone, you copy them. You imitate their good behavior or methods.

Now, sometimes we use the expression "take a page from someone's book" as advice. We advise others to copy someone because they are good at something.

For example, let’s say you are taking a class with Tessa. She is a very good student. She studies hard, is organized and prepares for every class well ahead of time. If you want to do well in the class, you might want to take a page from her book.

You can also say borrow a page from someone’s book. And sometimes we say tear a page from someone’s book. The verb may change – take, borrow, tear. But the meaning stays the same.

In my circle of friends, I am known for bringing my famous chocolate cake to parties. Now, Rebecca, a new friend in the group, secretly copies my recipe. Then she starts bringing chocolate cake – my chocolate cake – to parties too. I can say she tore a page right from my book. Not cool, Rebecca. Not cool.

Sometimes we use the expression as a warning. By simply adding “not,” you can warn someone not to behave like someone else.

A: Do you have a minute? I need to talk about something.

A: Well, I’m new but I really want to do well at this job. Do you have any advice for me?

B: Sure. Show up on time, do good work, and be pleasant to work with.

A: I know all that stuff. I mean, anything else specific to this company?

B: Well, whatever you do, don’t take a page from Julian’s book.

B: Julian was vice president of the company.

A: Vice president? He seems like a good person to copy.

B: Well, last year he got caught stealing money from the company and is currently in jail.

A: Oh. Right. In that case, I won't be taking a page from Julian's book or anything else from him for that matter.

Sometimes people say, take a page from someone's playbook. This version of the expression comes from sports. A playbook contains the plays, or specialized instructions, for certain team sports.

But, if you are not a sports-minded person, you can simply say "book."

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

page—n.a piece of paper in a book, magazine or similar published material

reveal—n.the act or event of showing something that was not known before or that was hidden

admire—v.to feel respect or approval of someone

emulate—v.to try to be like someone or something

imitate—v.to do in the same way as someone else; to copy someone's behavior, appearance or sound

recipe—n.a set of instructions for making food; a way of doing something that will produce a certain result

Article 43: Vaccine or Vax for Word of the Year

Date: 2021-12-04T22:00:47+00:00 | 683 words | Source

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The word “vaccine” can bring out emotions and discussions in ways it never did before the start of the pandemic.

In some countries, new variants are spreading as COVID-19 vaccines have yet to arrive. In others, shots are wasted as citizens fight against the government's vaccination requirements.

“Vaccine” has come to represent not just scientific progress but also political divisions around the world. That is why two major dictionary publishers have chosen "vaccine" and "vax" as the 2021 words of the year.

Peter Sokolowski is an editor with American dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster. He told The Associated Press the word “vaccine” represents two stories.

“One is the science story, which is this remarkable speed with which the vaccines were developed. But there's also the debates regarding policy, politics and political affiliation. It's one word that carries these two huge stories,” he said.

Lookups, or searches, for the word vaccine increased 1,048 percent on Merriam-Webster's website from 2019 to 2021. Debates over who is able to get the vaccine, vaccine requirements and additional shots kept interest high, Sokolowski said. So did concern about the safety of the vaccines and vaccine passports.

Although people looked up the word on the internet a lot all year, searches rose 535 percent in August, Merriam-Webster said. At that time, there was a lot of news about vaccine requirements and vaccination rates, the publisher said.

Across the Atlantic Ocean, Britain's Oxford English Dictionary named "vax" as its word of the year for 2021. "Vax" is an informal word that can mean the noun "vaccine" or the verb "vaccinate."

Researchers at the Oxford University Press released a report about how "vaccine" affected the English language over the past year. The report said it is rare for a subject to affect language so much in such a short period of time.

"Vaccine" comes from the Latin word "vacca," which means "cow." The word was first used to describe inoculation. That word described a process of using small amounts of cowpox to prevent small pox, explained Merriam-Webster on its website. In English, the word "vaccine" started being used in the 1880s.

Some say the word "vax" started to appear in the 1980s. Oxford researchers found that the word was not used often until this year. By September, "vax" was being used over 72 times more often than at the same time last year. "Vax" is used in informal ways, in terms such as "vax sites" and "to get vaxxed." The word "anti-vaxxer" refers to a person who is against receiving a vaccine.

Last year, Merriam-Webster chose "pandemic" as the word of the year. It had the highest number of lookups on Merriam-Webster's website in 2020. The company bases its choice on searches, paying close attention to large increases. The company has been naming a word of the year since 2008.

Britain's Cambridge dictionary chose the word "perseverance" as the 2021 word of the year. Perseverance is a continued effort to do something, even when it is difficult or takes a long time.

The word "perfectly captures the undaunted will of people across the world to never give up, despite the many challenges of 2021," Cambridge said on its website. Lookups of the word also greatly increased in February when NASA's Perseverance Rover landed on Mars.

Collins Dictionary, however, selected "NFT," which has nothing to do with the pandemic, as its word of the year. "NFT" is a short form for the words: non-fungible token. The term means a unique electronic identifier that records ownership of electronic property. NFTs have grown in popularity in 2021.

Dan Novak wrote this story for VOA Learning English with additional reporting from The Associated Press. Mario Ritter, Jr. was the editor.

dictionary—**n.** a book that contains words listed in alphabetical order and that gives information about the words' meanings, forms, how to say them

remarkable—n. unusual or surprising; likely to be noticed

regarding—prep. about; relating to something

dramatically—adj. sudden and extreme

inoculation—n. to give (a person or animal) a weakened form of a disease to prevent infection by the disease

undaunted—adj. not afraid to continue doing something or trying to do something even though there are problems, dangers

unique—adj. unlike anything else

Article 44: Expressions to Help You Stay Healthy

Date: 2021-12-11T21:59:38+00:00 | 749 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about expressions that remind us to be healthy and have a healthy lifestyle.

Benjamin Franklin often gets credit for some very famous healthy lifestyle sayings. Here is one about planning your day: “The early bird gets the worm.”

Of course, we’re not talking about an actual worm. This means the person who arrives first has the best chance of success. It can also mean the person who gets up early before anyone else will be more prepared for the day and, therefore, more prepared for success.

That is why he also reportedly said, “Early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.”

The meaning of this expression is pretty clear. It means that going to bed and waking up early may lead to success and better health.

While Benjamin Franklin often gets credit for saying this, other word experts say this expression was said slightly differently in English as early as the mid-1400s and, in Latin, even earlier.

Personally, I like to go to sleep early and wake up early. But what if you’re an owl and do your best work at night? Waking up really early would not be a good idea.

We all need good sleep to be healthy. We also need to eat well. We have some expressions that remind us to eat healthy.

Here is one: “An apple a day keeps the doctor away.”

Some word historians say this saying first appeared in publication in the mid-to-late 1800s. It sounds like a very specific saying – if you eat more apples, you will be healthier. And if you are eating an apple, someone might say to you, “I see you’re trying to keep the doctor away!”

But sometimes we use this expression as a simple reminder to eat healthy – and not just apples.

After all, “You are what you eat.” This saying also reminds us to eat healthy. And sometimes it is used to criticize someone’s poor food choice. Some young people may look like a picture of health. But if you eat too much junk food, or smoke, or drink a lot of alcohol when you’re young -- you might get sick easier.

Getting enough sleep, exercising, and eating healthy food all increase your chances of getting a clean bill of health. “A clean bill of health” is another common health-related expression. It is a decision by a doctor that someone is healthy.

But we also use this expression for other things that go through a difficult time but get better. For example, let’s say a country’s economy is doing well after a period of not doing well. Economists could give that country’s economy a clean bill of health.

Now, let’s hear these healthy expressions used between two friends.

A: Wow! You look great! What did you do? New haircut? Lose a couple of pounds?

B: I finally changed my job. Working nights at the news desk was killing me!

A: Yeah, I don’t know how you worked that night shift for so long.

B: It was difficult. My sleep suffered. And I got no exercise. And I was eating poorly. You know how they say, you are what you eat?

B: Well for months ... I was one big pizza. Then I got really sick.

B: Thanks. But I’m better now. As soon as I changed jobs ... I felt better. My doctor just gave me a clean bill of health.

A: You look like the picture health. Here ... have an apple. I have two.

A: You know what they say, "An apple a day keeps the doctor away."

B: Hopefully, my new job will keep the doctor away too!

Even if you take good care of yourself and look like the picture of good health – you can still get sick. Sometimes it is out of our control. So, everyone out there, take good care of yourself!

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

lifestyle– n.the typical way of life of an individual, group, or culture

credit– n.recognition or honor received for some quality or work

worm– n.a long, thin animal that has a soft body with no legs or bones and that often lives in the ground

night owl– n.a person who keeps late hours at night

Article 45: ‘Omicron’ and ‘Eilish’ Among Most Mispronounced Words of 2021

Date: 2021-12-18T22:00:57+00:00 | 621 words | Source

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Each year brings a new set of words that are widely used but difficult to pronounce.

Among the terms making the 2021 list were a new version of the coronavirus, a superstar singer and the names of two digital currencies.

The list identifies words that were most often mispronounced by American newsreaders and television presenters. The U.S. Captioning Company chose the words. It creates captions for live events on television and in courtrooms.

The creation of the list was supported by the language-learning company Babbel. Esteban Touma is a teacher for the company's Babbel Live service. He said, "As a language teacher, it's always interesting to see that some of these terms are usually new colloquialisms, or are rooted or borrowed from another language." A colloquialism is an informal word or expression that is more useful in speech than writing.

Touma added: "As a non-native speaker, I must confess it's fun to see English speakers stumbling a bit for a change."

He provided The Associated Press with guidance on how to correctly pronounce the words that made the list. Here are the explanations, with phonetic pronunciations next to the words.

Cheugy(CHOO-gee): A term made popular by members of Gen Z, a name for the generation of people born in the late 1990s through the early 2000s. Cheugy is used to describe people and lifestyle choices considered outdated, unpopular or uncool.

Chipotle(chih-POHT-lay): This U.S.-based restaurant company received viral attention on the internet with a campaign that centered on how older people pronounce the name.

Dalgona(tal-goh-NAH): A sweet Korean treat made with melted sugar and baking soda. It was shown in the widely popular Netflix TV series *Squid Game*.

Dogecoin(DOHJ-coin): A form of cryptocurrency that began as kind of a joke before being popularized by Tesla and SpaceX chief Elon Musk.

Ethereum(ih-THEE-ree-um): Another form of cryptocurrency that skyrocketed in value this year.

Eilish(EYE-lish): The last name of Grammy Award-winning singer Billie Eilish.

Ever Given(EV-er GIV-en): The name of the ship that blocked the Suez Canal in March, costing billions of dollars in lost trade. Many news presenters mistook the name of the ship as "Evergreen." But that was actually the name of the company that owns the ship, which was printed on its side.

Glasgow(GLAHZ-go): The Scottish city where the United Nations Climate Conference was held. The name was widely mispronounced, including by both President Joe Biden and former President Barack Obama.

Kelce(KELs): The last name of American football player Jason Kelce, who plays for the Philadelphia Eagles. He said earlier this year that his teammates and the media had been saying his name wrong for years.

Omicron(OH-muh-kraan (U.S.) / OH-mee-kraan (Britain)): The name of a new COVID-19 variant. It is a letter of the Greek alphabet, in keeping with the World Health Organization's system of identifying new coronavirus versions.

Shein(SHEE-in): The Chinese clothing company at the center of the “Shein haul” trend. The trend involves people recording themselves trying on numerous sets of the company’s clothes.

Stefanos Tsitsipas(STEh-fuh-nohs TSEE-tsee-pas): A Greek tennis player currently ranked number 4 in the world.

Yassify(YEAH-sih-fai): A popular trend in which different beauty filters are put onto well-known pictures to produce humorous effects.

The Associated Press and Reuters reported on this story. Bryan Lynn adapted the reports for VOA Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

pronounce— v.to make the sound of a letter or word

caption— n.words written under a picture or with video to explain it

confess— v.to admit something

stumble— v.to make a mistake, such as pausing or repeating a word, while speaking

phonetic— adj.relateing to the sounds you make when you speak

trend— n.a general development or change in a situation

filter— v.to pass liquid, gas, light, etc. through a piece of equipment in order to remove unwanted material

Article 46: Boxing Day and Box Expressions

Date: 2021-12-25T22:00:51+00:00 | 524 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

In some places around the world, the day after Christmas is called Boxing Day. In Britain, Australia, Canada and other places, Boxing Day is a national holiday.

There are several thoughts on how the holiday became known as Boxing Day. The Associated Press wrote about the origins of the name back in 2019.

The most widely held understanding of the origins of Boxing Day comes from a tradition among wealthy people. They would give a “Christmas Box” to their servants and other workers. The box would contain money and gifts. Traditionally, these workers would also have Boxing Day off to rest.

The AP story says the start of Boxing Day may even date back to the times of the Romans. Some experts say Roman invaders brought the practice to Britain. The tradition was then taken up by churches. Churches would put boxes outside their doors to collect money for the poor. This tradition gained popularity during the middle 1800s and continues to this day.

Boxing Day is still celebrated today in many countries around the world. However, the United States is not one of them. We don’t generally have the day off

But the Christmas holiday, which takes place the day before, is often filled with boxes. Boxes are useful for storing and containing all kinds of things – especially gifts! It is fun to shake a gift box and try to guess what is inside. But an empty box can be just as much fun. Just ask any child ... or any cat, for that matter. Personally, I cannot walk by a cardboard box without thinking of what I could make out of it.

A child can enjoy the box their gift came in as much as, if not more than, the gift itself. An empty box can lead to imaginative play. It can become anything! It can be a secret house in the forest or a boat on the open sea or a rocket ship flying through space!

That is because children are masters at “thinking outside the box.” To think outside the box means to explore ideas and consider solutions that are creative and unusual.

Someone who thinks outside the box is not limited or controlled by rules or tradition. Another way of saying this is that they are not “boxed in” by such rules and traditions. They think of new ways to solve a problem.

To be “boxed in” can also mean being physically prevented from moving. For example, a car can “box in” another car in a parking space, .

However, thinking outside the box is important not just for playing or for teaching English. Lots of problems and situations can be helped by thinking outside the box!

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time...

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Ashley Thompson was the editor.

origin– n.the rise or beginning from a source

church– n.a building for public and especially Christian worship

cardboard– n.a material made from cellulose fiber (such as wood pulp) like paper but usually thicker

Article 47: 'Trash Talk' and Other Trashy Expressions

Date: 2022-01-01T22:00:00+00:00 | 910 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

At the beginning of a new year, some people like to start with a clean slate. They like to start fresh. Sometimes that involves simply cleaning your house and getting rid of things you do not need. Some things you can give away to others or donate. Other things without value or use are trash.

And so trash is also our topic for today. After we talk about some trash expressions, you will hear them used in a conversation.

In American English, we have other words for trash such as garbage and rubbish. They all mean the same thing. Sometimes we use them interchangeably in expressions. But sometimes we don't.

Let's begin with this expression: trash talk.

"Trash talk" is insulting speech aimed at a person or a group. Trash talk is very common in sports. Members of one team could trash talk to members of another team.

For example, in baseball, if a player hits the ball poorly, the other team might say, "My 80-year-old grandmother hits harder than that!"

The term "trash talk" is a set expression. So, we do not say "garbage talk" or "rubbish talk."

Trash talk has another meaning. It can mean meaningless or false talk. We also call that kind of trash talk a load of nonsense. In that case, you could say that trash talk is a "load of rubbish," or a "load of garbage." Those all work and sound natural.

Here is another expression that uses the words rather well: "Good riddance to bad rubbish."

We say "good riddance" as a way of saying "goodbye" to something bad that will not be missed. So, "good riddance to bad rubbish" means it is better for everyone that the person or thing is leaving.

We could also say "good riddance to bad garbage." However, "good riddance to bad trash" does not sound right. So, we do not use trash in that expression.

Now, there are other expressions that use garbage and trash but not rubbish.

A raccoon is an animal known for getting into people's trash cans and stealing their garbage. The black color around the eyes makes a raccoon look like a bandit or a robber. So, a funny name for a raccoon is either trash bandit or garbage bandit. We do not, however, call it a rubbish bandit. Again, it just doesn't sound right.

The same thing happens when a person uses bad language. We say he has a garbage mouth or she has a trash mouth. Again, we do not say rubbish mouth.

Garbage in, garbage out

Our last expression for today is “garbage in, garbage out.” This means if something is of bad quality or done incorrectly, it most likely will produce poor results.

In computing, you might hear an engineer says garbage in, or badcodes,will produce garbage out, or poor computer programs.

But you can use it for other situations as well. For example, we often say “garbage in, garbage out” as a warning to eat healthy food. If you put bad food in your body, your energy and physical abilities will be affected.

For this expression, it is common to use “garbage.” Others will understand you if you say, “rubbish in, rubbish out” or “trash in, trash out.” But they don't sound as natural as “garbage in, garbage out.”

Now, as promised, let’s hear two friends use some of these expressions.

A: How was the basketball game last night? Did your team win?

B: We did! We beat the other team by like 20 points.

A: Wow. Youcreamedthem! What happened? Did they forget how to play?

B: They said they didn’t practice ... at all. So, you know what they say: Garbage in, garbage out.

A: Well, win or lose -- it sounds like you had fun.

B: We did. The second best thing about the game was all the trash-talking. We got very creative with our insults.

A: Didn’t the other team get mad?

B: Nah! It’s all in good fun. They were doing their own trash talking. Soon we were competing over who had the best insults!

A: That does sound fun, especially if no one takes it personally.

B: Well ... one guy on the other team did. He kept dropping the ball. So, we called him butter hands.

A: I’m guessing he didn’t like that.

B: No, he didn’t. He actually left the game. But his teammates didn’t seem to care. All they said was ... good riddance to bad rubbish!

A: Now, THAT is really trashy trash talk.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Hopefully using our content at VOA Learning English is not garbage in, garbage out.

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo!

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

clean slate-n.a person's record (as from a school or a job) that shows no evidence of any problems, broken rules, etc.:a clean record

conversation-n.a talk between two or more people:the act of talking

interchangeably-adv.capable of being used in place of each other

load of nonsense-n.large amount of words or ideas that are foolish or untrue : a lot of language that has no meaning

bandit-n.a criminal who attacks and steals from travelers and who is often a member of a group of criminals

code-n.instructions for a computer (as within a piece of software)

cream-v.to defeat (a person or team) easily and completely

Article 48: Doctors and Nurses

Date: 2022-01-08T22:00:40+00:00 | 843 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Whenever there is a health crisis, two groups of people can bring help – doctors and nurses.

A nurse is a person skilled or trained in caring for sick or injured people. We also use the word “nurse” as a verb. You can nurse a person or animal back to health. And you can nurse a patient, helping that person heal or get better.

But you can also nurse a symptom, something unhealthy like a headache after a late-night party. You can nurse other bad things too, like a grudge. A grudge is a strong feeling of anger toward someone that lasts for a long time. If you nurse a grudge, you keep the anger alive. You make sure it doesn’t lessen over time.

You can use the verb “nurse” in other ways. For example, you can “nurse a drink.” That doesn’t mean you are trying to heal it, but rather you drink it very slowly, to make it last longer. For example, if I go to a costly restaurant and buy a \$15 drink, I might nurse it to make it last the whole meal.

The word “doctor” is also used as a verb. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary says that one meaning of the verb “doctor” is to give medical treatment. For example, she doctored her sick friend. That makes sense. But personally, I have never heard the term used that way. In my opinion, it is more common to nurse someone back to health.

Sometimes people say “doctor” to mean “fix.” For example, he has doctored that clock several times. But again, this usage is rare.

A more common usage of the verb “to doctor” is to change something in an honest or dishonest way. For example, the school board official was accused of doctoring her study results. She was caught changing the results to fit her policy needs.

When we change something, either in an honest or dishonest way, we sometimes add the word “up” to “doctor.”

For example, the writer doctored up the script to better fit the actor. Here is a dishonest example: The legal team was accused of doctoring up photographs of evidence.

Now, let’s hear two expressions using the word doctor.

If something is exactly what you want or need, it is “just what the doctor ordered.” This expression can be used in many situations. For example, if I worked all week, a night on the couch with a good movie might be just what the doctor ordered.

In a recent Words and Their Stories, we talked about another expression that means the same thing. If something “hits the spot,” it is just what you need at that time.

Our last expression is this: Doctors make the worst patients.

This means it is difficult to give people advice about something which they do for a living. This is because they might feel they know better than the person giving the advice.

For example, Mary tried to persuade her boss at the bank to seek help for his growing debt. But he got angry. He said he knew best how to deal with his money. She just shook her head and said to herself, “It’s true. Doctors make the worst patients.”

Now, let’s hear two neighbors use some of these nurse and doctor expressions.

A: Hi there! I see you’re cleaning up your garden. It was so beautiful this summer.

B: Thanks! I was pretty proud of it. Are you good with plants?

A: I’m only good at killing them, unfortunately. Like this one. It’s pretty brown. (holds up dead plant)

A: Do you think you can nurse it back to health?

B: Um...I’m sorry. But this plant is dead. You need to water your plants.

A: Good advice. You should tell Celia across the street the same thing. She owns a plant store but still the plants at her house look awful!

B: I tried to give her some advice once. She did NOT like that one bit. You know how it goes: Doctors make the worst patients. But as for your plant...it’s dead. There’s no nursing a plant back from the dead.

A: That’s too bad. I wanted to use it for some photos for my website.

B: Maybe you could add a plant.

A: What do you mean?

B: You know, doctor the photo on your computer and add a plant.

A: Isn’t that dishonest?

B: The photo is just for your website. It's not like your doctoring official evidence in a criminal case. Now THAT would be dishonest.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

symptom—n.a change in the body or mind that shows that a disease or sickness is present

grudge— n.a strong feeling of anger toward someone that lasts for a long time

garden— n.an area of ground where plants (such as flowers or vegetables) are grown

proud—adj.very happy and pleased because of something you have done

Article 49: Is It Time to 'Clean House'?

Date: 2022-01-15T22:00:12+00:00 | 617 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

At the start of a new year, many people make a resolution – something to improve on or work on in the new year.

Some common resolutions are to lose weight or make more money. Another common resolution for many people is to clean their homes from top to bottom. This usually involves not only cleaning, but organizing as well.

The start of a new year is a great time to remove the things you no longer need from your home.

So, today we talk about the expression: to clean house.

If you clean house you make a place neat and orderly by removing extra stuff. You get rid of dirt and anything not needed or wanted. You straighten up, tidy up, and declutter.

That is how we “clean house” in a physical environment. But we also use this term another way. When we get rid of bad things we don't want, like bad behavior, we can use the term “clean house.”

For example, in politics a scandal often causes people to clean house. And officials within a corrupt government may need to clean house. In fact, it is amazing how quickly government officials want to clean house when a scandal hits the news.

In a business, you can clean house on inefficient practices – ways of doing business that cost too much money. In an organization, you can clean house on policies that just don't work. Leaders of a company can clean house by firing employees who do poor work.

Now, we heard a term earlier in this program that we can also use in this way: To straighten up.

However, we usually use “straighten up” when talking about an individual. If you tell someone to straighten up, you are telling them to stop some sort of bad behavior. You can also tell them to clean up their act. This also means they have been doing something bad and you warn them to change it.

So, let’s say a friend of yours is slacking off at work -- coming in late, leaving early, and not really doing anything. You could tell him to straighten up or clean up his act or he will get fired!

If students do poorly at school, parents could tell their children to “straighten up” or “clean up” their act.

Now, let’s hear two friends use the term “clean house.”

How’s your friend Meredith doing? I haven’t seen her around for a long time.

She’s been better. She had been slacking off at work for months. Her boss warned her to straighten up and clean up her act. But she didn’t. So, he fired her.

You know. It’s funny you mention this. A friend of mine got fired recently, too. His company needed to clean house on jobs that cost money, but didn’t do much. And he got the axe.

Oh, what was his job?

He was Chief Efficiency Officer. And after an audit, he found that he was getting paid too much to do his job. So, he had to fire himself.

Do you have a new year’s resolution? And is it to clean house?

And that’s the end of this week’s Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

tidy up—phrasal verb to make neat

clutter—n. an unorganized collection or mixture of various things :declutter—remove clutter

scandal—n. a cause of shame

inefficient—adj. not producing the desired result

slacking off—phrasal verb as in forgetting, neglecting

fired—v. to let go from office, service, or employment

got the axe—slang phrase to get fired from a job

audit—n. a close look at or over someone or something in order to judge condition

awkward—adj. causing difficulty, discomfort, or annoyance

Article 50: Sometimes It Is Better 'To Let Sleeping Dogs Lie'

Date: 2022-01-22T22:00:00+00:00 | 636 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Sometimes the best way to deal with a problem is to face it head on. But sometimes ... it is not. In some cases, it can be a good idea to give a problem or a difficult situation time and space.

Sometimes we just don't want to deal with it – whatever “it” is. So, we ignore a situation and act as if the problem does not exist.

And of course, we have an expression just for that! Actually, we have a couple. But the first one we will talk about is this: to let sleeping dogs lie.

“To let sleeping dogs lie” means to do nothing in a situation. Sometimes taking action can make things worse. Sometimes it is best to “leave well enough alone” and to not “stir up trouble” – in some cases, more trouble. That is when we let sleeping dogs lie.

There are other expressions that have a similar meaning.

When we “let nature take its course” we do not interfere. We sit back and let events unfold. To let something unfold means to permit it to happen naturally.

Now, turning a blind eye to something is different. This is when you choose to ignore something. Usually it is something bad that someone else has done. In this case, you also choose to do nothing.

If you turn a blind eye to something you stand by and let it happen. For example, when teachers turn a blind eye to bullying in the classroom, really bad things can happen.

Sometimes turning a blind eye, though, is helpful. For example, if your friend has a bad habit and you choose to ignore it -- you are turning a blind eye to their bad habit.

Now, let's listen in on two friends as they use some of these expressions.

A: Hey, do you have a minute? I really need to talk to someone.

B: Sure. What's wrong?

A: My co-worker Jess is really mad at me.

A: Well, he didn't get a promotion. So, at a work gathering recently, I told his boss that she made a mistake...

A: ... and that she should give him the promotion.

B: Oh boy. That is a big no-no! You should never interfere in someone's work-life!

A: I know. I know. Now, I feel like I should call his boss and apologize.

B: You definitely should NOT do that.

A: But I made a mistake. I want to fix it.

B: That will not fix anything. You need to let sleeping dogs lie.

A: A phone call is not a big deal.

B: In this case ... it is. Jess's boss most likely has forgotten your comment. But if you call her, it will only stir up more trouble!

A: I guess you're right. But it's really hard to not do something.

B: Think of it this way. If you meddle again, you could really make things worse for Jess. And then he may never talk to you again.

A: You're right. I won't call. Maybe I'll send her a card.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

ignore—v.to refuse to take notice of

stir up—phrasal verb to cause (something, usually something bad or unpleasant) to happen

interfere—v.to enter into or take a part in the concerns of others

turn a blind eye—expression pretend not to notice

bully—v.to frighten, hurt, or threaten (a smaller or weaker person); to act like a bully toward (someone)

habit—n.a way of acting or doing that has become fixed by being repeated often

promotion—n.the act of moving someone to a higher or more important position or rank in an organization

apologize—v.to express regret for something done or said

meddle—v.to change or handle something in a way that is unwanted or harmful

Article 51: Do You Feel Stuck in 'Groundhog Day'?

Date: 2022-01-29T21:59:19+00:00 | 560 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

February 2 is known as Groundhog Day in the United States. On this day, so the old story goes, the groundhog wakes from its winter sleep and leaves its underground home. If the groundhog makes a shadow when it surfaces, winter will continue for six more weeks. But, if no shadow appears, spring will start early.

Groundhog Day is also a popular American film from 1993. Actor Bill Murray plays a selfish and mean reporter. He doesn't want to go to a small town and report on the seasonal prediction of its famous groundhog. So he is angry and insults everyone as a result.

To learn his lesson, he gets trapped in time and has to relive the same Groundhog Day over and over and over. He is freed only after he learns to treat people better.

Because of that movie, “Groundhog Day” has become its own term in English. If the same bad thing keeps happening to you, or if you feel like you’re stuck in a bad dream – you can say you’re having a Groundhog Day.

Here is an example. I went to a new restaurant and the food tasted bad. But I gave them another chance. I went back again, but the food was just as bad. When it happened a third time, I felt like I was trapped in Groundhog Day.

There is another word, a French word, that is commonly used in English to express a similar idea -- déjà vu.

Déjà vu is a feeling that you have seen or heard something before. As déjà vu in French means “already seen,” it makes sense that we use it that way too.

When we get déjà vu, we feel like we are experiencing something that has already happened. And that can feel spooky.

When it happens, we often just stop talking and say, “Déjà vu! This has happened before, and I know what’s going to happen next!”

Now let’s hear two friends use the expression Groundhog Day.

A: Hey, are you going back to the office soon?

B: I thought so. But then we were told that we’d be working from home a bit longer.

A: How do you feel about that?

B: Well ... I’m used to working from home. But something different would be nice too.

A: I totally agree! I feel like one day is the same as the next.

B: Same here. I feel like I’m stuck in a Groundhog Day! I wake up and I feel like I’ve been in the same day for ... nearly two years!

A: Well, just make sure to build some variety into your day. Change things up! I do different kinds of exercise on different days. And one day a week I try out a new meal.

B: Good advice. Anything to break the monotony.

A: And remember ... you are not alone. Many people around the world are in the same Groundhog Day together!

And that’s the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Hey! Déjà vu! I feel like I’ve said that before!

shadow– n. the dark figure cast on a surface by a body that is between the surface and the light

spooky— adj.scary and frightening

variety— n.a collection of different things

monotony— n.a boring lack of change

Article 52: Let Something 'Pull at Your Heartstrings'

Date: 2022-02-12T21:59:50+00:00 | 631 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

February 14th is Valentine's Day in the United States and other countries. It is the day to express love and warm feelings for those important people in our lives.

So, today we will talk about an expression that is all about deep feelings – to pull at one's heartstrings.

When something pulls at your heartstrings, it makes you feel strongly. It creates a deep well of emotion right in the center of your heart.

Things that tug at our heartstrings also stir our feelings and emotions. They bring them to the surface.

What kinds of things have this effect on us? Well, that depends on who you are.

If you love a well-told story, a well-written book can pull at your heartstrings. A friend of mine loves art. Once I saw her crying in front of a painting. The colors she said really tugged at her heartstrings. People who love movies can have their heartstrings pulled by a good film. I love music. So, for me, the right song or even the right notes will pull at my heartstrings.

But we don't use this expression for all feelings. For example, anger is not an emotion that is connected to this expression. The feelings that are at play with this expression can be happy or sad. Usually those emotions are ones of love, longing or both.

Sympathy, pity, or compassion are common emotions we think of when we hear the expression "pull at your heartstrings."

Public aid campaigns and commercials often try to tug at our heartstrings. Think of seeing a puppy left out in the cold, or an old married couple who can't pay for needed medication. Both of those examples try to tug at your heartstrings and your wallet as well.

Now, let's talk about some notes on usage.

The verbs we often use for this expression are pull, pluck, and tug. Sometimes you might hear the expression said as "to play on someone's heartstrings." But that is a little less common.

Also, you don't always have to use the preposition "at." You can simply say something "tugs the heartstrings."

And sometimes the word “heartstrings” is used on its own. For example, a critic might say a movie “aims for the heartstrings but misses ... hitting the funny bone instead.”

Some word experts say that in medieval times it was thought that “heartstrings” were tissues that supported the heart. So, if you pulled them, you controlled the heart and the emotions.

Now, here is the expression used between two friends.

Did you see the new children’s movie that just came out – The Long Lost Lonely Little Ladybug?

That’s a children’s movie? It sounds so ... sad.

It is. I watched it last night and I cried for hours afterward.

Oh no, it was just what I needed – a good cry. I’m still thinking about it today. That movie really pulled at my heartstrings.

I don’t mind a good movie that pulls at my heartstrings. But it sounds like this movie pulled them right out of your chest. Maybe next time ... watch a comedy!

And that’s all the time we have this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

stir– v.to cause to arise or take place

emotion– n.strong feeling (as anger, love, joy, or fear) often accompanied by a physical reaction

sympathy– n.the feeling that you care about and are sorry about someone else's trouble, grief, misfortune, etc.:a sympathetic feeling

pity– n.a strong feeling of sadness or sympathy for someone or something

compassion– n.pity for and a desire to help someone

funny bone– n.a sense of humor

comedy– n.an amusing play that has a happy ending : an amusing and often ridiculous event

Article 53: 'Sugarcoat' Pills and Bad News

Date: 2022-02-19T21:59:49+00:00 | 750 words | Source

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And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Bad news can be hard to hear. It can be even harder to share with someone. So, we may tell someone bad news in a way that is easier for them to hear. In other words, we may try to sugarcoat it.

And that is our expression for today -- “sugarcoat.”

When you sugarcoat something you try to make it more pleasant or acceptable than it really is. You try to make an event or situation seem not so bad. So, you don't share all the upsetting or otherwise bad details.

It might surprise you to learn that a United States president was criticized for using the term "sugarcoat" in an official message. I will tell you which one later in the program.

But first, let's talk about the word "coat."

A coat can be a layer, such as a coat of paint. As a verb, "coat" also means to cover something with a substance. So, you could say the walls were coated with a layer of paint.

Sugar, as you know, is a sweet substance. It makes so many things taste good – things like cakes, cookies, pies, and candy. But sugar can also make things like medicine taste better too and therefore easier to take.

So, medicine makers began adding sweet flavorings to their products to help people, especially children, take the medicine.

Now, pills can taste bitter too. So, pill makers started doing the same. They began coating pills with a hard sugar coating. This made them easier to swallow.

These days we use the term sugarcoat for actual sugar coatings and when we share news and information.

A: Okay, give it to me straight. How much money did we lose last year?

B: Let me start by saying ... we'll make up our losses this year.

A: Stop sugarcoating it! I want numbers. How much did we lose?

B: All of it. We lost all of our profits from last year.

A: Wow. That IS bad. You could have broken the news to me a bit easier.

A: You said not to sugarcoat anything!

Now, back to our earlier question. Which U.S. president was criticized for using this informal term in an official address?

In a message to Congress on July 4, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln wrote:

"With rebellion thus sugar-coated they have been drugging the public mind of their section for more than thirty years, and until at length they have brought many good men to a willingness to take up arms against the government..."

Often on this show we talk about whether a term or expression is formal or informal. Formal language is well suited for professional and official situations, such as a presidential address. Informal is the type of language we use with those close to us.

Well, reportedly, some government officials at the time did not like President Lincoln's use of the informal term "sugar-coat" in an official message.

Experts at the website History.com explain that the official government printer objected to Lincoln using "sugar-coat," saying the word was beneath the dignity of the office of the president.

Also, reportedly, Lincoln didn't care.

History.com experts claim Lincoln said, "The time will never come in this country when the people won't know exactly what sugar-coated means."

And he was right. Sugarcoat in all its forms remains commonly used and clear in meaning. Feel free to use it in any situation, even if it is formal. You will be in good company.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

layer— n. an amount of something that is spread over an area; a covering piece of material or a part that lies over or under another

delightful— adj. highly pleasing

flavoring— n. a substance that is added to a food or drink to give it a desired taste

bitter— adj. having a strong and often unpleasant flavor that is the opposite of sweet

give it to me straight— phrase to tell someone the truth

profit— n. money that is made in a business, through investing, etc., after all the costs and expenses are paid; a financial gain

rebellion— n. an effort by many people to change the government or leader of a country by the use of protest or violence; open opposition toward a person or group in authority

formal— adj. suitable for a proper occasion

informal— adj. marked by the absence of formality or ceremony

dignity— n. the quality or state of being worthy of honor and respect

Article 54: Learn to Be Careful with the Alphabet

Date: 2022-02-26T21:59:54+00:00 | 630 words | Source

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And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about two expressions involving letters of the alphabet. They both warn us to be careful, and they sound similar. But their meanings are very different.

Here is the first one: to watch our p's and q's.

When we watch our p's and q's, we are on our best behavior. We are careful of our language too – so, no swearing. We do things politely and without causing trouble to others.

The expression is something an older person might say to children. “When you go to school, watch your p's and q's and mind your teachers.”

There are several stories about how the expression began.

Some word experts say it comes from people drinking in taverns or bars, places where alcohol is served. Bartenders would keep track of how much people drank by counting their pints (p's) and quarts (q's).

Other experts say the expression comes from the classroom. Schoolchildren were taught to be careful writing the letters “p” and “q,” which are easy to confuse.

And other experts say the phrase may come from the early days of the printing press. Letters were set in presses backwards so they would appear on the printed page correctly. P's and q's needed careful placement.

Now on to our second expression: to dot our i's and cross our t's.

To dot our i's and cross our t's means to be very careful. But it means to be careful about procedures. We make sure we have followed directions correctly and have done everything the right way.

While it may have its roots in spelling correctly, we use this expression in many situations. For example, when the TikTok star read her contract with an advertising company, she was careful to dot her i's and cross her t's. She didn't want anything to fall through the cracks. She didn't want to overlook any small detail that may affect her business.

If you are making a deal or spoken agreement with someone, a friend might warn you to dot your i's and cross your t's. Be careful of the small details. It is common knowledge that the smallest details are often where mistakes are made.

So, that is why it is important to dot your i's and cross your t's.

Now, let's hear two friends use these expressions

A: Are you sure you packed everything?

B: Yes, I'm sure. Please don't ask me again!

A: Well, you usually forget something. Remember last time ... at the airport?

B: Let's not bring up THAT again. I won't forget my passport this time.

A: I just wanted to make sure that we dot all our i's and cross all our t's. By being careful and thorough, we save time and money.

B: Don't you ever get tired of being careful and thorough? Don't you just want to be crazy and impulsive... for once in your life? Come on, throw away that list!

A: What are you doing? Give me my list back and behave! Seems like you not only have to dot your i's and cross your t's ... you also need to watch your p's and q's!

And that's all the time we have this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

swear—v.to use a commonly offensive word when you speak

politely—adv.to do something showing good behavior and respect for other people

printing press—n.a machine that prints books, newspapers, magazines, and similar materials in large numbers

procedure—n.a series of actions that are done in a certain way and in an established order to be acceptable

thorough—adj.careful about doing something in a correct way

impulsive—adj.doing things without careful thought or planning

behave—v.to act in an acceptable or correct way

Article 55: Two Gold Expressions

Date: 2022-03-05T21:59:51+00:00 | 560 words | Source

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And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this show we talk about words and expressions in the English language. Today, we talk about gold.

Gold is a highly-valued metal. We also use the word “gold” to describe a person or thing of extreme quality or value.

For example, if a friend stood by you in very difficult times, you can say that your friendship is gold to you.

Here is another example. If you want to convince someone that they can trust you, you can tell them that your word is gold. That means your word has value. You are honest, and they can trust what you say.

In English, the word “gold” appears in many expressions. Today we talk about two. One is a compliment, something nice to say about someone or something. The other is an insult, something bad to say about someone or something.

Let's start with the insult. That expression is: “All that glitters is not gold.”

All that glitters is not gold.

First, what does it mean to glitter? To glitter means to shine brightly. Imagine an object that shines by reflecting small flashes of bright light. It is glittering. For example, the diamond glittered in the sunlight.

Glitter can also mean to shine with strong emotion. For example, if someone looks very angry, you can say that their eyes glittered in anger. But in today's expression we are talking about something that looks beautiful because it is so bright and shiny.

"All that glitters is not gold" means something seems wonderful and beautiful, but in fact is not. You can also move the word "not" and say it this way: "Not all that glitters is gold."

When we say "not all that glitters is gold" we mean that just because something looks attractive does not mean it is valuable. The attractive appearance of something is not a clear sign of its true nature.

Another way to say this is "appearances can be deceiving."

Now, let's hear it used in two examples.

A: I thought that my new computer would be great.

A: No. It just cost a lot of money and looks nice.

B: You know what they say, "All that glitters is not gold."

A: Hey, how is the new job going?

B: Well ... it's okay.

A: Just okay? Last month you told me it was much better than your current job -- more money, better office, and the chance to meet famous people.

B: Well, let's just say not all that glitters is gold. The job may pay well, but my co-workers are just awful. I'm really unhappy.

Worth your weight in gold

Now for the compliment – the nice thing to say about someone.

That expression is: "Worth your weight in gold."

Imagine if someone made a sculpture of you out of gold. It would weigh a lot, and it would be worth a lot of money. And to us, our listeners are worth their weight in gold!

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

reflect– v.to throw back light or sound

bright– adj.giving off or filled with much light

deceive— v.to cause to believe what is not true

sculpture— n.a three-dimensional work of art (such as a statue)

Article 56: Do You Believe the 'Grass Is Always Greener'?

Date: 2022-03-12T22:00:41+00:00 | 586 words | Source

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And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Springtime is coming soon to the northern half of the planet. That means signs of green plant life are beginning to show!

Some flowers and trees will start to bloom and some grasses will become more green.

In the United States, many people spend a lot of time and money growing a yard full of weed-free green grass. Even if that area surrounding the house is not used very much, some people still want it to look nice with lots of healthy-looking green grass.

Neighbors can even get competitive over who has the greenest, thickest lawn.

But competing with and comparing ourselves to others is usually not a good idea. In fact, we have an idiom to describe that exact situation.

That idiom is: “The grass is always greener on the other side of the fence.”

This expression describes people who are not happy with their own lives, and they think that someone else – or everyone else – has a better life than they do.

Some might say this idiom describes the human quality of always wanting something different than what you have. Some people are never happy with their own situation. They are never satisfied. They think others have it better or easier than they do. Even if their life is perfectly fine, they still look at others and want what they have.

The idiom also expresses this idea: people often think a different set of conditions would bring them greater happiness. So, we use this idiom to remind people that this is not often the case.

Let’s say you “look over the fence” and see that your neighbor has a new car, a big house, and a good-looking partner. You may want what that neighbor has. But what you may not know is that the new car and big house are making your neighbor poor. And the good-looking partner is actually a mean, unpleasant person.

A: Did you hear the news about Martin? He’s moving again.

B: What? That’s the third time in a year! What’s wrong this time?

A: Well, he visited a friend in Oregon and saw that the guy has got a big house with a big yard, and the city has more farmers’ markets and bike lanes than where he lives now. So now he’s moving out there to

start over.

B: He did the same thing a few months ago when he visited a friend in California.

A: You know Martin. He's always been a grass-is-always-greener kind of guy.

B: Well, hopefully he'll be happy in Oregon.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

bloom— v.to produce or yield flowers

yard— n.an outdoor area next to a building that is often bordered (as by shrubs or fences)

weed— n.a plant that tends to grow where not wanted and to prevent the growth of more desirable plants usually by taking up space

lawn— n.ground (as around a house or in a garden or park) that is covered with grass and is kept mowed

idiom— n.an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but must be learned as a whole

fence— n.a barrier (as of wood or wire) to prevent escape or entry or to mark a boundary

satisfied— adj.pleased or content with what has been experienced or received

bike lane— n.a division of a road marked off with painted lines, for use by cyclists

Article 57: Are You a 'Big Fish in a Small Pond'?

Date: 2022-03-19T22:00:48+00:00 | 570 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On today's show we talk about an idiom involving fish and a pond. A pond is a small body of water. It is usually smaller than a lake.

And our idiom today is "to be a big fish in a small pond."

"A big fish in a small pond" describes a person who is very well known or important in a small group but is not known or important outside that small group.

For example, a high-performing high school student in a small town could be a big fish in a small pond. He may feel overly-confident or overly-important, or he may simply not know how small his "pond" is -- until he moves on to a big university.

He must compete with hundreds of students who were also the best at their high schools. His pond just got a much larger and is now filled with many more fish.

Here is another example.

A young singer was famous in her small town. She wanted to move to a big city to grow her singing career. Her close friends and family supported her but also warned her. Here in our small town, they said, you are a big fish in a small pond. Once you move to New York City, that is going to change. Best be ready!

For some people, this can be a painful realization – sometimes called awake-up call.

Sometimes when we use the expression “a big fish in a small pond,” we add words to better describe the fish and the pond. For example, the singer’s friends could say that she will be a very small but talented fish in a very big competitive pond.

Now, some people like being a big fish in a small pond. They never grow their circle of friends or work environment. Sometimes they do not take opportunities that increase their environment, or pond. By staying in a small pond, it is safer. There are fewer dangers and also fewer competitors.

The Meriam-Webster online dictionary says that the expression “big fish” has been slang for an important or influential person since the early 1800s. The addition of “in a small pond” -- to mean an unimportant organization -- is more recent.

The dictionary goes on to explain another way to use the idiom “a big fish in a small pond.” It can also describe a situation in which one person has more power, influence, knowledge, or experience than others within a small group.

So, sometimes we use this expression to describe people in an insulting way. We are saying that they want to stay in a small pond just to feel more important. Their position of authority is not questioned by the other fish in the pond.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

idiom– n. an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but must be learned as a whole

pond– n. a body of water usually smaller than a lake

confident– adj. having or showing sureness and optimism

wake-up call– n. something that serves to alert a person to a problem, danger, or need

opportunity– n. a good chance for advancement or progress

slang– n. very informal words used by a group of people

authority– n. power to influence or command thought, opinion, or behavior

Article 58: Hope Springs Eternal

Date: 2022-03-26T21:59:26+00:00 | 550 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Spring has come to many places around the world. Here in the Northern Hemisphere, we celebrate the first day of spring on the vernal equinox. In 2022, spring began on March 20.

With new life starting to show in nature, it is easy to see why this season has meant hope and new beginnings to many people through history.

As a verb, the word “spring” can mean to come forth with energy.

For example, when you “spring into action,” you start a project or task with a lot of positive energy.

Here is another way to use “spring” as a verb. If you “spring” news or information on someone, you tell them something without preparation. For example, the other day a good friend told me she would be moving to a new city by the end of the week! I can’t believe she sprung such important news on me.

And that brings us to our expression for today’s show: hope springs eternal.

“Hope springs eternal” means that people can always find a reason to hope, even in the bleakest situations. Here, the word “bleak” means to not have much hope.

Eternal means to last or exist forever, without end or beginning. So, there is a dreamy quality to this expression.

It is actually considered a proverb, a short well-known saying containing a wise thought. The wise thought here is that we human beings never stop hoping or believing that things will get better. Even when common sense tells us that something will not happen -- we still think it will.

For example, a group of friends tried to start a business together. Their first three tries failed. But that did not stop them from trying again. You know what they say: Hope springs eternal!

Here is another example. Even though a woman lost her job, her car, and her apartment all in one month, she still kept a positive attitude. She still had good health and good friends. She asked them for a little help and then started to rebuild her life. For her, hope springs eternal is more than a proverb. It is her life’s motto.

People who use or believe in this proverb are optimists. They optimistically believe in a brighter tomorrow. A pessimist, the opposite of an optimist, probably won’t use “hope springs eternal” very often ... if at all.

Language experts say the proverb “Hope springs eternal” comes from a shortened line from Alexander Pope’s 1732 poem *An Essay on Man*. He wrote: “Hope springs eternal in every human breast.”

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

vernal equinox— n.the equinox in spring, on about March 20 in the northern hemisphere and September 22 in the southern hemisphere

positive— adj.having a real or beneficial effect or result

eternal— adj.lasting forever:having no beginning and no end

bleakest— adj.lacking in warmth, life, or kindness

proverb— n.a short well-known saying containing a wise thought

motto— n.a short expression of a guiding rule of conduct

optimist— n.a person who is inclined to be hopeful and to expect good outcomes

pessimist— n.a person who is inclined to expect poor outcomes

opposite— adj.being in a position to contrast with or cancel out

Article 59: 'Fresh As a Daisy,' Other Daisy Expressions

Date: 2022-04-02T21:59:54+00:00 | 446 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language.

The natural world gives us many of our expressions -- from weather to animals to plant life. Today we talk about a kind of flower.

Daisies are big, bright, happy-looking flowers. They stand upright on strong stems. So, if we describe someone as being “fresh as a daisy” we mean they seem well-rested and full of energy.

We often say we are fresh as a daisy after resting or getting cleaned up. Here is an example. After an all-day hike, I was very tired. But after a shower and short rest, I felt fresh as a daisy and ready for the next activity.

Looking fresh as a daisy can also describe a place or room that is clean and orderly. For example, after the man cleaned and painted his kitchen, it looked fresh as a daisy.

When a child is learning to walk, they often fall. To encourage them to stand up and try again, we might say “upsy-daisy!” We also might say “upsy-daisy” when we lift a child up. It just sounds cute! Upsy-daisy!

Speaking of children, a popular activity with some is to connect flowers together, like a chain, and wear them. Because of their strong stems, daisies are commonly used to make “daisy chains.”

A daisy chain can mean any connected events, experiences, happenings, or things. A daisy chain is also used to describe electrical signals that are connected in a system.

Sometimes, this can be used as a verb. When the Internet went down, I had to daisy-chain my phone to a friend's computer to share some videos.

There is also a strange way we use the flower “daisy.” If someone is “pushing up daisies,” they are, unfortunately, dead and buried. This comes from the fact that wildflowers often grow on top of graves. We may use daisies for this expression because they grow easily and wildly in nature.

It is important to know that we only use this expression informally. Sometimes we use it as a joke. For example, I'll be pushing up daisies before a time travel machine is invented.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

stem-n.a plant part (such as a branch, petiole, or stipe) that supports another (such as a leaf or fruit)

fresh-adj.newly made or received

hike-n.a long walk especially for pleasure or exercise

chain-n.a series of connected links or rings usually of metal: a series of things joined together as if by link

Article 60: 'April Showers Bring May Flowers'

Date: 2022-04-09T21:59:27+00:00 | 447 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Rain can be annoying. It can stop you from doing activities outside. So, it is easy to complain about rain.

Of course, rain is important, especially for plants. Although rain might seem annoying, it helps flowers and other plants grow.

There are some periods of the year when it rains more than other times. In some parts of the world, for example, the month of April can be especially rainy.

That brings us to our expression for today: April showers bring May flowers.

This weather expression states that heavy rains help flowers to grow. Here “Showers” mean short periods of light rain.

As a verb, “shower” can mean that large amounts of things fall, are given off, or happen at the same time. For example, you can shower someone with praise. That means you say a lot of nice things about someone.

But now, let's go back to our expression: "April showers bring May flowers."

If you hear someone complain about all the rainy weather in the spring, you can remind them that April showers are helpful.

This is aliteralmeaning of this expression. But it also has a deeper meaning.

"April showers bring May flowers" means that even after long periods ofadversity, good times will follow. "Adversity" means difficulty and hardship.

In English, there is another saying that means about the same thing. Sometimes we simply say, "This too shall pass." This means that difficult situations will not last forever.

A: Hey, I haven't seen you in months! How's everything going?

B: Well, okay, I guess.

A: You don't sound okay. What's wrong?

B: The company where I work had to cut back. So, I've lost a lot of hours at my job. And both of my parents have been sick. So, I've been taking care of them.

A: I'm sorry to hear that. Sounds like you're having a tough time.

B: It will pass. I keep telling myself April showers bring May flowers.

A: That's a greatattitude! Hey, how about if I make my famous chicken soup for your parents?

B: That would be great. Thanks! See the 'May flowers' are starting tobloom.

And that's all the time we have for thisWords and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

annoying— adj.causing slight anger

complain— v.to express grief, pain, or discontent:find fault

praise— n.to express approval of

literal— adj.following the ordinary or usual meaning of the words

adversity— n.a state or instance of serious or continued difficulty or misfortune

attitude— n.a feeling or way of thinking that affects a person's behavior

bloom— v.to produce or yield flowers

Article 61: What Does It Mean to 'Get the Greenlight'?

Date: 2022-04-16T22:00:13+00:00 | 656 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

In many parts of the world, the flow of traffic is controlled in part by traffic lights. Typically, they have three colors: green, yellow, and red.

Green means go. Yellow means proceed with care and be prepared to stop. And red means stop.

But these colored lights are not only used to control traffic. When it comes to red and green, we also use those two in our English expressions.

The most common is the green light.

“Greenlight” means to have permission to go ahead with a project.

In English, we often turn verbs into nouns and nouns into verbs.

For example, sometimes we use “go-ahead” as a noun. If you have been given a go-ahead to proceed with a project, you have been given the greenlight. Or in other words, you have been green-lighted, to use the past tense. However, we would not say that we have been “go-aheaded.” Making that past tense is simply not correct.

When you get the greenlight, you can proceed. You have been given consent. A greenlight is simply permission to get started!

This term is especially common in the film and theater industry. Producing films and plays takes a lot of resources. So, getting the greenlight is important.

For example, the company producing my friend’s film refused to green-light production until he did a big rewrite on his script.

A: So, when are you starting your new project?

B: As soon as I get the greenlight, I can take the first step.

A: The boss gave you the go-ahead in the meeting yesterday.

A: Yes, she did. I saw her. She nodded her head!

B: That’s not a greenlight. That’s body language. For all I know, she could’ve been tired and her head dropped forward slightly.

A: No way. I’ve known her for years and that is definitely how she greenlights a project. In fact, just last week she greenlighted a bigger project than yours with just a wink.

B: That’s a shockingly subtle way to authorize a project.

A: Perhaps. But also smart. If it doesn’t work out, she can say she never gave consent.

B: Well, my project needs a lot of resources. So, I’m going to need more than a wink and a nod, before I proceed.

A: What more could you need?

B: Oh I don't know ... maybe something in writing ... like an email?

Now, a red light used as a traffic signal means “stop.”

This is also true in conversation. It means an order or directive to stop an action or project. During the pandemic, many companies put a red light on all unnecessary costs.

Although, this usage is less common than greenlight.

A red light can also mean a signal of danger or a warning. For example, always being late for work could be a red light for a larger problem. Used this way as a warning, we could also say “red flag.”

There is another way we use “red light.” Sometimes we combine it with the word “district.” In a red light district adult entertainment is sold.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories! Until next time...I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

traffic— n.the movement (as of vehicles or pedestrians) along a route

consent— n.approval of or agreement with what is done or suggested by another person

script— n.the written form of a play or movie or the lines to be said by a performer

nod— v.to bend the head up and down one or more times

wink— v.to close and open one eye quickly as a signal or hint

subtle— adj.difficult to perceive or understand

authorize— v.to give power to:give authority to

a wink and a nod—exp.A sly, subtle signal used to communicate a piece of information that one doesn't want to state aloud, publicly, or directly

conversation— n.a talk between two or more people:the act of talking

Article 62: Are You Guilty of 'Sitting on the Fence'?

Date: 2022-04-23T22:00:25+00:00 | 608 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

This program takes a deeper look at words and expressions in the English language. Sometimes we take one word and see where it leads us.

Today, we look at the word “fence.”

One definition of "fence" is an outdoor structure that encloses an area. Fences mark property. They are barriers. A fence is different from a wall because it does not have a solid foundation along its whole

length.

Fences are used to keep things in -- like animals -- or keep things out -- like criminals.

Speaking of criminals, when they deal in stolen goods they are fencing and could be called a fence. And if the criminals are fencing stolen goods while having a sword fight, you say they are fencing fences.

But let's get back to "fence" meaning an outdoor structure.

As we said, a fence marks a property line. It gives you privacy. People can't see onto your property and vice versa. To many people, this is a good way to keep peace in a neighborhood. Everybody just minds their own business. Sometimes if a neighbor knows too much of your business, it could lead to problems.

That is where this proverb comes from: "Fences make good neighbors." This proverb appears several times in Robert Frost's poem *Mending Wall* published in 1914.

Our next expression is very common: To be on the fence.

If you are sitting "on the fence" about something you are undecided. A fence divides property into sides. So, if you are on the fence about something, you have not taken sides.

For example, let's say your child's school just raised \$20,000. School officials want to spend that money on either new science equipment or a new outdoor play area. They ask the parents to give their opinion. But you don't know which is more important for the students. So, you sit on the fence for awhile. You don't feel strongly about either choice. If you did, you would certainly pick a side and not stay on the fence.

Sometimes we turn this saying into a noun.

A "fence-sitter" is someone who always stays neutral. They never take sides in an argument. They do not seem to have an opinion of their own. And they never take a stance for anything. This could show a lack of courage. So, calling someone a fence-sitter is usually an insult.

Now, that is not the case if you are simply undecided about an issue; or if you need more time to make a decision; or if you just don't care.

For example, let's say there is an election coming, and I have not decided who I am voting for. I can say, "I don't know. I'm on the fence between two candidates." This doesn't mean I'm unwilling or unable to pick a candidate. I just haven't yet.

However, let's say I never vote because I can't make a decision. And I have a long history of being indecisive. Someone could rightfully call me a fence-sitter. And that would rightfully be an insult.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

criminal— n. a person who has committed an unlawful act

fencing— v.dealing in stolen property : fighting with swords

privacy— n.the state of being out of the sight and hearing of other people

vice versa— adv.with the order turned around

proverb— n.a short well-known saying containing a wise thought

neutral— adj.not favoring either side in a quarrel, contest, or war

stance— n.intellectual or emotional attitude

courage— n.the ability to meet danger and difficulties with firmness

Article 63: What Does It Mean to 'Hit the Nail on the Head'?

Date: 2022-04-30T21:59:42+00:00 | 549 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English!

On this program we explore the meaning of words and expressions in the English language.

Today we talk about a saying that comes from the world of carpentry.

Two of the most basic tools for building things are a hammer and nail. With them, you can build many wooden structures from a house to a piece of furniture to a picture frame.

For the nail to go into the wood, you must hit the nail on the flat part at the very top. This is called the head. If you miss, you might damage the wood or injure yourself.

So, our expression for today is “to hit the nail on the head.”

We use it several ways.

When you hit the nail on the head, you got something exactly right. In other words, you were correct. Here is an example:

Hey, remember when you told me that Bob would not last long at his new job?

Yeah, that was last week. I got the feeling from him that he was not enjoying the work.

Well, you hit the nail on the head. He just texted me that he quit his job.

Hitting the nail on the head can also mean you have understood or expressed something perfectly. For example, you could say that "the reporter hit the nail on the head in her explanation of current budget debates in the city.”

If you have hit the nail on the head, you have also described a situation accurately. That situation can be either good or bad. Here is another example:

How was your camping trip?

It was amazing! I haven't had that much fun outdoors in ... forever!

Wonderful! Didn't Stacy suggest the campground you visited?

Yes! She said it was heaven with lots of outdoor activities. And she really hit the nail on the head! We stayed for four days and loved every minute!

So, if you are totally right about something; if you describe something perfectly; if you find the exact answer; or if you do or say the right thing – you have hit the nail on the head!

Word experts claim that by the time Henry David Thoreau used the expression in 1849, it was already a commonly used one. In *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he wrote this:

“The poet will prevail to be popular in spite of his faults, and in spite of his beauties too. He will hit the nail on the head, and we shall not know the shape of his hammer. He makes us free of his hearth and heart, which is greater than to offer one the freedom of a city.”

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

carpentry– n. the skill or work of building or repairing wooden things

frame– n. an open case or structure for holding or enclosing something : window frame, picture frame

accurately– adv. without mistakes or errors

campground– n. the area or place (such as a field or grove) used for a camp, for camping, or for a camp meeting

prevail– v. to succeed in convincing : to win against opposition

hearth– n. a brick, stone, or concrete area in front of a fireplace

Article 64: Let's Get to the 'Root of the Problem'

Date: 2022-05-07T22:00:17+00:00 | 574 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language.

Today we talk about an important part of every plant – the roots.

The roots of most plants grow below the ground. There, they have some very important jobs. The roots anchor the plant. They secure it in the ground. Roots also take in water and minerals to feed the plant. And in many plants, the roots store food and nutrients.

So, roots are the foundation of the plant: the supporting structures. And that gives us our first expression: “to put roots down.”

When you put roots down, you make a place your home by creating connections. You get a job and maybe buy a house. You also make friends and join activities. You might start a family. As your children start school, your ties to the school and other parents are also roots.

All these things connect you to a place. Each connection makes it harder for you to leave. Just like the roots of a plant, they ground you.

If you want to move a plant, you must be careful not to disturb the roots too much. If you do, you could kill the plant.

And that brings us to another way we use the word root. The root can also be the start or cause of something.

For example, I could say that my love of mystery stories is rooted in my childhood full of Agatha Christie books! Now, problems have roots too. So, people could say that a small town’s problems are rooted in a lack of good jobs.

That suggests our next expression: Get to the root of the problem. When we get to the root of the problem, we get to the cause of it. You can also strike at the root of a problem if you are looking for a way to solve it.

Sometimes we use the verb “dig” to go with some root expressions. As we said, roots are underground. You must dig to reach them. So, we could say, “A lack of jobs is just one issue. To get to the root of the city’s larger problem, we must dig deeper.”

A: I just heard that the city council is going to add more money to this year’s school budget.

B: That’s good news! But I’m not sure more money is going to fix high truancy rates and poor classroom behavior.

A: Well, it can’t hurt.

B: True. But to really help students, we need to get to the root of the education problem.

A: And what do you think the root of the problem is?

B: I think the “roots” to that problem are vast and complex.

Now for our final expression. There is a common saying in English that involves roots. You may hear people say that money is the root of all evil. That expression comes from the Bible: “The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”

While it may not be the root of all evil, I’m sure that greed has caused quite a few problems.

And that’s the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

anchor—v. to hold something firmly in place

truancy—n. to miss school without permission

vast—adj. very great in size, amount or extent

greed—n. a selfish desire to have more of something (especially money)

Article 65: You 'Hit the Jackpot!'

Date: 2022-05-14T21:59:04+00:00 | 422 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. And today we talk about being lucky or having a great success -- or both!

There are times in our lives when everything seems to go our way. We win big. In other words, we hit the jackpot.

In a very literal way, to hit the jackpot means to win a lot of money. A jackpot is the most valuable prize in a game of chance. A lottery is one such game of chance. People buy tickets, but only a few tickets are chosen by chance to win prizes.

Some states in the U.S. hold a weekly lottery. The jackpot increases until someone wins it. Some lottery jackpots can get as big as many millions of dollars!

Once I heard about a man who really did “hit the jackpot.” He usually did not play the lottery or gamble with his money. But one day, he decided to buy a lottery ticket. And guess what? He won millions of dollars! He really struck it rich. We can also say he made a killing!

However, hitting the jackpot does not always deal with money. It can also mean to have a great success, usually involving some luck. For example, if you get a great job simply by being in the right place at the right time, you can say you have hit the jackpot.

I know a woman who started dating a very good-looking man. He was also very nice and smart. Then she found out that he was also really rich. She likes to say she really hit the jackpot when she met him.

There are some other expressions that have a similar meaning. If you “hit it big” or “hit the big time,” you have hit the jackpot.

I feel like I hit the jackpot with my job. The work is interesting, my co-workers are nice, and I get to hear from our readers and listeners from around the world. Jackpot!

And if you are looking for one place to learn English, you have also hit the jackpot with VOA Learning English!

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

literal— adj.following the ordinary or usual meaning of the words

gamble— v.to play a game in which something (as money) can be won or lost

to make a killing— phrasehave a great financial success

Article 66: 'Airbrush' Your Way to Perfection

Date: 2022-05-21T21:59:06+00:00 | 547 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language.

Today we talk about the pursuit of perfection. Or at least the things we do to try and make things seem perfect.

If you paint something with a brush, it often leaves brush marks. When you paint with a roller, you might still have lines left behind by the roller.

Some consider this a flaw (something bad you don't want) in the paint job. So, people came up with a process to cover things up with a perfect layer of paint called “airbrush.”

The Airbrush Museum says in 1876, F.E. Stanley created a device that could spray watercolor and ink. Three years later Abner Peeler came up with a paint distributor that was later sold as an “airbrush.”

However, this may have not been the first attempt at airbrushing. Some archeologists claim that early cave people, Neanderthals, used the process to airbrush some of their paintings by blowing paints through hollow bones.

Back in the modern day, we also use airbrush as a verb to describe painting or changing something to cover imperfections with or as if with an airbrush.

For example, let's say some vandals painted offensive words on the side of your house. If you do not want to see the words ever again, you airbrush over the words to cover them completely.

Here is another example: If you apply beauty products, or makeup, on your face, you can airbrush just about any mark on your skin.

In some publications, workers often use software called Photoshop to change an image. They could use it to airbrush all the flaws in an image or even remove pieces of the image completely. The term photoshop has since taken on the same meaning as airbrush.

There is another way we use the term airbrush.

If someone is accused of airbrushing history, they are being accused of changing something bad in the past as if it did not happen.

Now, let's hear these two friends use the term "airbrush."

A: Hey let's meet for coffee tomorrow!

B: Sure! How about Hal's that new coffee shop down the street? I hear the coffee is really good.

A: Umm, let's go somewhere else. I don't like the owner.

B: Why? What's wrong with Hal?

A: Don't you remember? He ran for office two years ago. And during the campaign, some really bad stuff came out about him.

B: Really? I don't remember that.

A: That's because he airbrushed it all from history. Removed. Gone. It's like it all never happened.

B: Well, people cover up bad things from their past all the time. Besides ... he makes really good coffee.

A: I will find another coffee shop!

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

flaw— n.a small fault or weakness

hollow— adj.having a space inside:not solid

spray— v.to scatter or let fall in a fine mist

distributor— n.a person or company that supplies stores or businesses with goods

vandal— n.one who willfully or ignorantly destroys, damages, or defaces property belonging to another or to the public

apply— v.to put to use especially for some practical purpose

Article 67: Do Your Best with This Car Expression

Date: 2022-05-28T21:59:41+00:00 | 487 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

This program explores words and phrases in the English language.

And today we talk about an expression that comes from the world of vehicles and the engines that power them.

In an internal combustion engine, a cylinder is said to be firing when the fuel inside it is ignited, or lit. With that small, contained explosion, the engine starts and the car is ready to go! Most engines have

four cylinders. Some very powerful vehicles have six or even eight cylinders!

That brings us to today's expression: to fire on all cylinders.

When you are "firing on all cylinders," you are working or functioning at the greatest possible level of efficiency, speed or productivity. In other words, you are at your peak performance. You cannot do much better.

Sometimes we use this expression to mean we are using all our energy to do something. We are working as well as possible. For example, some people can only fire on all cylinders after they have had a good night's sleep.

We often use this expression in the negative form. For example, every morning, I have two cups of very strong, black coffee. The coffee helps my brain come to life. So, if someone tries to talk to me in the morning before I've had my coffee, I might say to them. "Can this wait? I'm not firing on all cylinders yet."

However, I would probably not say that to a supervisor. The expression is very informal.

Now let's hear this expression used by two co-workers.

A: Hey, can you hand me that notebook? It has all my notes for today's meeting.

B: (yawns) I'm sorry. Are you talking to me?

A: You seem like you need more sleep. You do realize this meeting about our project will decide your future for the next month.

B: I know. It's just really early. I don't fire on all cylinders until at least 10am.

A: Well, you had better get your cylinders fired up because here comes the client.

Before you take on your next big project, make sure you are firing on all cylinders.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

internal combustion engine— n.a heat engine in which the combustion that generates the heat takes place inside the engine proper instead of in a furnace

cylinder— n.the piston chamber in an engine : also, a long round body whether hollow or solid

ignite— v.to cause (a fuel) to burn

efficiency— n.the ability to do something or produce something without waste

peak— adj.being at or reaching the maximum

performance— n.the carrying out of an action

negative— adj.emphasizing the bad side of a person, situation, or thing

informal— adj. not requiring serious or formal behavior or dress: suitable for ordinary or everyday use with close friends and family

Article 68: Describing Things That Happen Very Fast

Date: 2022-06-04T21:59:32+00:00 | 732 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

The English language has several expressions that describe things that happen very fast. Today we will talk about several. Some involve body parts. And some involve acts of nature.

Let's start with our bodies.

There are some things we humans we do very quickly – namely our blinking eyes and beating hearts. Those bodily actions happen incredibly fast. So, we use “in the blink of an eye” and “in a heartbeat” to describe things that happen in no time at all.

Here are some examples:

She accepted the new job in a heartbeat. She didn't need to think about it at all.

When he hit the lottery, all his money problems disappeared in the blink of an eye.

Now, some may say that “blink of an eye” is redundant. After all, the only part of the body we can blink are the eyes. So just saying “blink” is enough. She blinked and her friend was gone! But when we use the expression, we always say the word “eye.”

We also don't think about blinking our eyes or beating our hearts – well, hopefully we don't. So, the expressions also mean that no thought was involved in the action.

If something happens in the blink of an eye or in a heartbeat, it happens “in no time flat.” This strange little phrase also means something happens in a very short amount of time. For example, my friend reached my house in no time flat. She wasted no time in getting here!

Okay, now let's talk about the expressions from the natural world.

If you are very fast, we might compare you to two powers in nature: wind and lightning. These two are usually used in the form of a simile. A simile compares things using “like” or “as.”

And we usually use them when describing a person's actions. So, we might say you move or run like the wind! Or we might say you are as fast as lightning.

With lightning, we could also use the words with a hyphen and say you are lightning-fast!

Also, when lightning happens, it happens as a flash of lightning or a bolt of lightning. Both these words, flash and bolt, are also used to describe fast things.

If something happens in a flash, it happens at lightning speed. And if I bolt somewhere, I run very fast to get there. For example, when it started to rain, I bolted to my car!

Now let's hear some friends use these expression together. They are waiting for a third friend in front of a movie theater.

A: Hi! Thanks for coming to the movies with me.

B: I love movies! As soon as you texted, I responded in a heartbeat.

A: It's a good thing I came early and got tickets. They sold out in the blink of an eye. Hey, where's Steve?

B: He had some work to finish up. So, he might be a bit late.

A: Oh, look there he is now! Hey Steve! Looks like you ran all the way here.

C: I was running FROM work not TO the movies. So, what's the name of the movie anyway?

A: Lightning McGrady and the Race Against Time !

B: Sounds great! I can't wait! Um ... what's it about?

C: A fast man. Now, let's go inside and get a seat.

A: He's not just fast. He's lightning-fast! When he runs, he can slow down time. Hey, who wants popcorn or a drink?

B: There's no time! People are going in! You'll miss the trailers! And you love trailers!

A: No problem. I'll be back in a flash!

C: Hold on. I'll go buy drinks and popcorn. After all, you bought the tickets. Just save me a seat.

A: Great Steve! Thanks!

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

blink— v.to shut and open the eyes quickly

lottery— n.a drawing of lots in which prizes are distributed to the winners among persons buying a chance

redundant— adj.specifically:using more words than necessary

compare— v.to represent as similar

hyphen— n.a punctuation mark - used especially to divide or to compound words, word elements, or numbers

flash— n.a sudden burst of lightflash— v.to appear suddenly

bolt– n.a lightning stroke

trailer– n.a short promotional film composed of clips showing highlights of a movie due for release in the near future

Article 69: Use the 'Ocean' to Express Big Thoughts

Date: 2022-06-11T21:59:05+00:00 | 446 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. Today we talk about the ocean.

Oceans are amazingly large, deep bodies of water. When talking about some of the deepest parts of the world's oceans, much is still not known. With something so big and full of wonder, it is not surprising that English has several expressions that use the word "ocean."

For starters, we can simply say "oceans of" something to mean "a lot" something. For example, Timothy will have oceans of problems if he does not find a job soon. He is racking up oceans of debt.

Naturally, it is very common to use the word "ocean" in expressions that describe very large, seemingly limitless, things. For example, my love of my reading is as big as the ocean! I really love to read.

You can also say "as deep as the ocean" to describe something very vast and intense. For example, if you love someone deeply, you can say your love for them is as deep as the ocean. It seems as if it has no end.

Saying that something is as deep, big, or wide as the ocean is a simile. A simile compares things using "like" or "as."

An ocean can also help describe something that is very far away from something else. The expression "to be oceans apart" can be used for more than just physical distance. If you are oceans apart from something, you are far from reaching a point of agreement or having common ground.

Consider these examples:

During an important business deal, the two parties found that they were oceans apart. It was impossible to make a deal that was good for both sides.

Even though their political and religious views were oceans apart, the two people shared a love of music and became close friends.

Finally, the ocean is so big that it would not make a difference if you added a drop of water to it. So, if I say something is just a drop in the ocean, it is a small amount compared to the amount that is needed. For example, some might say investing \$1 million dollars in a country's educational system is just a drop in the ocean. Millions more dollars will be needed to make real change.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

racking up— phrasal verb achieve; gain

vast— adj. very great in size, amount, degree, intensity, or especially in extent or range

intense— adj. existing in an extreme degree

Article 70: 'Full Steam Ahead!'

Date: 2022-06-18T22:00:59+00:00 | 540 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language.

Today we talk about “steam.”

Steam is water heated to the boiling point. Above 100 degrees Celsius, water becomes a gas. When placed under pressure, steam can supply energy for heating, cooking, or mechanical work, as in a steam engine.

“Steam” can mean other things too.

It can be used to mean anger or to describe someone who is angry. For example, it is not healthy to get steamed over every little issue. Life is too short.

Every time a friend of mine receives criticism, she gets steamed for a while. When I learned this about her, I knew to give her time and space to calm down after giving her any suggestions.

“Steam” can also mean energy, active force, or motivation. This kind of steam is good for getting things done.

For example, I once led a large group of people in a big creative project. I knew we needed to work up steam to get the job done. In other words, we would need a lot of energy. I told the team what was needed. I wanted to encourage them to get started. So, I said to them, “Full steam ahead!”

But it is also easy to “lose steam” if you don’t plan well. Once, I started a project in the spring but by summer I had run out of steam. I did not have the energy or motivation to finish.

Steam can also mean suppressed emotional tension or frustrations. Life can be busy and full of frustrations and problems. If we don’t talk about them, pressure can build up inside us – like a volcano that is ready to blow its top.

When we blow our top, we become angry, often quickly.

So, sometimes we need to “let off a little steam.” We need to ease the tension. When we let off steam, we release feelings that we may have been avoiding. We can also say, we need to “blow off steam.”

When we blow or let off steam, we calm down or release emotions or energy by doing something we like. Like a tea pot blowing off steam, it is a release of energy. So, when life gets frustrating, I like to go for a walk to blow off some steam. But some people may like to yell to let off steam. For some people, blowing off steam is hard to do. They don’t know how to relax or calm down.

Blowing off steam can mean that we “air out” issues that are bothering us. To air out concerns is a way of easing the pressure in our steam engine. It means to discuss our thoughts openly, so we feel better.

That’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

motivation—n.the act or process of giving someone a reason for doing something

encourage—v.to make someone more hopeful or energetic

tension—n.a feeling of nervousness or being unable to feel at ease

frustration—n.a feeling of anger or annoyance caused by not being able to do something

relax—v.to make or become loose or less tense

Article 71: English’s ‘Mile’ Expressions Are a Mile Long

Date: 2022-06-25T21:59:35+00:00 | 592 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

In the United States, many people use the English system for measuring. While some people use the metric system, our idioms and expressions often stick with measurement words from the English system.

Today, we talk about expressions using the word mile. And we have miles and miles of them! That means we have a lot.

For example, if you can run a mile a minute, you can run very fast. So, we can use the expression “a mile a minute” to describe people who do things very quickly.

For example, Sarah was very excited about her trip! When she told us about it, she talked a mile a minute. We could barely follow what she was saying!

Here is another example. Sam is a very quick problem-solver. His brain seems to work a mile a minute.

Now, when we talk about running a race, we use both kilometers and miles. However, when we use the expression “go the extra mile,” we only use mile. If you run a race that is 10 miles long and you run 11 miles, you have run farther than others and farther than needed.

So, when we go the extra mile, we do more than is asked of us. We do this to prove we are hardworking and dedicated to something. For example, many friends were only supposed to collect used books for a literary organization. But Tory went the extra mile; she delivered the books to needy families in the community.

A mile is equal to 1.6 kilometers. That is far enough away that you cannot see, smell, or notice something. Well, at least it should be. So, if we say, “I could see that from a mile away,” it means something is very noticeable.

For example, I can spot a liar from a mile away. That means I am very good at detecting people who do not tell the truth. Even if they are a mile from me, I can tell.

If a scent is very strong, you could say you smell it from a mile away. I don’t know what cologne that man was wearing, but I could smell it a mile away.

To be a million miles away is even farther. We often use that expression to mean lost in thought. If I am a million miles away, I seem very far away from those around me.

We can also use it to compare things. For example, her goals for her future and her parent’s goals for her future were a million miles apart. The two goals had nothing in common.

Our last expression describes people who are selfish and greedy. They always want more. If you give some people a little of something, they will often take a lot. I knew a woman who was like that. Every time I “gave her an inch, she took a mile.” She always wanted more from the people around her.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

If you are listening to VOA Learning English to improve your English, then you are truly going the extra mile. Good job!

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

dedicated— adj. devoted to a cause, ideal, or purpose

detecting— v. to discover or determine the existence, presence, or fact of

scent— n. an odor that is given off by someone or something

cologne— n. a perfumed liquid composed of alcohol and fragrant oils

greedy— adj. having or showing a selfish desire for more than is needed

Article 72: Use a Sledgehammer to Crack a Nut

Date: 2022-07-02T21:59:55+00:00 | 535 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

There are many kinds of nuts. There are walnuts, almonds, hazelnuts, cashews, and pistachios – just to name a few.

Nuts are good for you. And they come in their own very hard shell. So, let's say you want to eat a walnut but do not have a nutcracker. (A "nutcracker" is a tool to open, or crack, the hard shell of a nut.)

Without a nutcracker, you might try to open it with something like a hammer or even a sledgehammer.

We use a hammer in building jobs to attach pieces of wood with nails. And we use a sledgehammer to break up rocks, tear down walls, or destroy things. A sledgehammer is so big and heavy that most people need to use both hands to raise it.

So, if you use a sledgehammer to crack a nut, you will probably destroy the nut inside. Then you will have nothing to eat but very small pieces of nut mixed with its hard shell. Not good.

In American English, this expression means someone uses more force than is necessary. We also use it to describe problem-solving methods that are extreme. The methods are excessive. And in using such over-the-top, or extreme, measures, you can harm your own cause.

For example, a store owner called the police to report a "violent person" who was threatening employees and holding him hostage. When the 20 police officers arrived to the store, the "violent person" turned out to be an 80-year-old woman who was unhappy about a purchase and refused to leave.

The police captain probably would have said something like this: "Her? I brought 20 police officers for her? That's like using a sledgehammer to crack a nut!" And the store owner would possibly be fined for calling in a false report.

Sometimes we use this expression to describe a punishment that is over-the-top or does not fit the severity of the crime.

Let's say a child disobeyed his parents and ate ice cream before a meal. The father punished his child by taking away his food for three days! That is definitely using a sledgehammer to crack a nut. In other words, the punishment does not fit the crime.

Sometimes this expression means the solution to a small problem is overly complex.

For example, once at a bookstore, too many people showed up for an event. They had to wait in long lines and some could not get into the store to speak with the writer. So, now the bookstore asks people who come to events to sign three forms saying they understand they may have to wait and may not get in. Talk about using a hammer to crack a nut.

Please note. When using this expression, we sometimes say “hammer” instead of “sledgehammer.” A hammer may be smaller, but the damage is still the same.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

crack— v.to break or cause to break with a sudden sharp sound

excessive— adj.more than what is usual, proper, necessary, or normal

over-the-top— adj.extremely or excessively flamboyant or outrageous

Article 73: Got Something to Hide? Try 'Sweeping It Under the Rug'

Date: 2022-07-09T21:59:39+00:00 | 741 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today’s show, we go into the home! We talk about a common object that gives us some useful expressions.

That object is a rug. Rugs are floor coverings that serve many purposes in a home. They add color and style to a room. They protect the floor. Rugs can make a home more comfortable and quiet. They can also make a slippery floor safer to walk on.

But since they are on the floor, rugs can trap a lot of dirt. When we clean the floor, it is a good idea to remove the rugs first. This way, you can sweep away all the stuff that gets trapped under it.

But if you don’t have time or are feeling a little lazy, you can always clean the floor quickly and just sweep around the rug. The dirt under the rug cannot be seen. It’s like it’s not there.

And that brings us to our first expression: “to sweep something under the rug.”

When we “sweep something under the rug,” we try to hide something. What kinds of things do we try to hide? Things that are illegal, unethical, embarrassing, or just wrong.

For example, the corrupt politician won re-election because he swept all his failures and dirty dealings under the rug.

Here is another example:

Before meeting her new boyfriend’s family, my friend carefully and completely swept all her past mistakes under the rug. She wanted a fresh start. She decided to keep her complex past hidden.

You might also hear someone say “brush something under the rug.” The word “brush” in this case means to clean something off.

Now, as we said earlier, one purpose of a rug is to make the floor safer. But there are also ways that a rug can be dangerous. If someone pulls a rug out from under your feet, you most likely would fall. And you could get hurt.

So, when we “pull the rug from under someone's feet,” we put that person in a difficult and unexpected situation. We suddenly take away support or help from them.

For example, I felt like someone had pulled the rug out from under my feet when I found out my apartment building was being torn down. I had only one week to find a new place to live!

You can also say, “to pull the rug out from under someone.” It means the same thing.

We finish today's program not with another expression but with a joke.

As we discussed earlier, a rug covers and protects the floor. But the word “cover” has many meanings. “Cover” can also mean to give protection or to pay for something. So, let's say I go out to dinner with a friend and she forgets money. I can say, “I have money. I've got this covered.” That means I will pay.

Here is another example:

Some home insurance policies do not cover flood damage. The policies do not protect against high water damage.

Knowing that definition of “cover” helps you understand this joke.

Once there was an old floor in an old house. It learned that the owner of the house wanted to put in a new floor. The floor cried and cried about the bad news. Hearing the floor crying, the rug wanted to make the floor feel better. So, what did the rug say to the floor?

“Don't worry. I've got you covered.”

That joke is a pun on the word “cover.”

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

style— n.a method, manner, or quality that is felt to be very respectable, fashionable, or proper

slippery— adj.causing or tending to cause something to slide or fall

lazy— adj.not liking or willing to act or work

unethical— adj.not conforming to a high moral standard:morally wrong

embarrassing— adj.causing a feeling of self-conscious confusion and distress

joke— n.something said or done to provoke laughter

insurance— n.coverage by contract whereby for an agreed payment one party agrees to indemnify or guarantee another against loss by a specified contingency or peril

pun— n.a form of joking in which a person uses a word in two senses

What do you think of this story? Was it helpful in your understanding of the expression “sweep something under the rug”?

We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Article 74: Solving Problems with Sleep Expressions

Date: 2022-07-16T21:59:05+00:00 | 802 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

A couple of years ago, we wrote a story titled “Ways We Sleep.” We taught expressions such as catch a few z’s, get some shut-eye, nod off, and turn in ... just to name a few.

There are many, many sleep expressions in English. But today we talk about ones that deal with problem solving.

Now, it is common to sleep on a bed. When we go camping, we sleep on the ground, or we sleep on a cot. If we fall asleep watching television or when we visit a friend’s house, we may sleep on a couch. And sometimes we may have to sleep on a floor.

But “to sleep on” has another meaning.

If I have a problem and cannot think of an answer, I can “sleep on it.” Often an answer comes to me the next day.

Let’s say some co-workers are working on a project together, and they run into a difficult problem. No one can think of a way to solve it. One person might say, “Look, we’re not getting anywhere. So, let’s sleep on it. Tomorrow we can try to figure this out.”

To “sleep on” something means you give yourself time to think about a problem overnight. You plan to make a decision about it later.

This does not have to mean that you are actively thinking about the problem. Your subconscious may be working on it. For example, if I am writing a story and run into a problem, I often sleep on it. I think about the problem before I go to sleep and hope that my sleeping self comes to the rescue!

Sometimes we use this expression when we just want more time to pass. We also use it when we want to look at a problem with a rested mind. We know that sleep is necessary to be healthy, both mentally and physically. Sometimes a problem doesn’t look so bad the next day after a good night’s sleep.

Here is another sleep expression.

Some problems are not a big deal — they are not important. You can describe them as “nothing to lose sleep over.” And if you want to say you are not going to worry about something, you can say you’re “not going to lose sleep over it.”

Let’s listen while two friends use this expression.

Mark: Hey Tish, did you hear about the new apartment building coming to our neighborhood? It's going to have 100units!

Tish: I did. Why do you ask?

Mark: It will mean a lot MORE people and a lot LESS parking. Aren't you upset?

Tish: Well Mark, we DO live in a city. And cities have lots of people. So, I'm not losing any sleep over it -- if that's what you're asking.

Mark: Good for you. I've lost A LOT of sleep over it.

Okay, who is upset by the new apartment building – Mark or Tish?

If you said Mark, you are right!

For our last expression, we talk about serious problems – problems in which your life might be at stake!

If you “sleep with one eye open,” you are too distrustful to fall asleep. You are suspicious of others around you. You are worried or even fearful that someone or something will hurt you in your sleep.

For example, once I took a friend camping with me. She was a city girl and had never been camping. While sleeping in a tent in the woods, she heard animal sounds and movements in the woods all night. In the morning, I asked her how she slept. She said, “I didn'tsleep a wink.I slept with one eye open the whole night!”

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

If you run into a problem with English, try sleeping on it! Maybe the answer will come to you with the morning sun.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

camping–n.the activity of sleeping outdoors in a tent or cabin usually for fun

cot–n.a thin, light bed that can be folded

couch–n.a piece of furniture that a person can sit on or lie down on

cushion–n.a soft pillow or pad to rest on

subconscious–n.the part of a person's mind that they do not consciously know about

unit–n.a single thing, person, or group forming part of a whole

at stake–n.in a position to be lost if something goes wrong

sleep a wink–v.to sleep for a very short period of time

What do you think of today's program on sleep expressions? We want to hear from you.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

Article 75: Let the 'Doors of Opportunity' Open Wide!

Date: 2022-07-23T21:59:17+00:00 | 548 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

We walk through doors many, many times a day. If we want to enter any building, we must go through a door. And that building could be a new home, an interesting store or restaurant. Maybe it is a school, library or laboratory.

We don't know for sure what is on the other side of a door. If you think about it, doors offer us many possibilities and opportunities!

That may be why we have several expressions that connect doors with opportunity.

First, let's talk about an opportunity. An opportunity is a chance for greater success. It is a good chance for advancement or progress. Or it can be just a chance for something different. But you won't know unless you open the door.

So, "when opportunity comes knocking, be ready to answer the door." This expression means you do not want to miss an opportunity. There is a certain sadness and regret involved in a missed opportunity.

You don't always get another second chance. That is why we also say, opportunity knocks but once. You may also hear it said this way: opportunity seldom knocks twice.

Both expressions mean that great opportunities are usually only offered to us one time. We use these expressions to urge people to act quickly and to take an opportunity when it comes to them.

Now, sometimes an opportunity is not a completely open door. Maybe the door is open just a little – a crack. If that happens and you want to get in, you should make sure to put your "foot in the door."

Imagine you are standing in a doorway and you want to get inside the building. You want to be part of whatever is happening in there. With your foot in the door, you are one step closer to making that happen.

When you have a foot in the door, you have an opportunity to get inside a building. The same can be said for a situation.

Sometimes, all you need to succeed is a small chance or opportunity to prove yourself. This is especially true for people who do not have connections that can open doors for them.

Getting your foot in the door is a way to open that door of opportunity for yourself. Here is an example: I had short-term job in New York City in the publishing industry. The job did not pay very much. But it was a good way for me to get my foot in the door.

Now, sometimes in life, things do not go our way. The door of opportunity slams in our face. But that's okay. We have another expression that can fix that problem.

"When one door closes, another one opens."

This expression means that the end of one situation or opportunity may often be followed by the start of a new one. You can use this expression to offer hope to someone who may have lost a good opportunity.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

opportunity— n.a chance for greater success

regret— n.sadness or disappointment caused especially by something beyond a person's control

crack— n.a narrow opening

slam— v.to shut forcibly and noisily

Article 76: Stay on Time with Clock, Watch Expressions

Date: 2022-07-30T21:59:26+00:00 | 786 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give you examples and sometimes notes on usage.

Today we talk about expressions related to keeping on time. To help us plan our time, we use tools — namely clocks and watches.

If something happens at the exact same time every day it is predictable. When an event is very regular, we can say we could “set our watch by it.”

And that is our first expression – to set your watch by something.

You might hear someone using it like this:

Regina leaves her house to go to work every weekday at exactly 7 a.m — never a minute earlier or later. You can set your watch by it.

In this example, you could say that Regina is a “creature of habit.” This means she sticks to her plan no matter what happens. And that is why you can set your watch by her.

This expression can also describe someone who is always on time. They are reliable and punctual— like in this example.

A: John said he'd be here at 3 p.m. and it's 2:45 p.m. If he's late, we'll miss our train!

B: Don't worry. If John said he will be here, then he will be here. He's always right on time. You could set your watch by him.

Now, let's talk about clocks: devices that tell time.

Some events or activities happen easily and on time. And some systems operate without a problem. If everything is going as planned, we can say it is "running like clockwork."

Clockwork is a system of wheels and springs inside mechanical clocks. The term means something that is carefully made which runs smoothly and on time.

Once, I ran a two-week teacher training class. It took a lot of work to organize and had "many moving parts," or things that needed to be done. But I'm happy to say that the training ran like clockwork!

Here is another way to say that: The training went off "without a hitch." Here, "hitch" is a problem.

To run like clockwork means to operate with extreme regularity. Some word experts say that using a clock mechanism to describe other areas of our lives dates from at least the late seventeenth century.

For a big company event, we rented a conference room in a big hotel. But we only had the space until 3 p.m. And we had a lot of issues to cover. Luckily, the event ran like clockwork. We got all our work done and still had time left over to have a little fun!

The expression "run like clockwork" can also mean to operate, manage, control, or direct something in a very smooth, efficient, reliable manner. Used this way, a noun or pronoun is used between "run" and "like clockwork."

Here are some examples:

When the new manager took over, he wanted to run the office like clockwork. So, he made the workers take lunch at set times every day.

When I lived in Seattle, I ran children's theater festival like clockwork. All the performances were on time and everyone had a blast!

Years ago in Washington, DC, I ran a children's summer camp like clockwork. All the activities were on time, and all the children had a blast.

And that's all the time we have for Words and Their Stories. But we'll be back at the same time next week because this show runs like clockwork. You can set your clock by it!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

habit—n. a usual way of behaving; something that a person does often in a regular and repeated way

reliable—adj. able to be trusted to do or provide what is needed

punctual—adj. doing something at the expected time

efficient—adj. able to produce desired results without wasting materials, time, or energy

blast—n. (informal)a good time

We want to hear from you!

Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 77: Learn How to 'Read the Room'

Date: 2022-08-06T21:59:27+00:00 | 595 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

As humans, we have emotional states, also called moods. Sometimes we feel happy and sometimes sad. Other times we may feel angry or anxious or excited.

Well, moods are not just for individuals. Groups of people can also share a collective mood. On today's show we talk about an expression that describes ways we understand the general mood of a group of people.

That expression is “to read the room.”

When you read the room, you use your powers of observation to learn the general mood or emotional state of people in a particular setting. You may then act in a way that is similar to that mood. You match it.

Let's say you are in a silly mood – laughing a lot and making jokes. Then you enter a serious work meeting. You may need to read the room and change your behavior.

Here's another example.

If I need to bring up a serious issue with a group of friends, I will read the room first. If everyone is having a good time and the issue is not urgent, I will wait.

You can tell someone else to “read the room” if they seem clueless about the mood of a group of people. It is a way of expressing to that person that they are behaving incorrectly or inappropriately.

Used this way, it can either be funny or insulting— depending on the situation and how we say the phrase.

Let's say you are at a dinner party. People are seated around a table enjoying good food and conversation. Then, your friend Betsy brings up a very serious topic – like a historic battle where many people died. Suddenly the tone changes. The atmosphere goes from happy to serious. You could say, “Betsy, read the room! No one wants to talk about that now.”

Or I could say to someone later, “Betsy needs to learn how to read the room. She brought down the mood of the party with her talk of war and death.”

The expression “read the room” is all about being observant. Reading the room is a skill. People who can read the room know the right atmosphere, tone, and mood and are able to fit in.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

anxious— adj. afraid or nervous about what may happen

mood— n. a person's emotional state

silly— adj. not serious or important : playful and lighthearted

insulting— adj. giving or intended to give offense

conversation— n. a talk between two or more people: the act of talking

tone— n. an individual way of speaking or writing especially when used to express an emotion

We want to hear from you. Are you good at reading the room? Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Write your comment in the box.

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Article 78: Problems Happen When You Are 'Asleep at the Wheel'

Date: 2022-08-13T21:59:54+00:00 | 762 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage.

The United States is a very big country. So, getting from point A to point B can take a lot of time. Most people who live in the U.S. drive cars. So, it should come as no surprise that we have many car expressions.

Driving a vehicle is a big responsibility. After all, it is a heavy piece of machinery traveling at fast speeds. So, it is important to stay focused on the road.

You should pay close attention when driving. It is dangerous to drive when you are distracted or when you are tired. If you lose your focus, you could cause a crash.

The same could be said in other situations in life. And that brings us to our expression for today: to be asleep at the wheel.

This expression comes from the idea of someone falling asleep while driving a car. But as an idiom, it means someone is not paying attention or is focused on what they are doing. This can cause all kinds of problems.

If I am asleep at the wheel, I fail to see my responsibilities or duties. I am not paying attention to important issues for which I am responsible.

We often use this expression to describe a person who is not thinking about possible future problems. It can also be used when talking about a business or government that is not paying attention to problems waiting down the road.

The government agency in charge of public health safety was asleep at the wheel on this issue.

Here is a workplace example:

Gabrielle was supposed to make sure all the contracts were signed by the deadline. But she fell asleep at the wheel and did not get her task done on time.

Anyone can fall asleep at the wheel and in any situation. Here is an example from the world of sports.

During an important game, the star goalie of the football team was asleep at the wheel. The other team was able to score easily.

In these examples, we used the verbs “to fall” or “to be” with this expression. Both are correct. And neither one is more common than the other. So, feel free to take your pick!

As we said earlier, this expression refers to someone who has fallen asleep while driving a vehicle. We have a similar expression that relates to someone falling asleep while operating a train.

That expression is “to fall asleep at the switch.” Here, “switch” refers to the controls on the train. Note that “falling asleep at the switch” is less commonly used.

And that is all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

When it comes to teaching English, VOA Learning English promises not to fall asleep at the wheel. We will stay focused on helping you improve your language skills!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

point A to point B— idiomatic expression: to go from one place to another

distracted— adj. having one's thoughts or attention drawn away: unable to concentrate or give attention to something

idiom— n. an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements (such as up in the air for "undecided") or in its grammatically atypical use of words (such as give way)

focus— n. a center of activity or interest

down the road— idiomatic expression: in the future

goalie— n. a player who defends the goal in any of various games (such as hockey, lacrosse, or soccer) : goalkeeper

switch— n. a device for making, breaking, or changing the connections in an electrical circuit

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 79: 'The Road to Hell Is Paved With Good Intentions'

Date: 2022-08-20T21:59:17+00:00 | 455 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Roads are paved with different kinds of materials, such as concrete or asphalt. Older roads were paved with cobblestones. Some streets in Washington, DC still have the cobblestones from over a hundred years ago. They were meant for horses and carriages. So, they can be difficult to walk on.

Today we talk about roads paved with a very different material – intentions. Intentions are things we mean to do or things we want to do. They are not things we have done.

So, sometimes we say: The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

This is a proverb -- a short, well-known saying containing a wise thought. The wise thought with this proverb is promises and plans must be put into action, or else they are useless.

Some people talk a lot about doing things, but they don't actually do them.

This proverb means that we intend to do something good but, in the end, we do not do it. And the road to hell (a bad place) is paved with all those promises that we did not keep.

Now, let's hear it used in an example.

There is a community event to raise money for a new playground. Many people promised their time and skills to raise the money, including a woman named Tara. But Tara did not show up at the event.

A: Hey, have you seen Tara?

B: No, I haven't, and I've been here all day. What was she supposed to do for the event?

A: She promised to bring her famous bread for the event. She said she could raise around \$500 for the new playground. Well, that was her intention anyway.

B: You know what they say: The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Tara always promises and then doesn't deliver.

A: I wish I had known that before organizing this event.

Sometimes, we would say that talk is cheap, or actions speak louder than words. These are both common expressions to use when someone promises to do something but fails to come through or when they simply talk about doing something.

We also use the road to hell is paved with good intentions to describe another situation. It is not enough to intend to behave well or treat others well. For it to count, you must actually do it.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

pave– v. to make a hard surface on (as with concrete or asphalt)

carriage– n. a vehicle with wheels used for carrying people

playground— n.a piece of land used for and usually equipped with facilities for recreation especially by children

Article 80: Blaming Others With a Goat: A 'Scapegoat'

Date: 2022-08-27T21:59:08+00:00 | 569 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Many of our English expressions come from our interactions with or observations of animals. Today we talk about an animal that gets blamed for a lot of bad things – a goat!

To be more exact, we are talking about a scapegoat.

A scapegoat is a person who is the receiver of blame and anger about a situation. Often the anger is without reason. So, if someone is unfairly blamed for something, that person could be called a scapegoat.

“Scapegoat” combines the English words “escape” and “goat.” The word has an interesting history. But before we hear that, let’s hear the word used in some examples.

Just because Tabitha had made mistakes in the past, she became the scapegoat in her family for everything that went wrong. But in fact, her sisters did worse things than she did.

The builder of a new apartment building became the scapegoat for changes to the neighborhood. Houses became more expensive and poorer people began moving out. But in reality, wealthy people had been moving into the area for many years.

Now, let's talk about the origin: Where does this word come from?

Experts with Merriam Webster say "scapegoat" is connected to religion. On the dictionary’s website, they explain that on a certain religious holiday, ancient Hebrews would sacrifice one goat and lead another one into the wilderness. The goat sent to the wilderness carried all the sins of the people.

So historically speaking, a scapegoat is an actual goat that takes on the sins of others. In other words, the goat carried the sins of other people away with it.

In our modern usage, a scapegoat is someone who bears the blame for others.

In English, there is another word that has a similar meaning. A “fall guy” is someone who is blamed for something that someone else did. The word “fall guy” suggests that the person was set up for something they did not do.

Lawyers for the defendant argued that their client was being set up by her boss. She was simply a fall guy for her boss’s crimes. He was the real guilty party.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

origin— n.the point where something begins

sacrifice— n.something offered as a religious act : an act of giving up something especially for the sake of someone or something else

sin— n.an action that breaks a religious law : an action that is or is felt to be bad

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 81: Where Is the 'Wrong Side of the Tracks'?

Date: 2022-09-03T22:00:49+00:00 | 810 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage. And sometimes we tell you how the expression came into use.

Today we talk about train tracks.

Imagine a town that has a railroad and train tracks running through it. Trains may be great to travel on, but crossing their tracks can be dangerous. Bright lights and warning signals at tracks can only do so much. Train tracks often will divide a town in two.

One side is often more desirable than the other. The houses are usually bigger or newer. Public resources, like schools and parks, are more available or are better operated. There might be better stores, restaurants and fewer crimes reported on the desirable side of town.

The other side of the tracks, and town, might be poorer. The houses are smaller or less modern. It also might be where factories, trash dumps, and other industrial sites are found. Community centers, playgrounds, and similar places may be few and far between. This means there aren't many of these facilities.

That kind of town, separated by a “good” side and a “bad” side, is at the heart of the expression the “wrong side of the tracks.”

"Tracks" refers to the railroad tracks. These sometimes were thought of as splitting a town between the haves and have nots. If I am from the wrong side of the tracks, I am from the poor part of a town.

However, you don't have to live in a town with railroad tracks to use this expression. And many towns with railroad tracks do not divide rich and poor people. If I grew up in an underdeveloped, poor and possibly dangerous environment without railroad tracks, I could still say I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks.

We use this expression another way.

Sometimes we don't even know where a person is from. But if they often cause or get into trouble, someone might say they are bad news and are from the wrong side of tracks.

Now, crossing the tracks either for love or to create a richer life, is a popular idea in stories.

Many popular movies are about star-crossed lovers who are from different sides of the tracks. Their different economic conditions and cultural backgrounds form a barrier. Their families and friends try to keep them apart. But in the end, they overcome these obstacles, fall in love, and live happily ever after. At least in the movies.

Dirty Dancing is one of these popular movies. She is an upper-middle class girl. He is a working-class dance teacher. They meet at a summer camp and their shared joy of dance brings them together. The barriers break down.

Lady And The Tramp, Pretty Woman, and Grease are other very popular movies centered on this idea.

Now, sometimes the story concerns one character trying to move from the wrong side of the tracks to the right side. We can call this a rags-to-riches story. “Rags” here are old, poor clothing in disrepair. Annie is a rags-to-riches story. She is a poor and parentless girl who gets adopted by a rich man.

Sometimes the story is about two groups of people from either side of the tracks who can't seem to get over their differences and get along.

The film The Outsiders is a good example. The Greasers are from the wrong side of the tracks. The Socs are from the right side of the tracks. In the story, however, both sides get into trouble. The Socs, or Socs, just have more money and better cars.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Don't forget to practice using the expression to be from the wrong or right side of the tracks.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo!

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

obstacle— n. something that stands in the way or opposes

class— n. a group sharing the same economic or social status

adopt— v.to take by choice into a relationship especially: to take voluntarily (a child of other parents) as one's own child

We want to hear from you! Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the language from the story.

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Article 82: Who Would 'Bring Sand to the Beach'?

Date: 2022-09-10T22:00:01+00:00 | 607 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we talk about common expressions in the English language. We give examples. And we talk about when and how to use them.

Today we talk about pointless, useless actions. And we have a very descriptive expression to help us do that. For this expression, let's go to the beach!

For a beach trip, we bring several things that can make the trip more enjoyable. For example, a beach towel makes sitting on the sand more comfortable. Some people choose to bring a beach chair. And a beach umbrella protects you from the sun's powerful rays. Swimming in the ocean can really make you hungry. So many people bring a cooler for food and drinks.

Making sandcastles on the beach is a fun activity. So, bringing sand-digging tools -- like a shovel -- and a bucket is a good idea. But you do not need to bring the sand. Most beaches have a lot of that already!

And that brings us to today's expression: bringing sand to the beach.

Bringing sand to the beach describes actions that are pointless and unnecessary. The actions are futile. This means serving no purpose.

To bring sand to the beach can also mean overkill. Overkill means to do or have more than is necessary or useful.

Often when using this expression, we say "like." For example, bringing flowers to the opening of a florist is like bringing sand to the beach.

Now, let's hear this expression used between two friends. They talk about an upcoming party and what they are bringing.

A: Hey, Ingrid's yearly party is tomorrow. What are you bringing?

B: I made a great music playlist. The songs I picked will definitely get people up and dancing. What about you?

A: I thought I'd bring my famous spinach dip.

B: Um, your spinach dip? You know, I wouldn't bring food. Ingrid always makes too much food. And she is such a good cook. Bringing food to her party is like bringing sand to the beach.

A: Well, I know Ingrid makes lots of great food. But she doesn't make my spinach dip. Every party needs spinach dip!

B: I've tasted your spinach dip. No party needs that.

A: Ouch, that is so cold.

B: Why don't you bring some balloons? Everyone likes balloons.

We usually use like bringing sand to the beach when bringing something to a location is unnecessary. But you can also say the same idea with different objects and locations.

For example, I could also say it is like bringing a sandwich to a restaurant. With this example, the meaning goes one step further. It also means that what you are bringing (the sandwich) is of lesser quality than what you would find at the location (the restaurant).

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

towel— n.a cloth or piece of absorbent paper for wiping or drying

comfortable— adj.giving physical ease

cooler— n.a container for keeping food or drinks cool

sandcastle— n.a small model of a castle or other structure that is made with sand on a beach

shovel— n.a tool with a long handle and broad scoop used to lift and throw loose material (as dirt or snow)

bucket— n.a usually round container with a handle for holding or carrying liquids or solids

futile— adj.serving no useful purpose

florist— n.a person who sells flowers and houseplants

dip— n.a sauce or soft mixture into which food may be dipped

What do you think of the expression “bring sand to the beach”?

We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Article 83: This Is 'The Best Thing Since Sliced Bread'!

Date: 2022-09-17T22:00:27+00:00 | 673 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, notes on usage, and examples.

Today we talk about innovation. Innovation is an improved way of doing something. Innovation can lead to change that makes for a better product or idea. Sometimes innovation involves a new, physical invention.

Some innovations are revolutionary.

Innovation brings us to the world of bread and today's expression: the best thing since sliced bread.

The best thing since sliced bread describes a new, excellent thing that makes a great improvement to something. For example, the new map and direction app on my smartphone is the best thing since sliced bread! Now, when driving I find my destination easily and only get lost when my phone dies.

But where does this expression come from?

Well, for many years, bread has been a main part of meals for many people around the world. Most bread comes in a long form, called a loaf. A bread loaf travels well. You can buy a loaf of bread, stick in your bag, and make it home without the bread getting damaged. And on the way, you can break off a piece of bread for a little snack.

But when making a sandwich, you need two slices of bread of the same thickness. If you had to cut them yourself, that may not happen. One may be thicker than the other -- one of life's little annoyances.

Well, that changed in the late 1920s. An inventor in the United States brought an innovation to the world of bread. Otto Frederick Rohwedder invented the bread slicer. The machine cut the bread into individual slices of the same size.

Soon after, he invented a machine that sliced the bread and then packaged it. Later, a small machine to toast the bread was invented. The slices fit neatly into the toaster. Toasters can be found in homes across the U.S. and other countries.

Sliced bread became even more popular. People love bread and Rohwedder's creation revolutionized the bread industry.

So, being described as the best thing since sliced bread is high praise, indeed.

Here is another example.

A: So, what do you think of the chief's new policy on paid leave?

B: It's the best thing since sliced bread! I'm going to use the extra vacation time to visit friends in Paris.

Please note: People also use the expression as an insult.

Let's say you know someone who thinks very highly of herself. She thinks she can do no wrong. You don't agree. You could say, "She thinks she's the best thing since sliced bread."

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

innovation—n.a new idea, method, or device

slice—n.a thin flat piece cut from something: a slice of bread, a slice of cake—v.to cut with or as if with a knife

destination—n.a place to which a person is going or something is sent

loaf—n.a shaped or molded mass of bread

snack—n.a light meal: food eaten between regular meals

annoyance—n.a source of vexation or irritation

toast—n.sliced bread browned on both sides by heat:—v.to make (food, such as bread) crisp, hot, and brown by heat

packaged—adj.a covering wrapper or container

We want to hear from you. Do you have any similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 84: The Best Way Is 'Tried-and-True'

Date: 2022-09-24T21:59:59+00:00 | 515 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage.

Today we talk about things that are dependable (you can depend on them) and reliable (you can rely on them). These are things in life that we count on. We know they work because we have tried them!

So, today we talk about a word that describes such things: tried-and-true.

Tried-and-true is an adjective. It describes a way of doing something that is proven to work well.

Something tried-and-true is tested. Often, we say a method or process is tried-and-true. It is trustworthy, or worthy of your trust.

If a method or way of doing something is tried-and-true, it could become your go-to way of doing something. You go to it often because you know it works. Go-to describes a method or process that has worked so well and so often that you count on it.

A tried-and-true method is so dependable that it is a sure bet. You could even bet your life on it.

What other words do we use with tried-and-true?

A remedy or cure can be called tried-and-true. We can say a tried-and-true remedy works wonders or works like a dream.

A formula, an approach, a set of instructions -- basically any way of doing something can be tried-and-true.

Now let's hear two friends use this word and some related words.

A: You look a little tired. Have you not been feeling well?

A: You should try my tried-and-true remedy for getting better sleep.

B: Sure! I'll try anything.

A: I take a really long run about an hour before bedtime.

B: Correction. I'll try anything ... but that. Running may work wonders for you but not for me. Do you have any other dependable go-to remedies?

A: You could drink a cup of warm milk before bed.

B: Now, that sounds like my kind of remedy.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

We hope that VOA Learning English has become a tried-and-true way for you to learn English.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

reliable— adj. suitable or fit to be depended on or counted on

method— n. a procedure or process for attaining an object: such as

remedy— n. a medicine, application, or treatment that relieves or cures a disease

formula— n. an established form or method

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 85: 'All Over the Map' Can Be Good and Bad

Date: 2022-10-01T21:59:00+00:00 | 626 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

The world is filled with many interesting places. A map helps us find them. Any place you need to find -- a street address, business, famous landmark or park -- is most likely on a map.

Which brings us to our expression: all over the map! We use this expression in several different ways.

The first way means to be spread out over a great distance.

For example, years ago I drove across the United States by myself. I was all over the map on that trip -- through mountains, deserts, forests, and more.

Here is another way we use this expression.

All over the map can also mean having many different kinds of something. For example, if a restaurant offers a variety of dishes from many different countries, you can say its menu is all over the map.

Here is another example. Washington, D.C. is a very international city. People from all over the map live and work together in D.C.

Here's another example. If someone asks me what music I like, it's hard to answer. I enjoy listening to many kinds of music -- from rock to classical to soul and country. You could say my musical interests are all over the map.

Or, another example: My favorite international store sells a little of everything. It has coffee from Brazil, chocolate from Belgium, soap from France, and tea from Japan. But you can also buy fresh vegetables! That store is all over the map with its products!

Finally, we also use the expression all over the map to mean confused or unfocused. If thinking, speaking, or planning is unorganized, we can describe it as all over the map.

This expression can also describe a person. If someone is all over the map, they could be having a hard time focusing on one thing.

Here's an example. My coworker Karen led a very confusing meeting. First she talked about plans to move the company overseas. Then she switched to sales estimates for the next season and later, budget cuts. Her presentation was all over the map! Nobody had a clear understanding of the project.

Another project I worked on was set up to fail. The directions the designer gave to the team were all over the map. The builders did not even know where to start digging!

And that brings us to the end of this Words and Their Stories. I hope our expression was clearly explained. This is not time to be all over the map!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

variety— n. collection of different things

dish— n. food prepared in a particular way

menu— n. a list of the dishes that may be ordered (as in a restaurant) or that are to be served (as at a banquet)

classical— adj. relating to music in a European tradition that includes opera and symphony and that is generally considered more serious than other kinds of music

confused— adj. being disordered or mixed up

unfocused— adj. not concentrated on one point or objective

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 86: What Does It Mean 'To Push Someone's Buttons'?

Date: 2022-10-08T21:59:42+00:00 | 774 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

The world is filled with buttons! Some buttons we press -- such as the ones needed to operate a vehicle or machinery.

Some buttons fasten our clothes. They keep our shirts closed and our pants from falling down.

In English, the word “button” is found in many useful and common expressions.

Let’s talk about the kinds of buttons you press or push. Young children like to push buttons – even if nothing happens. There is something very satisfying about pushing a button.

Well, did you know that people have buttons too? However, these buttons are not physical things. Our buttons activate our feelings. They are things to which we are sensitive.

So, some unkind people may find it satisfying to push people’s buttons. If you push someone’s buttons, you do something or talk about something that upsets them.

Button-pushers like to upset people by bringing up sore subjects. For example, a woman I used to know always tried to push my buttons by bringing up an old boyfriend. But then finally, I told her I did not care. After that, she stopped trying to push the old boyfriend button.

However, pushing someone’s buttons can also happen accidentally. Sometimes we don’t mean to, but we can bring up an issue that is touchy to someone else.

Now, let’s talk about the kind of buttons on clothing.

As you know already, buttons are fasteners on our clothes. They keep them shut. Well, imagine if our mouths had buttons. We could fasten them shut to keep silent.

And that gives us some impolite expressions. They all mean to be quiet.

If I tell someone to button their mouth, button their lip or to simply button it, I am telling them to shut up. Like I said, the expressions are rude.

But there is another way we use “button” in our conversations.

For a button on our clothing to work, it needs a buttonhole. Otherwise, you can’t fasten them. A buttonhole traps the button. So, if you buttonhole someone in a conversation, you trap them. Like a button that has slipped into a buttonhole, they cannot escape.

Now, you can buttonhole someone with a fun topic. But usually, we use this term when someone talks to you for a long time about something you don’t want to hear. If you are buttonholed over an unpleasant topic, you can also say that someone had you cornered.

Now, let’s hear some of these terms used between two friends.

A: Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you. Have you tried the cake? It is SO good.

B: I haven’t had anything to eat or drink yet! Jen had me buttonholed for an hour about her work project.

A: Not cool. A party is NOT the place to corner someone about work.

B: And she knows I wanted to work on that project.

A: Really not cool! She just wants to push your buttons. And you’re too nice to tell her to button it. Are you still upset about the project?

B: No, I’m over it. And I told her. I also told her that I don’t want to talk about work anymore at a party.

A: Good. Not caring is the best way to deal with a button-pusher. Uh-oh. Look over there. Now she’s got David buttonholed.

B: Poor guy. But he can take care of himself. Now, where is that cake you were talking about?

And that brings us to the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

fasten— v. to fix firmly or securely

satisfying— adj. producing pleasure or contentment by providing what is needed or wanted

trigger— v. to cause an intense and usually negative emotional reaction in (someone)

sensitive— adj. easily hurt or damaged

sore— adj. causing emotional pain or distress

corner— v. to catch and hold the attention of especially to force an interview

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 87: What Is the 'Straw That Broke the Camel's Back'?

Date: 2022-10-15T21:59:55+00:00 | 695 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

In life, things can get tough. Sometimes, it is good not to let things bother us. Letting things roll off our backs is a good life skill. When things roll off our backs, they are out of our minds. They no longer bother us.

But, let's face it ... sometimes, things do bother us. Sometimes in life, we are pushed to our limit.

So, on today's program, we talk about those times when we have had enough!

We have a couple of expressions that help us describe that state of mind. They involve the word straw.

First, let's define straw. Straw is the dry stem of plants like wheat or other grains. TheHayManager.com says, “Straw is yellow or golden colored and is a byproduct of the grain harvest.”

In other words, it is a waste product of wheat. But it has many uses.

In a garden, you can use straw on top of soil to keep it from drying out. Straw can also keep weeds from growing.

Straw, especially dry straw, is not very nutritious. But because it is hollow, straw makes excellent bedding for animals. Horses, cows, goats, and camels may enjoy a good night's sleep on a straw bed.

Animals not only sleep on straw. Some may also have to carry bales of straw on their backs.

And that brings us to this expression: the straw that broke the camel's back.

Merriam-Webster dictionary says the expression means “the last in a series of bad things that happen to make someone very upset, angry, ...” or some other bad feeling.

The straw that broke the camel's back was one straw too many. With that piece added to the camel's back, the load became too heavy to bear. In other words, it is the last thing to happen that makes you give up on something.

Here is an example: Let's say I have a friend who constantly lets me down. When he says he is going to do something, he never does it. And he always promises next time will be different.

Well, one day I told him I was going out of town for two days and needed someone to feed my cat. He offered to help. I was not so sure. But he promised that he would take care of my cat Meepers. I believed him and left my cat in his care. Well, guess what? He forgot to feed her! She went two whole days without food! Luckily, Meepers is a very fat cat. But still, that was unforgivable.

It was the straw that broke the camel's back. I am never trusting him again.

We have a similar straw expression but without the camel.

The last straw is the last thing that pushes you to some sort of limit. You cannot take a situation anymore because of that last straw.

Here's another example: Earlier this year, I joined a local yoga studio. It was very close to my home. So, that was good. But other things about the studio were not. It was very small. So, when I did yoga positions, I would often get hit by other people. That bothered me. Also, the teacher talked too much about modern philosophy during the class. That got on my nerves. But then she raised the cost of her classes. The price almost doubled!

That was the last straw. I decided just to do yoga at home with a YouTube instructor. I save money. And if the instructor talks too much, I can just turn down the sound.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Don't forget to practice using last straw or the straw that broke the camel's back.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

Below is an English in a Minute video showing another example of "last straw."

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by-product— n.a product or result produced in addition to the main product or result

hollow— adj.an unfilled space

bale— n.a large bundle of goods tightly tied for storing or shipping

yoga— n.a system of exercises for gaining bodily or mental control and well-being

studio— n.a place for the study of something

Article 88: 'Bury Your Head in the Sand' to Avoid Difficulty

Date: 2022-10-22T22:00:32+00:00 | 621 words | Source

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Hello! And welcome to Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English!

On this program we dive into words and expressions in the English language. We go beneath the surface of an expression and explain it more fully. We give examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we tell where the expression came from.

Today we talk about avoiding difficult subjects. One way you can do this is to bury your head in the sand.

Burying your head in the sand means that you are avoiding, or trying to avoid, a situation. You do this by pretending that it does not exist.

Some word experts say this expression comes from a common, but mistaken, belief about a large flightless bird. Some believe that ostriches bury their heads in the sand when frightened. The idea is that an ostrich believes that if it cannot see any danger, the danger is not there. Experts say the birds do not really do, or think, this. They do, however, dig a lot in the sand for food but not to avoid danger.

But you can use the expression bury your head in the sand to describe people who refuse to think about unpleasant but important facts. You can use it for those who hide or ignore clear signs of danger. These types of people are all burying their heads in the sand.

The expression means the same if you drop the word “bury” and just say someone has their head in the sand.

The expression can also be used as an adjective. A head-in-the-sand approach, attitude, opinion, or method refuses to recognize a problem. And they will probably not be very effective. For example, the teacher had a head-in-the-sand idea of her students. She did not see that they were not understanding her classes.

Organizations can be described as head-in-the-sand — so can people.

Now, let's hear two friends use the expression to bury your head in the sand.

A: The storm clouds are starting to move in. We should get going. Have you packed your emergency bag?

B: No. I'm not leaving.

A: What? What do you mean? There is a class 5 hurricane coming! The whole city is being evacuated!

B: I've been through hurricanes before. I'm going to ride out the storm in my apartment.

A: Look, now is not the time to bury your head in the sand. This is serious! Even if nothing happens to this apartment building, food and water will be hard to find. Electricity will go out.

A: No! It won't! Now get your head out of the sand, pack a bag, and come with me!

And that brings us to the end of this Words and Their Stories! Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

pretend—v. to act as though something were true or is one way when it is not true or is another way

evacuate—v. to leave or be removed from an area because of danger

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 89: Have Your Cake and Eat It Too

Date: 2022-10-29T22:00:28+00:00 | 695 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we use them in short stories.

Today we talk about a popular dessert-- cake.

Cakes are made by baking a mixture of flour, sugar, eggs, and butter. They come in just about any flavor you can imagine – from chocolate, vanilla, and lemon to unusual flavors like cherry, coconut, and pumpkin. And do not forget about the icing. This sweet topping also comes in just about any flavor imaginable.

We often eat cakes to celebrate birthdays, weddings, and other important events. All this talk about cake has brought my attention to a common expression: to have your cake and eat it too.

This expression, or idiom, can be used to describe a couple different situations.

One is where two good things happen at the same time. For example, a friend of mine loves to read so she got a job at a library. Now, she reads all day long and gets paid! Talk about having your cake and

eating it too!

We also use the idiom to describe a situation in which two good things happen at the same time, but they don't usually exist together in the same situation.

Here's an example: My friend just had a baby. She has a good job that pays well. And now she spends more time with her new baby by working from home. We can say that she is having her cake and eating it too!

In both of these examples, we could also use this expression: to have the best of both worlds.

Now, here is another form of our cake idiom. We also commonly use it in the negative form: You can't have your cake and eat it too.

In the negative, it means you cannot have or do two things at the same time that are impossible to have or do at the same time. You must decide which one you want because you can't have both. In other words, you cannot have two conflicting things.

For example, let's say your friend is complaining about the amount of taxes he pays. But at the same time, he complains about the lack of services the city provides. You could say to him, "Look, you can't have your cake and eat it too. Better services cost money."

You could also say, you can't have the best of both worlds. Another similar expression is: you can't have it both ways.

You can't have your cake and eat it too also means we should not try to have more than is reasonable. In other words, you can't possess the cake and eat it at the same time. Once the cake is eaten, it is gone.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

If you want to get caught up on world events and practice your English, you can come to VOA Learning English. Here, you have the best of both worlds. You can have your cake and eat it too!

Until next time. I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

dessert— n. a usually sweet course or dish (as of pastry or ice cream) usually served at the end of a meal

bake— v. to cook by dry heat especially in an oven

flavor— n. the quality of something that affects the sense of taste

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 90: How Dirty Is 'Greasing Someone's Palm'?

Date: 2022-11-05T21:59:00+00:00 | 457 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage.

Today we talk about something that sounds dirty because it is –to grease someone’s palm.

When we grease someone’s palm, we give them money, or something else valuable, to get what we want. Simply put, it is an act of bribery. For example, if someone greases a government official's palm, the person secretly gives money to the official in order to get something they want.

You may also hear this expression used with the word *oil* instead of grease.

Grease and oil help some machines work smoothly. Grease and oil are both black, slippery materials. They prevent friction when pieces of machinery touch or rub together.

You could argue that bribing people to get what you want works the same way. It makes a process work better – at least for the person doing the greasing.

Now, sometimes when we grease someone’s palm, it is not as serious as bribery.

If you have ever secretly put money into someone’s hand or palm for the purpose of getting a favor from them ... you have greased their palm. But don’t worry. Palm-greasing is not always illegal. Sometimes it just simplifies a process or helps avoid a long wait. Other times it gives you access that may be denied to others.

For example, at a restaurant you could give someone money to get a better table. You could also give money to a tour guide to see areas closed to others.

I once had a friend who would often grease her little brother’s palm when her boyfriend visited. This little bit of palm-greasing guaranteed that she and her boyfriend would have some privacy. Her little brother kept his word, and her parents never knew about the boyfriend’s visits.

These examples of palm-greasing may be secret but they are not illegal. They simply make something happen more quickly or easily.

And that brings us to the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English.

oil— n.any of numerous greasy flammable usually liquid substances from plant, animal, or mineral sources that do not dissolve in water and are used especially as lubricants, fuels, and food

grease— n.oily matter

palm— n.the underside of the hand between the fingers and the wrist

slippery— adj.having a surface smooth enough to cause one to slide or lose one's hold

friction— n.the force that resists motion between bodies in contact

favor— n.an act of kindness

access— n.permission or power to enter, approach, or make use of

tour guide— n.a person who takes people on trips through an area and explains the interesting details about it

Article 91: 'To Have a Monkey on Your Back' Is No Laughing Matter

Date: 2022-11-12T22:00:33+00:00 | 445 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about an expression, or idiom, involving an animal – a monkey to be exact.

Monkeys are intelligent animals, and they often do funny things. So, the English language has some monkey expressions that describe a fun situation.

For example, to monkey around means to do things that are not useful or serious. And if something is more fun than a barrel of monkeys, it is very fun!

But what if you had to carry a monkey around with you every minute of every day ... on your back? That may not be so fun.

And that brings us to today's expression – to have a monkey on your back.

If you have a monkey on your back, you have a problem that cannot be easily solved. And you possibly have had that problem for a long time.

To have a monkey on your back can also mean to carry a great emotional weight. This weight comes from a bad decision or perhaps a feeling that you have done something wrong.

But the expression is used in more situations than that.

It is often used to describe a serious problem, worry, or concern that makes life difficult or unpleasant. Sometimes we use this idiom to describe a situation that is not our fault. It could be a hardship or condition from which we suffer.

Here are some examples.

A man grew up in extreme poverty. For a time, it was a monkey on his back. But getting a good education was the first step to getting the monkey off his back.

If a woman has a gambling, alcohol, or drug addiction, we could say she has a monkey on her back. It could last for many years or even a lifetime. However, if she could solve or end the problem, we could say she finally got the monkey off her back!

There is another expression that also means having a monkey on your back.

That expression is a millstone around someone's neck.

A millstone is a very large, heavy stone used for grinding things such as grain or corn. It crushes things easily. So, we also use the word millstone to describe a serious responsibility, problem, or concern.

For example, student debt is a millstone for many young people. We could also say the debt is a millstone around their necks or a monkey on their backs.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

barrel-n. a round bulging container that is longer than it is wide and has flat ends

fault-n. a wrongful act

addiction-n. a strong inclination to do, use, or indulge in something repeatedly

Article 92: Scrabble Dictionary Adds 500 New Words

Date: 2022-11-18T21:55:00+00:00 | 618 words | Source

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Scrabble is a popular word game in which players put letters of the alphabet together to form words. It helps when a player remembers unusual words to use in the game.

This month, the game is about to get more interesting with 500 new words and variations added to The Official Scrabble Players Dictionary.

Some of the new words include stan, sitch, convo, zedonk, dox, and faux hawk. They will be a part of the more than 100,000 words of two to eight letters in the dictionary.

The book was last brought up to date in 2018 through a longstanding partnership between Hasbro, the maker of Scrabble, and the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

Peter Sokolowski is Merriam-Webster's editor at large. He said the editors look at the often-updated online database at Merriam-Webster.com to expand the Scrabble dictionary.

But Scrabble players only look for eight-letter words that help them clear their racks for 50 extra points. Sokolowski said the new word *fauxhawk* has the highest possible points for a new word.

Fauxhawk is a haircut similar to a Mohawk. *Embiggen*, a verb meaning to increase in size, is among the unexpected. For example, “I really need to *embiggen* that Scrabble dictionary.”

Other eight-letter words include *hogsbane*, more commonly known as giant hogweed, and *pranayam*, a breathing technique in yoga.

The new words include shorter versions of other words like *guacamole*. And there are more variations in the use of nouns as verbs, like *adulted* and *adulting*.

Sokolowski told the Associated Press, “We also turned verb into a verb so you can play *verbed* and *verbing*.”

Compound words are words created by combining two or more words. In the new dictionary, there are *deadname*, *pageview*, *babymoon*, and *subtweet*. So are words with “un,” such as *unfollow* and *unsubscribe*. They may sound familiar, but they were never in Scrabble’s official dictionary.

The new dictionary includes at least one old-sounding word that simply was forgotten for years: *yeehaw*.

“*Yeehaw* is like so many of the older, informal terms. They were more spoken than written, and the gold standard for dictionary editing was always written evidence. So a term like *yeehaw*, which we all know from our childhood and in movies and TV, was something you heard. You didn’t read it that often,” Sokolowski said.

The editors have also added many new words related to food. They include *iftar*, *horchata*, *kabocha*, *mofongo*, *zoodle*, *wagyu*, and *queso*.

Scrabble players, however, only care about scoring more points with the words than their meaning.

But if you want to know: *Iftar* is a meal taken by Muslims at sundown to break the daily fast during the holiday season of Ramadan. *Mofongo* is a traditional food from Puerto Rico. *Horchata* is a sweet drink and *kabocha* is a winter squash.

For the rest, you will have to look them up yourself.

In the last year or two, Scrabble has also removed more than 200 offensive words. They may, however, still be present in older Scrabble dictionaries.

Sokolowski would not say what all the 500 new words were. He said the players should hunt them down on their own. And he added, “You’ve got some fun new words.”

So which new word is his favorite? “I like *eggcorn*,” Sokolowski said, “because it’s a word about words.”

The dictionary says *eggcorn* is a word or phrase that sounds like and is mistakenly used for another word.

I'm Gregory Stachel.

Leanne Italie reported this story for The Associated Press. Gregory Stachel adapted it for VOA Learning English.

variation—n. feeling or showing the effect of too much work, use, or effort

informal—adj. the state of being poor

standard—n. a level of quality or achievement that is considered acceptable or desirable

What do you think of word games like Scrabble?

We want to hear from you. We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

Article 93: Have You Felt the 'Walls Are Closing in on You'?

Date: 2022-11-19T21:59:19+00:00 | 582 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give you examples and notes on usage.

Today we go inside a building and talk about a feature of every building – walls.

Walls protect us from the outside world. They can help us stay safe and give us comfort.

But what if we are inside a room too long? Those same walls can start to feel like a prison. We can feel trapped by them. When that happens, we can say the walls are closing in on us.

This means you are feeling confined, or stuck, in an area.

For example, after a year of living with the COVID-19 pandemic, I felt like the walls of my house were closing in on me. When that feeling came over me, I knew I needed to go outside for a walk!

When you feel trapped or confined indoors, a walk outside usually helps. Not only are you in the fresh air, but you are also looking at different things. A change of scenery can help when you feel like the walls are closing in.

Sometimes the “walls” in this idiom are not actual walls in a building. Instead, they are walls in our minds or in a certain situation. We can use the expression the walls are closing in when we are sick and tired of something.

For example, if you are unable to make advances in your job, you could feel like the walls have closed in on your career. You may feel like you don't have the chance to advance or try new things.

It can feel like the “walls” are closing in on a relationship too. When people find themselves in very restricted relationships with someone who is trying to control them, it may feel like the walls are closing in on them.

In these cases, a change of scenery is not found outside in the woods. The change of scenery is a new job or a new relationship.

When the walls feel like they are closing in, we can also use another word to describe what we are feeling: claustrophobic.

Claustrophobia is defined as an abnormal fear of being in closed or confined spaces. Sometimes, we use the term “claustrophobic” to mean we feel uneasy by a situation that is limiting or restricting. This feeling of unease could be from physical or non-physical reasons. A job and a relationship can also feel claustrophobic.

A: Hey, what happened to Chad? I haven’t seen him around DC lately.

B: During the pandemic, he moved out west...somewhere in the desert.

A: The desert? What made him do that!?

B: He said he felt too claustrophobic in the city and was sick and tired of being around so many people. He needed more space and open skies!

A: I can understand that. Sometimes the walls of my apartment feel like they are closing in on me. But moving to the desert is a pretty extreme decision.

B: He’ll be back. He texted me last night complaining that it takes him 30 minutes to drive to the nearest store.

A: Well ... he wanted more space. Now he’s got it!

And that brings us to the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

feature— n.a part or detail that stands out

comfort— n.to give strength and hope to

confined— adj.limited to a particular location

scenery— n.a view or landscape resembling a beautiful painting

Article 94: Cornucopia: So Much of a Good Thing!

Date: 2022-11-26T21:59:52+00:00 | 439 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage.

Today we talk about a word connected to Thanksgiving.

One of the traditional images of Thanksgiving is something called a cornucopia. This is a container shaped like a goat's horn. And it is overflowing with many kinds of fruits and vegetables, such as gourds, ears of corn, apples, and grapes. So, sometimes we call it a "horn of plenty."

Plenty means to have a large amount of something. For example, if you live in the land of plenty, you live in an area with lots of resources -- natural as well as social and financial.

But let's get back to the word cornucopia. This word describes a large amount or supply of something.

For example, the holiday table held a cornucopia of food and drink. Anything you could possibly want for dinner was available.

While the image of a cornucopia involves food, we use it for an abundance of good things. If something is abundant, there is plenty of it.

Here is another example.

A recent gathering offered a cornucopia of jobs from many industries. Representatives from more than 200 companies were there offering jobs. There was something for everyone!

Sometimes the word cornucopia means there is an inexhaustible supply of something. If you exhaust something you use it all up. So, if something is inexhaustible it seems limitless -- like a bottomless pit.

For example, a library is a cornucopia of knowledge. I could go into a library every day for the rest of my life and learn something new!

These examples have an abundance of good things: food, jobs, and knowledge. We do not use the word cornucopia to describe an abundance of bad things.

Also note, we often add a prepositional phrase to explain what type of cornucopia it is: a cornucopia of food, a cornucopia of jobs, or a cornucopia of knowledge.

Now, let's say that -- for whatever reason -- you are not a fan of the word cornucopia. In the examples with jobs and knowledge, you could easily replace cornucopia with wealth. In the food example, however, I would replace it with abundance or even bounty.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories!

Don't forget to check out other programs at VOA Learning English. Our website is a cornucopia of English learning materials.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

plenty— n.a full supply;a large number or amount

abundance— n.a large quantity

inexhaustible— adj.incapable of being used up

wealth— n.abundant supply : a great amount of money or possessions

bounty— n.something given generously

Article 95: What Is Your Word of the Year?

Date: 2022-11-29T21:55:02+00:00 | 822 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

English language dictionary publishers traditionally announce their words of the year as the year is coming to a close. Sometimes, they choose words based on how many times people look them up. Others select words that have been in the news a lot.

Merriam-Webster dictionary

This week, American dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster announced that it selected “gaslighting” as its word of the year for 2022.

Merriam-Webster defines gaslighting as “the act or practice of grossly misleading someone, especially for one’s own advantage.”

In 2022, lookups for gaslighting on merriam-webster.com increased 1,740 percent over the year before. Peter Sokolowski is Merriam-Webster’s editor at large. He told the Associated Press, “It’s a word that has risen so quickly in the English language, and especially in the last four years, that it actually came as a surprise to me and to many of us.”

Merriam-Webster said English has many ways to say “lies,” including falsehood, untruth, and disinformation. But in this age of misinformation with fake news, deep fakes, and artificial intelligence, the word “gaslighting” has emerged as a word for our time.”

Other lookups on Merriam-Webster included oligarch, following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Omicron, a fast-spreading version of the COVID-19 virus, and Queen Consort, as the wife of Britain’s King Charles, Camilla, is now known.

Cambridge dictionary

Now, if a British English dictionary publisher says it has chosen an American English word as its word of the year, you would likely say someone is gaslighting you.

But that is exactly what happened.

In November, Cambridge Dictionary announced that its word of the year for 2022 is... homer. Cambridge says homer, short for homerun, “is a point scored in baseball when you hit the ball, usually out of the playing field, and are able to run around all the bases at one time to the starting base.”

Cambridge said there were 65,000 searches for the word homer in a single day. It was May 5. That was the day when homer was the winning word on the popular online game Wordle.

The British publisher said many Wordle players outside of the United States had not heard this word before. Some expressed their frustration on social media, but many more turned to Cambridge to find its meaning.

The popularity of Wordle also brought searches for other five-letter words, including caulk, tacit, humor, and bayou.

So, now you know that we are not gaslighting you!

Another publisher, Collins, said 2022 seems to be a year of permanent crisis with the pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the worldwide economic downturn.

So, Collins selected permacrisis as the word of the year for 2022. The dictionary defines the word as “an extended period of instability and insecurity.”

Collins said the year also gave us terms like quiet quitting, which involves doing no more work than necessary, and sportswashing, which people are accusing Qatar and Saudi Arabia are doing with the World Cup and LIV golf.

The editors of the Oxford dictionary said 2022 has been a year defined by re-opening after the pandemic. “However, although we have finally been able to physically reunite and come together again, our world somehow feels more divided than ever.”

Oxford said the use of metaverse increased four times in October as people are debating the future of online activities. The word describes a new level of online experiences for socializing, learning, and playing.

From the war in Ukraine to the legal action between actors Johnny Depp and Amber Heard, people used #IStandWith on social media to express their support. And goblin mode is the idea of rejecting societal expectations in favor of doing whatever one wants to.

So, Oxford decided to leave the selection of word of the year to you.

Until Friday, December 2, you can vote for your favorite word as Oxford’s word of the year 2022. The choices include metaverse, #IStandwith, and goblin mode.

Hai Do wrote this report for VOA Learning English with additional material from the Associated Press.

advantage—n. something that helps a person do better or be more likely to succeed

fake news—n. false or misleading information presented as news

deep fake—n.a media image or picture that has been digitally changed and uses high technology to make something false look real

artificial intelligence—n.the field of computer science that aims to give machines the ability to appear to have human intelligence

frustration—n.the feeling of unhappiness from being unable to do what you want to do

caulk—n.a material that fills cracks and holes that is used to keep out water

tacit—adj. expressed or understood without being stated or spoken

bayou—n. an area of water that is slow moving and has many plants growing in it

We want to hear from you.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Write your comment in the box.

Under the box, you can see four images for social media accounts. They are for Disqus, Facebook, Twitter and Google.

Click on one image and a box appears. Enter the login for your social media account. Or you may create one on the Disqus system. It is the blue circle with “D” on it. It is free.

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

Article 96: ‘Having Skin in the Game’ Is Not as Painful as It Sounds

Date: 2022-12-03T22:00:00+00:00 | 601 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage.

Today we talk about the largest organ of the human body — our skin! As our protective outer layer, our skin can certainly gather many cuts and wounds.

In English, we have many skin expressions. I wrote about some of them in an earlier Words and Their Stories.

In that story, I talk about expressions like thick-skinned people – people who take criticism well. And if you are comfortable in your own skin, you are happy with who you are.

But today we talk about skin expressions that relate to having personal involvement in a certain situation.

If you have skin in the game, you are invested or involved in something directly. You have something at stake. In other words, you risk losing -- or gaining -- something. Usually, it is something financial.

To have skin in the game means you have an active interest in the success of something. If it fails, it affects you in some way. For example, workers who have stock in their company have skin in the game. So, they may work harder to make it successful.

You can also use this expression in the negative form. If you have no skin in the game, you have nothing at stake and nothing to lose. Having no skin in the game means you have no personal investment or risk in some goal, project, or situation. Again, we commonly use this expression when talking about business and finance.

We have another skin expression that is close in meaning.

If something is no skin off your back, it does not affect you. It is of no interest or concern to you.

Let's hear this one used between two friends.

A: Hey, do you think I could borrow your lawn mower this weekend. My grass is getting really long.

B: Of course! You can pick it up anytime.

A: I promise I'll return it Sunday night. I know people are funny about loaning their tools out to others.

B: Not me. Especially my lawn mower. I have two! So, really, it's no skin off my back. Keep it as long as you need it!

You might sometimes hear this expression said this way: it's no skin off my nose. Whether the skin is on your back or nose, the expression means the same thing.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories! Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

comfortable— adj. producing a relaxing feeling especially because of shape or materials:

(at) stake— n. in a position to be lost or won

dating— v. to make a usually romantic social arrangement to meet with: to have a date with

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 97: 'Set in Stone'

Date: 2022-12-10T21:59:43+00:00 | 523 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage.

Some things in life change easily and often. They are fluid. They change and move as fluids do -- easily. When we are planning events or establishing rules and policies, sometimes it is good to keep things fluid or changeable.

But some things are not easily moved or changed. They are fixed or inflexible.

To describe these inflexible things, we can say they are set in stone. Things that are set in stone are very difficult or impossible to change.

We can say that permanent rules, laws, and policies are set in stone. It often takes several difficult actions to change them.

The dates of some events are also set in stone.

For example, wedding take a lot of planning. Some people even start planning for their wedding a year or more ahead of time.

You simply cannot tell friends and family that your wedding will happen sometime in June. You must find a space for the ceremony. You need to invite people and find out how many are coming. You need to decide on food, music, and flowers. And you must have money to pay workers to do different things.

So, setting a wedding date in stone is the best way to make sure the wedding happens smoothly. Setting the date in stone means it cannot change. Or at least, changes would cause problems for people and possibly cost you a lot of money.

We also use this expression with two other verbs: carve and write. So, you can say something is carved in stone or something is written in stone. The meaning stays the same.

On the other hand, if a rule, date, or event could be changed easily, we can say it is penciled in.

If you pencil something in, you are admitting that it is not set in stone. It may change and may be erased. When using this expression, however, you do not need to really use a pencil.

So, when we say something is not carved, set, or written in stone, we mean it can be changed.

For example, many workers were upset by some new office rules. So, the supervisor said, “If they don't work, we can always change them.” In other words, the rules are not carved in stone.

Before we end the program, here is one more example set in stone. The editor used it when he sent back my edited story. He gave some changes but added, “These are just suggestions. They are not set in stone.”

It's good to have an editor with a sense of humor!

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

inflexible— adj. incapable of change

wedding— n. a wedding anniversary or its celebration

carve— v. to cut with care or exactness

erase— v. to rub or scrape out (something, such as written, painted, or engraved letters) : to remove written or drawn marks from

sense of humor— noun phrase: a personality that gives someone the ability to say funny things and see the funny side of things

Article 98: Inside Baseball, Other 'Inside' Expressions

Date: 2022-12-17T22:00:32+00:00 | 719 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we go out to the ballpark ... the baseball park!

We talk about an expression from the sport of baseball but now means so much more.

Inside baseball is something that is known or understood only by a small group of people. Sometimes inside baseball describes a subject that has too many uninteresting details. So, most people do not understand it or even want to understand it.

We commonly use this expression with subjects like politics, science, or finance.

For example, some urban voters are not interested in the inside baseball of constitutional reform. But, they still might support reforms promising good schools, safe neighborhoods, and jobs.

Here is another example. Many people would consider the yearly earnings reports of major companies as inside baseball information. The reports would not be of interest to them. But to investors such reports are important. These insiders need the information.

On its website, Merriam Webster online dictionary explains how this phrase began back in the 1890s.

To score in baseball, a player needs to land on first, second, and third bases before reaching home plate. That is where the player scores. One way to do this is to hit a home run. The player hits the ball so far that the other team cannot get it. Then, the batter and anyone else on a base moves forward all the way to home. That big hit will always please the crowd!

But most hits are not home runs. Most batters hit balls inside the field and move around the bases as other batters take their turns hitting.

This can include also very short hits called bunts, where the bat touches the ball lightly to keep it in field. There are also stolen bases -- when runners take a next base usually as the other team is pitching to a batter.

These are part of a long list of skills, tools, and possible plays used to play competitive baseball. This kind of play is called inside baseball. It is not an obvious type of scoring, especially when compared to the dramatic home run.

“Inside” is also featured in other popular terms in American English.

An inside joke, for example, is a joke that only a few people understand. Within inside jokes, we often say this to those who don’t understand: “You had to be there.”

Insider knowledge is also things understood by a special few. Let’s say you want to work at a company and you have insider knowledge about it. Maybe you know people who work there or their product line. This insider knowledge may give you an advantage over others.

An inside track is a good position in a situation. It comes from racers on a circular track. The runners on the inside may have an advantage. Here’s how to use it: She seems to have an inside track at the university. She knows everyone!

And finally, an inside job is something done with the help of someone inside an organization. The term, however, is usually used in connection with a crime. If police think a bank robbery was an inside job, for example, they would probably question all who work at the bank.

And that’s all the time we have this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

bunt— n./v. to push or tap (a baseball) lightly with a bat without swinging

infield— n. the area of a baseball field enclosed by the three bases and home plate

obvious— adj. easily discovered, seen, or understood

dramatic— adj. striking in appearance or effect

advantage— n. superiority of position or condition

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 99: Expressions for Celebrating the Holidays

Date: 2022-12-24T22:01:48+00:00 | 790 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

December is a special month when many people celebrate holidays around the world.

There is the Winter Solstice celebration called Dongzhi in China and Toji in Japan. Jewish people celebrate eight days of Hanukkah. And African American culture has seven days of Kwanzaa that ends on New Year's Day.

In many places around the world, today is a holiday – Christmas!

So, we will talk about holiday expressions that you can use in American English.

Let's start with the holiday spirit.

If you are in the holiday spirit, you feel good about holidays and are looking forward to them. Some people get into the holiday spirit weeks, even months before the actual holiday.

However, for some people, the holiday season can be a sad time. Or some people just do not like holidays. If you are not really into holidays, for whatever reason, you can say, “I'm not really in the holiday spirit.”

But let's say you love holidays and are in the holiday spirit. If you get invited to some special holiday events, you can say you'll be there with bells on. For example, if I invite you to a holiday party or dinner, you can say, “Thanks! I'll be there with bells on!”

This doesn't mean that you will actually wear bells. It means you are very excited to attend the event. However, if you want to wear bells... well, you can do that too!

The expression I'll be there with bells on does not have to be used just for a holiday party. For example, let's say you are invited to a birthday party, you can also say you'll be there with bells on.

Now for better or worse, gift-giving is a big part of many holidays. So, let's talk about some expressions that come from gift-giving.

Sometimes the best things in life are very small and simple. For those things you can say, good things come in small packages.

This expression means you should not judge a gift, or anything, based on its size. Many smaller items may be of high quality or value.

For Christmas in the United States, many people put gifts under the Christmas tree. But some people also have stockings for small, less costly gifts and sweets. They stuff these stockings with them. So, the gifts are called stocking stuffers!

Many workplaces celebrate the holidays with gift-giving. But who has the money to buy gifts for all their coworkers? Not many.

That is why we use Secret Santa for gift-giving with a large group. Everyone in the group picks the name of one other person. That is the person you buy a gift for, and you become their Secret Santa.

It is also common for large families or large friend groups to have a Secret Santa. It saves everyone money and it is a lot of fun.

Many children who celebrate Christmas are warned that Santa is watching them throughout the year. If they are good, they go on the nice list. If they are bad they go on the naughty list.

Naughty means your behavior is a little bad. And parents tell children that those on the naughty list will not get any gifts or they will get something they don't want, like a lump of coal in their stockings.

So, if you are on Santa's naughty list, do not expect to get anything nice under the tree. You will just get a lump of coal in your stocking.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next year ... I'm Anna Matteo!

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

Winter Solstice— n. the point in the sky occupied by the sun on or about December 22d when winter begins in the northern hemisphere; the December solstice

bell— n. a hollow usually cup-shaped metallic device that makes a ringing sound when struck

package— n. a small or medium-sized pack : a covering wrapper or container

stocking— n. a usually knit close-fitting covering for the foot and leg

stuff— v. to fill by packing things in

lump— n. a piece or mass of indefinite size and shape

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 100: Dreamy Expressions

Date: 2023-01-07T21:59:06+00:00 | 632 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language.

If you love learning English expressions and want to speak like a native English speaker, this might just be your dream show. But I would not dream of saying it is the only show. That would be shamelessly overconfident and incorrect.

When we say, “I wouldn’t dream of doing or saying something,” that just means it is something we would never do or say.

When learning a language, it is helpful to study many different examples. We need to know how certain words and phrases are used. Hearing an example is a great way to learn its correct usage. This method works like a dream. In other words, it works really well.

What other methods could we say work like a dream? I would say using the expression often in a conversation also works really well ... like a dream.

If you have not already guessed the subject of today’s show, it is exploring expressions using the word “dream.”

Let’s look at an earlier example: dream show. If we put “dream” in front of any word, it makes that word the best choice for you. For example, your dream job has everything you could want in a job. Your dream date would include all your favorite things – such as a nice meal or funny movie. And your dream vacation would have things you love to do and see.

For example, I have a friend who loves birds. So, going somewhere with many different types of birds would be her dream vacation.

All of us have dreams that are pretty great. But some things are so amazing, they are beyond our ability to even dream about. In such cases, we can say those things are beyond our wildest dreams.

We often use this expression when describing a great place or situation. Once I visited Italy and that trip was beyond my wildest dreams.

We also use it when we want someone to do something or go somewhere. Let's go back to my friend who loves birds. Let's say I want her to go on a trip to the rainforest with me. But she is not sure. I can say, "In the rainforest, you will see birds beyond your wildest dreams!" Then, after a day of birdwatching in the rainforest, she might say, "Even in my wildest dreams, I could not have imagined such amazing birds!"

A vacation like that is what dreams are made of. When something fulfills your every wish and desire it is almost like a dream. That is when we say what dreams are made of. This expression simply means that something is perfect for someone.

You can also say it is the stuff of dreams. For example, if you love writing and traveling, getting a job as a travel writer would be the stuff dreams are made of. It would be a dream come true! Wouldn't it be nice if all our dreams could come true?

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

shame— n.a painful emotion caused by having done something wrong or improper: shamelessly—
adv.done without feeling you've done something wrong or improper

overconfident— adj.overly sure of yourself and your abilities

conversation— n.oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas

amazing— adj.causing great wonder or surprise

stuff— n.supplies or equipment that people need or use

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

Article 101: Things Are Serious If You 'Cross the Rubicon'

Date: 2023-01-14T21:59:00+00:00 | 511 words | [Source](#)

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage. Sometimes we tell about their origin story – where they come from. But origins are often a lot of guesswork. We often don't know how some expressions began.

That is not the case with today's expression – to cross the Rubicon.

But before we talk about its origin, let's talk about its meaning.

To cross the Rubicon means to make a decision of permanence. It cannot be changed. It is irreversible – a done deal – no cancellations!

Someone who has crossed the Rubicon has reached a point where they cannot change a course of action. In other words, there is no going back.

This expression comes from a story about Julius Caesar. Rubicon is the name of the river he crossed with his army. Experts say this started a civil war in Rome in 49 BCE.

When our enemies draw a line in the sand and we pass over that line, we could also say we have crossed the Rubicon.

Therefore, the result or consequence of the decision or action is severe. It has weight. If I cross the Rubicon, I have made a fateful and final decision.

Therefore, we don't use this expression for low-stake situations – times when nothing is at stake. If nothing is at stake, nothing important is at risk. For those lighter times, we can say, that ship has sailed or that train has left the station.

So, save cross the Rubicon for a heavy, meaningful decision or action.

Here are two friends using the expression.

A: Did you hear about Angela and Dimitry? They broke up.

B: What?? They seemed like such a great couple. What happened?

A: Well, Angela accepted a dream job out in Alaska. She's going to be researching polar bears.

B: That sounds great!

A: It is great. For her. The problem is ... she didn't tell Dimitry. He found out from some guy who works at their favorite coffee shop.

B: Oh, that's not good.

A: Yeah. Dimitry said he can forgive a lot but not this. She crossed the Rubicon when she decided to move without telling him first.

B: I like Angela. But Dimitry has a point.

And that brings us to the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

origin— n.a rising, beginning, or coming from a source

irreversible— adj.not capable of going back or backward

consequence— n.something produced by a cause or necessarily following from a set of conditions

fateful— adj.having serious results

stakes— n.something that is at risk for gain or loss

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 102: Raise a Red Flag

Date: 2023-01-21T22:00:38+00:00 | 442 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Red is nature's color of warning. Animals and plants with bright red colors are sometimes dangerous for other animals to eat.

Many Western countries also use red color for warnings. Red lights at train and road crossings warn drivers to stop. Red, as well as yellow, road signs tell people to be careful in dangerous areas.

And if you see a red flag on an ocean beach, that means the water is too dangerous for swimming.

That brings us to today's expression: a red flag.

If we say something is a red flag, that means we think it will likely cause problems or lead to danger. Let's hear how this expression is used in conversation:

A: Did you know that Mary has a new boyfriend?

B: Yes, but I'm kind of surprised at her choice.

B: Well, he doesn't have a job, for one thing. And he was dismissed from his last two jobs.

A: Ooo. That seems like a red flag.

B: It is a red flag, if you ask me!

In this example, the speakers think the boyfriend's work experience should be a warning to Mary.

We can also say something is a bad sign to mean the same thing as a red flag.

Many states in the United States have laws that try to prevent dangerous people from having guns. These laws are commonly called red flag laws.

When someone expresses concern or a warning over something, we say the person raises a red flag. For example, if people worry that a leader is making bad decisions, they might say those decisions are raising red flags.

As you can see, we use the expression red flag in many situations.

We use it mainly to warn about other people's behavior rather than natural dangers.

Unless you are at the beach. In that case, a red flag means you should stay out of the water!

See if you can find the use of raise a red flag in this VOA Learning English article about airport security.

You can also hear more examples of red flag in this English in a Minute video from VOA Learning English.

Keep learning new expressions with Words and Their Stories!

Until next time, I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this story for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

Article 103: First Dibs

Date: 2023-01-28T21:59:46+00:00 | 494 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

See if you can guess the meaning of first dibs from the following exchange:

A: "Hi, I was calling about the house for rent, and I was wondering if it's still available."

B: "Yes, well, it is empty, at the moment—but I can't rent it out yet. My nephew is interested, and he's got first dibs on it, so I'm waiting to hear from him."

A: "Oh, OK—do you know how long it'll be until he decides?"

B: "Um, you know, it could be a month. I'm not really sure."

Here, the owner is giving his nephew a chance to rent the house before anyone else can. Having first dibs on something means having the right to get something before anyone else.

We can have first dibs on one thing or on one or more things from a collection of objects. For example, you can say: “She has first dibs on the World Cup tickets.”

In both examples, note that we use the preposition *on* before a noun.

American dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster says the expression *first dibs* likely comes from a children’s game called *dibstones* played in 17th-century Britain. Children would try to catch small objects like pebbles *on* the backs of their hands. The objects were called *dibstones* or *dibs*.

By the early 1900s, *get first dibs* was in common use in American English.

Here are the verbs we often use with the expression:

You can *have* first dibs. You can *get* first dibs. Someone can *give* you first dibs, or you can *give* first dibs to others. And when you *call* first dibs, that means you claim possession even if nobody said you could choose first.

If you *call* first dibs, you should only do so if you think other people probably do not want, or care about, the thing you are claiming. Otherwise, people might view you as *selfish* or not respectful of the rights of others, and that could create conflict.

Can you think of something you’d like to *have* first dibs on? You can let us know in the comments section.

Until next time, I’m Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

guess-v. to try to answer a question correctly but without having the necessary knowledge to know if the answer is correct

rent-v. to pay a fee for the temporary use of something, such as a car, apartment, or piece of equipment

nephew-n. the son of one’s brother or sister

ticket-n. a small card, piece of paper, or other document which allows entry to an event such as a concert, athletic contest, and the like

pebble-n. a small stone about one to two centimeters in diameter

selfish-adj. characterized by not sharing with others and being concerned only for oneself

We want to hear from you. Do you have any similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 104: Footloose and Fancy-free

Date: 2023-02-04T22:00:28+00:00 | 529 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

English has many idioms to express close connections. If two people are extremely close and do everything together, we say they are joined at the hip. If two people are very similar to each other, we say they are two peas in a pod. And when two people marry, we say they tied the knot.

If you are tied down, that means there are important things you must do, and those things prevent you from doing something else. For example, you can be tied down by your employment or some other tasks. You can be tied down for an afternoon, a week, a month, or for years, depending on the situation.

For example, you might say, "I'm going to be tied down here for the next few hours." But you might also say, "He didn't get married because he didn't want to get tied down." In this second example, tied down refers to a long period of time.

But what about those people who haven't tied the knot and are not tied down? What expression can we use to describe them?

The following exchange gives the answer:

A: I think Michael would be a great match for Ellen.

B: I think he would too, but I don't think he's ready. Maybe in a few years.

A: You think he's too young?

B: Not really, it's just that he doesn't want to be tied down. He wants to travel and be, you know, footloose and fancy-free.

A: Sounds kind of nice, actually!

Footloose and fancy-free means that you do not have serious commitments. It expresses freedom and being without serious worries. Some people may connect the expression with young people who do not yet have serious responsibilities in their lives.

American dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster says the first known use of fancy-free dates to 1590 and first meant being free from romantic attachment. The first known use of footloose came in 1650. In the 1800s, footloose and fancy-free were combined into one expression in American English.

Footloose and fancy-free is the title of numerous songs, and Footloose was a popular American musical film released in 1984. The movie is about a teenager who moves to a small town where dancing is not permitted. But the teenager wants to dance and set his feet free.

Whether you're feeling tied down or footloose and fancy-free, that's it for this week's Words and Their Stories.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

idiom—n. an expression that has a meaning that is different than the individual words might suggest

hip—n. the sides of the body between the legs and the waist or the bone that is in that place

pea—n. a round, green seed that is a common food

pod—n. a part of a plant that contains seeds, especially peas

task—n. a job that is given to someone and that needs to be done

commitment—n. something that a person has a responsibility to do

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 105: Out of the Frying Pan and Into the Fire

Date: 2023-02-18T22:00:10+00:00 | 632 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore idioms, or expressions, in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage. And, sometimes we even use them in short stories.

Today we talk about bad situations. Sometimes we think a situation is very bad. We cannot imagine that it can get any worse. But then it does.

We have an expression for just that situation —out of the frying pan and into the fire.

Imagine we are camping. The area is near a small river. So, for dinner, we decide to go fishing. Fish cooked over a campfire is a tasty meal indeed. We start the fire. We add butter and onions to the frying pan. When it heats up, we add the fish.

In the frying pan, the fish is in a very bad situation. It flips violently back and forth. It tries to get out of the hot frying pan. Finally, the fish flips out of the frying pan but lands in the fire.

The idiom out of the frying pan and into the fire means you leave a bad situation purposefully only to find yourself in a much worse situation. You thought you were improving it, but the opposite happened.

Sometimes, this saying describes a choice between two equally difficult options.

Here is another example. Let's say your friend complains about his job all the time. He says his commute to the office is too long and the pay is too low. You remind him that he gets great benefits,

and he has the freedom to set his own hours. You tell him that no job is perfect. But he does not listen. He leaves his job and starts another one. When you talk to him a month later, this is how the conversation might go.

A: Hey, how is the new job going?

B: To be honest ... not so good.

A: Oh no! What's wrong?

B: Well, I used to set my own hours. My new job has a strict 9-to-5 policy.

A: Being able to set your own hours is a big plus.

B: And my take-home pay might be more. But I have to pay so much more for health insurance. And I have to pay for a parking space.

A: Sounds like you've jumped out of the frying pan and into the fire.

B: Please don't remind me.

And here is a final note on usage. If the friend in this conversation simply said, "Sounds like you just jumped out of the frying pan," we would know they mean this expression.

Some word experts say this phrase comes from very early Greek poetry. Those early poets used the expression to describe the process of trying to escape smoke and getting burned by the flames instead.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Do you have a question about an idiom or expression? Send us an email to voalearningenglish.com and let us know!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

flip— v. to toss so as to cause to turn over in the air

option— n. something that may be chosen

commute— n. the distance covered from one place to another

strict— adj. severe in discipline

take-home pay— adj. income remaining from salary or wages after deductions (as for income-tax withholding)

remind— v. to put in mind of something; cause to remember

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 106: Have You 'Ruffled Any Feathers' Recently?

Date: 2023-02-25T22:00:12+00:00 | 648 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Birds bring so many wonderful things to our lives. They have beautiful songs for our ears and beautiful feathers for our eyes.

Birds also add to our English expressions. You may have heard the early bird catches the worm. This saying means the person who arrives first is most likely to get what they want.

And what about birds of a feather flock together? That means people with the same interests are often together.

Well, today we talk about a bird expression that describes being upset, or bothering someone. When we upset others, we have ruffled their feathers.

For example, if I am often late meeting a friend, that could ruffle her feathers. It could bother her. And if someone lies to me, that will ruffle my feathers.

Besides meaning to bother or upset people, this expression has another meaning. It also means that your action shakes things up. We use it to describe an action that changes the status quo, or the usual way of doing things.

Sometimes, we upset more than just one person. In that case, we can say we ruffled a few feathers. For example, if a new work policy is not popular with workers, it will probably ruffle a few, or more than a few, feathers.

In English, we have quite a few expressions that mean something similar. To drive someone up the wall, to get under someone's skin, and to get on someone's nerves all mean to bother someone.

However, we do not use those expressions to describe changing the usual way of doing things. So, in that sense, ruffling some feathers is different.

Word experts say that the use of this expression began in the mid-1800s. It comes from the fact that, sometimes, birds ruffle their feathers when they are upset. But birds also ruffle their feathers at other times, for example to keep warm or during mating season.

Now, let's hear two friends use the expression.

A: The meeting for our Ukulele Club is going to start in 20 minutes.

B: I brought drinks and some food.

A: And I brought copies of our new rules!

B: Um ... I don't think you should hand those out.

B: Well, some members are NOT going to like them.

A: What do you mean?

B: I mean -- these new rules are going to ruffle some feathers.

A: No way! Whose feathers are going to be ruffled?

B: Well, Marjorie, for one. Your first new rule is no dogs are permitted during practice. She doesn't go anywhere without her little dog BinkyBoo.

A: Well, maybe we can change that one.

B: And the dress requirement? Do you really think people want to dress incostumefor performances?

A: It'll make it more fun for theaudience.

B: Actually, every one of the new rules is going to ruffle someone's feathers.

A: Okay, I get it. I'll throw them away. The last thing I want to be accused of is being a feather-ruffler.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

flock- v.to gather or move in a large group :– n.a group of animals (such as birds or sheep) assembled or herded together

status quo– n.the existing state of affairs

costume– n.special or fancy dress (as for wear on the stage or at a masquerade party)

audience– n.a group that listens or watches (as at a play or concert)

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 107: Expressions for a Full Meal

Date: 2023-03-04T22:00:33+00:00 | 738 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

For today's program, we invite you to share a meal with us – well, expressions about a meal, that is.

Like most languages, English is filled with food expressions. Today we will start with two appetizers, continue with the main dish, and finish with dessert.

In other words, we will take you from soup to nuts – or from the beginning to the end. With many meals, soup comes first and nuts come last. So, if you do something from soup to nuts you do everything from the beginning to the end.

An appetizer is the first part of a meal. Our first appetizer today is alphabet soup.

When you have a collection of letters of the alphabet that stand for several words, we can call it alphabet soup. These can be the letters that show a job, such as COO or Chief Operating Officer. They could be letters that show someone's education, like an MBA for a Master of Business Administration and a Ph.D. for a Doctor of Philosophy.

Let's say someone hands you their business card. After their name are the letters MBA, Ph.D., and COO. You can say, "Wow, that is quite the alphabet soup after your name. But what is it you do exactly?"

Now, let's move on to the next appetizer – salad.

A salad usually has some kind of vegetables mixed with cheese, egg, meat, nuts, or, sometimes, fruit. Well, when we have a mixture of words or phrases that are difficult to understand, we can call it a word salad.

Word experts say that in the past, word salad described difficult-to-understand spoken language from people with illnesses. However, in recent years, the expression word salad has come to simply mean difficult-to-understand language.

Now, let's move on to the main dish – in this case, a sandwich. You can make a sandwich from anything – meat, cheese, vegetables, tofu, fish, shrimp, or chicken. Just put them between two pieces of bread and you have a sandwich.

You can even make a sandwich from ... criticism!

A criticism sandwich is a way to soften the delivery of bad news. You put the criticism between two nice things – such as praise or approval.

So, your performance in last week's sales meeting was great! Thanks for your help. But I'll need you to clean up the report. I saw a few things wrong with the numbers. But yeah, the client really loved your presentation!

That could also be called a feedback sandwich. But it is made the same way!

If you love sweets, you will love dessert.

Now, I could use easy as pie or a piece of cake as examples. Both describe something very easy to do or finish. But I am going to use my favorite dessert – cookies!

Some cookies are formed by hand and their shapes can be very different from one another. However, some people use a device called a cookie cutter when making cookies. With a cookie cutter, every cookie is the same shape with little difference.

And that gives us the expression cookie-cutter. It describes something similar to many other things. There is nothing special, extraordinary, or different about things that are cookie-cutter.

For example, houses in my neighborhood were made by the same builders. They are all the same size and shape. In other words, the houses in my neighborhood are cookie-cutter houses.

Thanks for joining me for this lunchtime version of Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

appetizer— n.a food or drink usually served before a meal to make one hungrier

dish— n.food prepared in a particular way

dessert— n.a usually sweet course or dish (as of pastry or ice cream) usually served at the end of a meal

business card— n.a small card bearing information (such as name and address) about a business or business representative

salad— n.raw greens (such as lettuce) often combined with other vegetables and toppings and served especially with dressing

delivery— n.the act of handing over

lunchtime— n.the time at which lunch is usually eaten

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 108: Ups and Downs, Highs and Lows

Date: 2023-03-11T22:00:47+00:00 | 685 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Up and down. High and low. These short words describe more than just directions. They also connect to our feelings and experiences. In this episode of Words and Their Stories, we'll start down low and end up high.

Many cultures around the world connect the words “low” or “down” with something negative. This is because our minds can easily connect low places, like the floor or the ground, with dirt.

So, when someone asks, “How low can you go?” they are expressing their opinion that another person’s behavior is bad in a moral or ethical sense.

If you are down and out, that means you are poor, without enough money for the things you need.

And if you are down in the dumps, that means you feel unhappy or depressed.

Next, let’s look at two “down” expressions that relate to either getting or keeping information. They sound similar but have different meanings. The following exchange uses one of these expressions:

A: So, did Maria tell you anything?

B: She did! But keep this on the down-low—she’s going to quit her job next month.

A: Oh my gosh! Wow—that is big news.

B: I know, but she doesn’t want anyone else to know.

A: No worries. I’ll keep it on the DL.

To keep something on the down-low means to keep information secret. Speakers often say the shortened form, “on the DL,” when using the expression.

On the other hand, if you want the low-down on a situation, that means you want to get the information. For example:

A: Did Jane give you the low-down on the budget?

B: Yeah. She said they can’t afford to do a summer project this year.

So, getting the low-down means you are getting information. Keeping it on the down-low means you are keeping information away from people.

Now, let’s move up to a few expressions with “high.”

Imagine you are driving in an area with a lot of traffic. You see a car waiting to turn onto your street, so you stop and let that car make the turn. But this makes the car behind you slow down. The driver of this car now honks the horn for a long time, leans out the car window, and shouts at you.

At this point, you have a choice. You can also shout in return, or you can take the high road and not answer. To take the high road means to behave in a way that is morally correct, even when other people around you are not behaving well.

Our next expression relates to time. Sometimes there are things that people should do, but they wait longer than necessary to do them. By waiting, they sometimes create problems or make things worse.

In these situations, we can use the phrase “it’s high time” to say that people have delayed doing something for too long.

For example, someone can say, “It’s high time you cleaned up that apartment. It is so dirty!”

Next, we look at the word *highfalutin*. If you say someone is *highfalutin*, that means you think the person is overly *fancy* or *pompous*. *Highfalutin* is usually a negative way of referring to ways of speaking and behaving.

According to Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of American English, the first known use of this word was in 1839 in the United States.

Finally, you can end on a high note by connecting to another Words and Their Stories program. There, you can learn more expressions about highs and lows.

Then, give yourself a high-five for reading and listening to this week’s Words and Their Stories.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

negative—adj. not good; the opposite of positive

honk—v. to make a loud sound often with the horn of a car

fancy—adj. uncommon, costly, or fashionable

pompous—adj. behaving in a way that appears to show a person thinks they are better than others

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 109: Par for the Course

Date: 2023-03-18T22:00:12+00:00 | 770 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

In news reports, you can hear about surprising events. You can learn about new technologies, new plans, and big changes.

But in today’s Words and Their Stories, we consider how to talk about things that do not change — at least not very much.

The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Babies cry when they are hungry. Water turns to ice when the temperature drops below freezing. These are things we expect. In fact, we are so sure about them that we can bank on them.

To bank on something means that you are not taking a chance by saying something is going to happen or that something is true. It is a stronger way of saying that you can count on something.

And there are some days when we feel like nothing new happened, where today seems almost the same as yesterday. In such a situation, we can say same old, same old, which is another way of saying “nothing new or different happened.”

Now consider people’s behavior. Imagine you are planning to spend time with a friend. You agree to meet your friend at a local market, but when you arrive, your friend is not there. After waiting almost an hour, you receive a message on your phone. It says, “I’m so sorry! I forgot about our meeting! Are you still there?”

At this point, you simply say to yourself, “par for the course.”

In this example, par for the course means your friend’s behavior was not surprising but expected. That is because you know your friend often forgets things. But it also means you are not pleased with the behavior. We mostly use par for the course to express both that we do not like a situation and that the situation is the same as what we expected.

We can use par for the course to talk about rules or policies we don’t like, but also expect. For example, regarding a competition, someone might say, “The rules are so unfair. Unfortunately, that’s just par for the course.”

You can also use the expression in a neutral way—that is, with neither a positive nor a negative feeling. This happens when we are trying to make clear that people shouldn’t be surprised by something or place too much importance on it.

For example, someone might say, “Security checks at airports are par for the course.” Here, the speaker means, “Because security checks are normal at airports, you shouldn’t be surprised by them.”

The word “par” comes from Latin. It can mean “that which is equal.”

Language experts suspect the expression par for the course came from the game of golf, where “par” is the expected score of a skilled player for part of the golf course, or the whole course.

Next, we look at an expression in American English: Is that a thing? This question asks if something is new or becoming more common.

For example, imagine you travel far from your home. You see a car with unusual lights on its wheels. You wonder if that car is the only one with those special lights. But the next day, you see another car with similar lights. In this situation, you might ask someone who lives in the area, “Is that a thing?” The person can tell you if the lights are unusual, or if they are starting to become popular with some people. If it’s a trend, the person can simply answer, “Yeah, it’s a thing.”

We don’t ask “Is that a thing?” for something that is already common or expected. For example, you would not say “Is that a thing?” for an activity like brushing your teeth.

However, you could ask the question about a new health trend.

For example, in 2023, a person might ask if something is “a thing” about using virtual reality for health and fitness. That is because the technology is still new and not used by most people.

Was today’s Words and Their Stories the same old, same old for you? I hope not!

I’m Andrew Smith. And I’m Jill Robbins.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

neutral-adj. not having positive, negative, or other characterizations based on a person's likes or dislikes.

trend-n. a development toward something new and different

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 110: 'Holding Down the Fort' Is a Big Job

Date: 2023-03-25T22:00:43+00:00 | 579 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

A fort is a place of protection. It is a fortified structure with strong walls and doors, complex locks, barriers, and other security features. It is used as a defense. It is a place often protected by soldiers and occupied by officials. Someone always is in charge or responsible for a fort.

And that is where our expression comes in.

If someone asked you to hold down the fort, you are responsible for a place while those who supervise it are away. In other words, you are in charge! You are the chief!

For example, once a friend and I were at my house preparing for a party. But then I got an emergency call from my brother who needed a ride. So, my friend held down the fort at home and welcomed party guests while I helped my brother.

Sometimes we just say hold the fort. This also means staying behind to take care of things. Again, whoever is holding the fort is in charge. They are responsible for what happens. And they may be responsible for the safety of others.

Marion is the most responsible of the group. So we left her at the house to hold the fort.

There is another way we use the word “fort” in an expression.

In the American state of Kentucky, there is a famous fort – Fort Knox. Fort Knox is a protected place in the United States. Why is it protected? Fort Knox is a place where lots of gold is kept.

Needless to say, it is heavily guarded. So, when we want to describe a place that is hard to get into, we can compare it to Fort Knox. A place that is like Fort Knox is inaccessible usually because it is locked or heavily guarded. We can also say a place is as safe or as secure as Fort Knox.

Now, let's hear these two expressions used by two friends.

A: Hi, Sam! What brings you to my place?

B: Well, Maxine is holding down the fort at home. So, I thought I'd stop by to see if you want to hang out.

A: Sure! How about a walk around the neighborhood? I feel like I've been sitting all day.

B: Sound good. Let's walk past that construction project down the street.

A: They've been working on that house for months. I'm curious about the renovations.

B: Maybe we can sneak into the place and look in the windows.

A: That's a really bad idea. The property is locked up tighter than Fort Knox and probably has many security cameras. If you sneak in ... you're on your own.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ...

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

fortified– adj. made stronger or more secure

barrier– n. something material that blocks or is intended to block passage

inaccessible– adj. not accessible

construction– n. something built or put together

renovate– v. to make like new again; put in good condition: renovation– n. the act of making new again

sneak– v. to go about in a sly or secret manner

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 111: Low-hanging Fruit

Date: 2023-04-01T21:59:29+00:00 | 690 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Have you ever gone to a farm or an orchard to pick fruit? Was all of the fruit easy to pick, or were some pieces easier to reach than others? Perhaps there were some apples in a tree that were too high for you to reach. And maybe you saw that others had picked the easiest fruit to reach before you.

Today's Words and Their Stories, however, is not about fruit, but about ideas.

If you are the first person to arrive at an apple tree during harvest time, you can easily find some low-hanging fruit. These are the apples that are on the branches closest to the ground. Low-hanging fruit describes the most obvious or easiest things to do to help you reach a goal.

The problem with low-hanging fruit is that it is easy for others to get there first, too.

People who try to create new music, TV shows, or movies sometimes face this problem. They might believe that the best melodies and story ideas have already been taken.

Some songwriters or scriptwriters might say that the creative low-hanging fruit has already been picked.

When most of the fruit, ideas, or things that we desire have already been taken, we can say that the remains are slim pickings. This means there are only a few useful things left to choose from.

And, when almost nothing of value remains, we are scraping the bottom of the barrel. That means we are trying to get the last little bits. There is nothing but scraps left.

“Scraps” are small, unwanted pieces that remain at the end of a process, like bits of food remaining after making or eating a meal. The scraps are often given to animals or thrown away. So, if you have nothing but scraps, it means you have the least valuable things, worth almost nothing to most people.

When there is nothing left of something we need, like water, we must solve the problem. One answer is to dig a well to reach water underground. Some wells can last for many years, but others run dry. When the well has run dry, there is nothing left.

Paul Simon is a famous American songwriter. In 2007, he told a reporter, “I think there’s a certain reservoir of melody that you are born with, and in the beginning, you draw on that. And then after a while, a relatively short while, you use it up.”

A reservoir is a place where water is stored, such as a pool, a pond, or a lake. Simon added that when the artist has used all that is in the reservoir, he or she needs to expand their skills. Otherwise, their creative well is going to run dry.

So far, we have talked about running out of ideas. But what happens if you get lucky and find a lot of something valuable, like oil or gold?

In those cases, you have hit the mother lode. The term mother lode came from California after gold was discovered there in 1848. It describes a narrow area of rock in the state about 190 kilometers in length.

This rock was the source, or “mother,” of the gold found in rivers and streams in the area.

Is VOA Learning English your mother lode for learning new idioms and expressions? Let us know in the comments below. And be sure to keep reading Words and Their Stories!

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

pick-v.to select and take something

orchard-n.an area of land on which fruit trees are grown

branches-n.the parts of a tree that grow from its trunk and have leaves, fruit, or flowers on them.

obvious-adj.easily seen or understood

melody-n.the main notes that make a song or tune

draw on-v. (phrasal)to utilize or to take from a quantity or source

pond-n.a small body of water

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 112: It Is Not Nice to 'Dump on' Others

Date: 2023-04-08T21:59:29+00:00 | 561 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Trash may not be a glamorous subject. But it is an important one. We can throw our trash in a container called a trash can. We can dispose of our garbage in a garbage can. We can dump or pour unwanted things in a dumpster. All these unwanted things might end up at a landfill, sometimes called a dump.

We explored being down in the dump in a recent Words and Their Stories.

Being at the bottom of a dump is probably not a nice place to be. If you are down in the dumps, you feel sad. Down in the dumps means you have the blues, or you feel out of sorts. You are the opposite of happy.

If your friend is down in the dumps, you could try to do something fun to lift their spirits. You could take them to their favorite restaurant or a movie to cheer them up.

The verb “dump” means to place things without care. For example, when I wash my clothes, I dump the dirty clothes on the floor in front of the washer. But I don’t dump the clean clothes on the floor. They are clean! Dumping them on the floor could make them dirty again.

We can dump other things besides trash and dirty clothes. If you dump on someone you say bad things about them. You show them little respect.

And at work, you do not want to receive a document dump. This means someone has given you a huge number of documents. Usually, you have to deal with them in some way.

Now, let's hear these "dump" expressions in a conversation between two co-workers.

A: Hey, let's go! TGIF! Time to have some fun!

B: [sounds sad] I can't. You guys go ahead without me.

A: Why? And why are you so down in the dumps?

B: Karen just dumped a huge stack of work on my desk.

A: She gave you a document dump at 5 o'clock on Friday?

B: She did. And she wants me to file it all before I leave.

A: Can't you tell her you'll do it on Monday morning?

B: I tried. She said no.

A: You know, she did that to me once and I dumped her document dump right in the dumpster.

B: Did you get in trouble?

A: No. She didn't even ask about those stupid papers. I don't mean to dump on her, but dumping a bunch of needless work on someone on a Friday is a mean thing to do.

B: You know what...you're right! I'm coming with you guys. This document dump can wait until Monday.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

glamorous—adj. very exciting and appealing

dispose of—v. (phrasal) to throw away or remove something

dumpster—n. a big container for waste

landfill—n. a place where waste is buried

dump—n. a place where waste can be thrown out

TGIF (thank God it's Friday)—expression an exclamation of happiness or relief that the work week is over

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 113: 'Light at the End of the Tunnel'

Date: 2023-04-15T21:59:02+00:00 | 541 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Tunnels are long passageways that help us get from one point to another. We drive through tunnels. Subways and trains travel through tunnels. We can walk through tunnels and be protected from bad weather.

Some tunnels are very long. When we drive through them, we must turn on our headlights. If not, we cannot see! If you are afraid of long dark tunnels, having lights is important.

And that gives us this expression –light at the end of the tunnel.

This means to have hope that a bad situation will soon come to an end.

Imagine you are traveling through a long, dark tunnel. You keep going and going but you only see darkness. Then, finally, you see light up ahead! The end of the tunnel is near!

We use this expression for any difficult situation or long process. Let's say you are working on a long difficult project. It feels like you will never finish. But then, after a long day of working you finally see the light at the end of the tunnel. There is hope that the project will finally be finished.

Our other tunnel expression for today is not as hopeful.

Tunnel vision is an actual condition where your field of vision is limited. You have a narrow field of vision resulting in loss of side vision. That is the medical condition.

As an expression, to have tunnel vision means you are narrow-minded. You have a small or narrow viewpoint on a certain subject. It can also mean that you are single-minded, meaning you are only able to think of one thing.

Tunnel vision is usually not considered a good thing. But sometimes having tunnel vision temporarily helps you to finish something. Used this way, tunnel vision means to be extremely focused on something or on a part of something while ignoring other things. So, again, that can be helpful.

When talking about people who have tunnel vision, we can also say they have blinders on. They are not willing to see certain things. As with tunnel vision, having blinders on can also help you finish something difficult or meet a goal.

“Tunnel” can also be used a verb. It means to dig or bore through something. It is quite an act to tunnel through a mountain when making a tunnel. But you can also dig through things like work. If I tunnel

through a pile of documents, it means I was buried in work but worked my way out.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

narrow— adj. of slender width limited in size or scope not broad or open in views or opinions

focused— v. to cause to be concentrated

bore— v. to make (as a hole shaped like a cylinder) by boring or digging away material

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 114: Are You a 'Bull in a China Shop'?

Date: 2023-04-22T22:00:46+00:00 | 649 words | [Source](#)

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Have you ever felt out of place? Have you ever felt clumsy, like you cannot move gracefully and smoothly? If you answered yes, then today's show is for you!

Today we talk about what happens when a big animal runs loose in a small area. The expression is to be a bull in a china shop.

China is fragile, meaning very easy to break. Imagine a large bull running loose in a china shop. All the fragile plates, bowls, and tea cups in the shop would be on the floor and broken in a million pieces.

So, a bull in a china shop describes a person who is awkward and clumsy. Wherever they go, they create a mess.

This can happen on purpose or on accident. If you are behaving wildly in a small space and are breaking things here and there, you are acting like a bull in a china shop. But maybe you don't mean to. Maybe you are just very big or your body movements are not very graceful.

This expression can describe a person or a situation. For example, a fancy wedding is my bull in a china shop situation. I always end up knocking something over or saying the wrong thing.

This expression is used in other ways.

When a person feels out of place and deals too roughly with a delicate problem they can say they feel like a bull in a china shop.

If you are this kind of person, you do not handle light situations well at all. For some reason and sometimes through no fault of your own ... you just make things worse.

It can also mean you rush into a situation without thinking about it clearly. Acting like a bull in a china shop means recklessly attacking a problem without proper planning.

So, when you act like a bull in a china shop, you create damage. You leave a big mess in your wake. This could be an actual mess or a figurative one. For example, if you are a bull in a china shop you may not be invited to a problem-solving meeting at work. You may bring a little too much mayhem with you.

This expression can also mean you handle a delicate situation badly. You don't react calmly and carefully. Instead you add fuel to the fire. This means you make the situation worse.

For example, when it comes to relationship issues, Deirdre is like a bull in a china shop. She always ends up making more trouble. One time she tried to help a married couple who had been arguing a lot. After Deirdre's "help" the couple ended their marriage.

It is widely believed that this expression came from real animals causing real damage at outdoor markets in the 1800s. Word experts say that many languages have a similar expression but maybe they use a different animal, for example an elephant. And an elephant would also do a lot of damage in a china shop.

And that's all the time for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ...

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

clumsy— adj. lacking skill or grace in movement

gracefully— adv. displaying grace in form or action : pleasing or attractive in line, proportion, or movement

fragile— adj. easily broken or destroyed

awkward— adj. lacking skill and flexibility (as in the use of the hands): not graceful : clumsy

roughly— adv. in crude fashion

delicate— adj. ■ easily torn or damaged

figurative— adj. characterized by figures of speech

mayhem— n. needless or willful damage or violence

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 115: Why Is This Bird a 'Burden'?

Date: 2023-04-29T22:00:15+00:00 | 546 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we use them in short conversations.

Many English expressions come from the world of animals. And, today we talk about a seabird called an albatross. An albatross is a large web-footed seabird. In fact, this family of seabirds includes some of the largest. They have long thin wings and are excellent gliders. To glide means to move smoothly, silently, and effortlessly.

Considering that an albatross can fly seemingly without effort, it is a bit surprising how we use the word in conversations.

An albatross describes something – a burden – that weighs heavily on us and prevents us from accomplishing something. It can be a problem that does not go away. This problem makes it difficult or impossible to do or achieve something.

An albatross can also be something that gets in our way – a roadblock that keeps us from getting what we want. It hinders us. Or if you prefer the noun – it is a hinderance to our success or to our ability to be happy. Some describe an albatross as a mental burden.

For example: Her never-ending search for fame and fortune became an albatross to a normal, happy life.

Here is another example: His albatross was his huge credit card debt. It weighed heavily on every decision he made.

So, how did the name of this large, graceful bird come to have this meaning? On Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, experts explain that this usage of the word comes from European sea mythology.

Albatrosses are known for following ships at sea. They can glide for long periods of time without flapping their wings. So, some sailors had superstitious beliefs about the birds. A superstition is a belief that certain things or events will bring good or bad luck.

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge's 1798 poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, a sailor kills an albatross that had been following his ship. As punishment and proof that he killed the bird, the crew hung the large seabird from the sailor's neck.

To this day, the albatross remains a symbol for something that causes extreme guilt or something that is a great burden.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

glide— v.to move smoothly, continuously, and effortlessly

hinder— v.to make slow or difficult the progress of something

fame— n.the fact or condition of being known to the public

fortune— n.a very large sum of money

mythology— n.stories dealing with the gods and heroes of a particular people

flap— v.to move or cause to move with a beating motion

symbol— n.something that stands for something elseespecially:something real that stands for or suggests another thing that cannot in itself be pictured or shown

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 116: Oil and Water Do Not Mix

Date: 2023-05-06T22:00:32+00:00 | 540 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Oil and water are two very different substances. Oil is thick. Water is thin. If you pour oil into water, they do not mix, and the oil floats to the top.

This difficult relationship can play a part in some laboratory experiments. It can play a big part in kitchens as we cook food. It can also be used to describe some of our personal relationships.

If we say two people are like oil and water, it means they do not get along. They are not compatible.

Things like objects, elements, and people that do not or cannot mix together easily can be compared to oil and water.

Here is an example from experience. My friend often asked me to watch her cat Bluey when she would travel out of town. Usually, cats love me but not Bluey. He would make terrible cat noises as soon as I walked into the apartment. Every time I tried to pet him, he would bite and scratch me. So, I didn't like him either. We were like oil and water. I took care of him, but for the most part, we ignored each other.

This expression describes how oil and water naturally separate. They are incompatible. So are people who have nothing in common and do not get along.

We sometimes say oil and water do not mix to express an opinion that two things do not go together.

Here is another “oil” expression. If you pour oil on troubled water, you calm a tense situation. You might not hear this expression too much in America as it is mainly a British usage.

Now let’s hear the expression used between two friends.

A: I’m worried about my birthday party.

B: Why? It’s not until next weekend.

A: It doesn’t matter. My two best friends will never find a way to get along. Ben likes to plan everything and is a bit of a control freak. Kara is super easy going and likes to play things by ear.

B: Those two sound like oil and water.

A: They are! And they want to throw the party together. What a truly bad idea.

B: I have a good idea. I’ll come to the party early. If things between them get heated, I’ll get between them and calm things down.

A: You’ll be the oil on my troubled waters!

B: Sure. Whatever you say. I just want to have fun at your party!

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

compatible— adj. able to coexist without problems

control freak— n. a person whose behavior indicates a powerful need to control people or circumstances in everyday matters

play things by ear— idiom to do something without special preparation

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 117: 'Housekeeping' and 'Clean House' Mean More Than Cleaning

Date: 2023-05-13T22:00:36+00:00 | 782 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Spring is a time of the year when many people take time to clean. They straighten up messy areas of their homes. They tidy up!

Spring cleaning is a popular activity for many people. It is a chance to get rid of unnecessary items and get their homes clean and organized. Spring cleaning usually involves big projects, such as taking down and washing curtains, shaking out rugs and cleaning carpets, perhaps clearing out and cleaning up cabinets and closets.

Spring cleaning is a thorough cleaning inside and out.

So, on today's program we are going to clean house, too!

Daily cleaning tasks like doing the laundry or dishes are not considered spring cleaning. That is often called housekeeping or cleaning house. We use both of these terms in idiomatic ways.

First, let's talk about cleaning house. When an organization, business or other group clean house, it gets rid of people or policies that make trouble or that do not work.

My friend has a company that is suffering from troublemaking and non-productive employees. If the owner wants the company to succeed, she may need to clean house and fire anyone not contributing.

Cleaning house can also mean to wipe out corruption or inefficiency. When we use it this way, we are often talking about a political party or a governmental office.

Here's an example for that situation:

The city official in charge of education reform made cleaning house on corruption and waste the first item on his to-do list.

Sometimes we put words in between "clean" and "house" to make the expression more specific, as in this example:

To help their company succeed, the business partners needed to clean their financial house. And that meant hiring a new financial manager – one that wouldn't steal from them.

If you research the expression online, you may find another meaning for "cleaning house" – to punish or to give a beating. For example, the bully threatened to clean house on anyone who disagreed with him. But this usage is not as common as getting rid of ineffectual, troublesome or wasteful elements in a group.

Now let's talk about housekeeping.

Housekeeping defines the act of managing a household. Cleaning, organizing, paying the bills, and keeping food stocked can all be called housekeeping. Sometimes we call this putting our house in order. When we put our house in order we make sure it is running smoothly. It can also mean to organize your finances and other responsibilities, especially when preparing for a life-changing event.

Used as a noun, housekeeping is also the department at a hotel in charge of keeping your room clean and stocked with necessary items like towels and soap.

Housekeeping also describes any repeated tasks that keep a business or organization running smoothly. So, housekeeping issues for a business could be managing and scheduling resources. It could also be tasks like keeping your computer up and running or updating staff on events or policy changes.

So, think of it this way. Housekeeping issues are the day-to-day, ongoing tasks and responsibilities that keep a business, home, or organization running smoothly. And cleaning house is to get rid of anything that is not working or is creating a mess – either literally or figuratively.

As for usage, both of these expressions can be used in formal and informal situations.

That's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo!

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

tidy up– phrasal verb to put in order : to clean up a mess

idiomatic– adj. of or relating to an expression in the usage of a language that is peculiar to itself either in having a meaning that cannot be derived from the conjoined meanings of its elements (such as up in the air for "undecided") or in its grammatically atypical use of words (such as give way)

corruption– n. dishonest or evil behavior : the causing of someone else to do wrong (as by bribery)

inefficiency– n. something that is wasteful of time or energy

ineffectual– adj. not producing the proper or intended effect

manage– v. to look after and make decisions about

literally– adv. in a way that uses the ordinary or primary meaning of a term or expression

figuratively– adv. with a meaning that is metaphorical rather than literal

informal– adj. suited for ordinary or everyday use

formal– adj. relating to, suitable for, or being an event requiring elegant dress and manners

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 118: Does a Good Luck Charm 'Work Like a Charm'?

Date: 2023-05-20T21:59:00+00:00 | 769 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's program we talk about the word "charm."

"Charm" has several meanings.

It can be a word, action, or thing believed to have magic power, to keep away evil, or to bring good luck.

It can be a small item worn on a chain or bracelet. Charm bracelets are popular because you can add charms that show things you like, your hobbies, or your interests.

"Charm" is also a quality that attracts and pleases people. If you are charming, you charm people or you make them like you. In the story of Cinderella, the prince is called... Prince Charming.

Now, let's talk about our first expression. If something works like a charm it works perfectly. Something that works like a charm does exactly what it is supposed to do. This expression can describe an approach, a method, a tactic, or even a device. Whatever it is works so well, that it seems like magic!

Let's hear two friends use it. One friend invites another to go boating for the weekend. But before that can happen, the invitee must find a dog watcher for the weekend. Let's hear how they use the expression to work like a charm.

A: So, can you go boating with me this weekend?

B: Yes! My roommate agreed to watch my dog Milo.

A: She did? I thought she didn't like Milo... at all.

B: Me too. She complains about my dog all the time. Milo is too big. Milo is too playful. Milo is too... whatever!

A: So, why did she agree to watch him?

B: Well, I told her that when I take Milo to the dog park lots of men want to play with such a big, friendly dog. And I added that some of these men are very good-looking.

A: Oh, that is too funny!

B: It might be funny, but it worked like a charm.

The third time is the charm

Now, for our next expression. Let's say a person tries to do something but fails at it two times, or twice. But they want to try again for a third time. They hope that on the third attempt, it will work.

In this situation, we can say the third time is the charm. However, when we use this expression we usually say it quickly – like this "third time's the charm."

We often use this expression to encourage someone to do something that they have tried a couple of times. Sometimes we use it to describe our own efforts. We try to convince ourselves that our efforts, whatever they are, will finally work out.

Here is another conversation using the expression third time's the charm.

A: Where are you going with all those boxes?

B: I'm helping James open his new business.

A: James is opening another business? Didn't his past two businesses fail?

B: They did. He lost a lot of money on both of them.

A: Wow, he is brave for starting another business. You'd think he would have learned his lesson.

B: He said the third time's the charm! He really believes this one will work out.

A: What is the business anyway?

B: He is opening a dog summer camp.

A: A summer camp ... for dogs?

B: Yep. Those boxes are filled with dog treats and toys.

A: But people love spending time with their dogs in the summer.

B: Look, I'm just helping him out.

A: Well, in this case, I don't think the third time's the charm is the best expression to use. I'd use ... don't quit your day job.

The expression may have its roots in old superstitions. It means that the third time will be lucky and therefore successful. Word experts say that some cultures throughout history viewed three as a lucky number.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

tactic— n.a planned action for a particular purpose

complain— v.to express grief, pain, or discontent : find fault

encourage— v.to inspire with courage, spirit, or hope

root— n.an original cause or source

superstition— n.a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, or trust in magic

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 119: 'Watch My Dust!'

Date: 2023-05-27T21:59:18+00:00 | 502 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Dust is very small pieces of earth or other matter. It is so fine it floats in the air. And it gets everywhere.

Inside, it covers our floors, our belongings, and other surfaces. Outside, it covers things as well. And a small wind can blow dust into our eyes and mouth.

When we drive a car on dry ground, it can create a dust cloud. And when we run in a foot race, we can kick up a lot of dust, too.

That is why we have the expression *eat my dust*. It means you are ahead of someone. They are behind you and must deal with the dust you have made.

Sometimes, we also say *watch my dust*. This means you are so sure of winning that you are telling others they will lose.

We often use these expressions to talk about a race or a competition.

Using the same reasoning, if you *leave someone in the dust*, you have left them far behind. Again, you have won some kind of competition and you have won big!

However, if something *bites the dust*, it has failed.

To *bite the dust* can mean suffering defeat. It can also mean something comes to an early end or is no longer useful. For example, if my old car dies on a long road trip, I can say my car *bit the dust*. In the past ten years, many technologies have *bitten the dust*.

Sometimes, this expression means death in battle. But used this way, *bite the dust* is very informal and not respectful.

Our last “dust” expression is *when the dust settles*. In a dust storm, it is very difficult to see. When the dust settles, you can finally see clearly.

So, we use this expression to talk about the calm and clarity that comes after a big change or time of confusion. We often use it as advice or a warning. It is often a good idea to wait for a situation to calm down before making a big decision.

For example, let’s say you are moving to a new city and changing jobs. You will be very busy. So, you can tell your friends that you will contact them when the dust settles. In other words, you will contact them when things calm down.

And that’s Words and Their Stories. Have fun using these “dust” expressions! Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

informal— adj.suited for use between friends and family but not perhaps professional relationships

clarity— n.the quality of being easily seen or heard

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 120: 'Clean As a Whistle'

Date: 2023-06-03T22:00:21+00:00 | 563 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we use them in short conversations.

What do you say when something is so spotless, so perfect, so new and so clean?

In American English, we can say it is as clean as a whistle.

We often use this expression to talk about our physical spaces. After we clean our office, we can say it is as clean as a whistle. Our home can also be as clean as a whistle.

If you have a car, the inside of it can be ... you guessed it! As clean as a whistle. But, it is harder to keep the outside of a vehicle as clean as a whistle.

As you might have noticed, sometimes we add “as” to the beginning, and sometimes we don’t.

We can use this expression to describe other things, too.

For example, if you have never been in a car accident, you can say that your driving record is as clean as a whistle. If your school record is clear of any problems or issues, you can say it is as clean as a whistle. And if your elected leader is not involved in corruption or any other wrongdoings, you can say she is as clean as a whistle!

Like many of our English expressions and idioms, the origin of as clean as a whistle is unclear.

Some word experts say it comes from the sound of a whistle, which is clear and sharp. Other experts suggest that as clean as a whistle comes from drinking alcohol. When you finished your drink and your glass was empty, it was said to be as clean as a whistle and needed to be refilled.

Now let’s hear the expression used between two friends.

A: Did you hear about Wanda? She’s been fired!

B: Wanda? Are you sure? Her work record is as clean as a whistle. To my knowledge, she has never missed a deadline. And all her projects come in under budget.

A: That's true. But she got caught working for another company.

B: So. Many people have a second or even a third job.

A: Yeah, but not at the same time. She was working her other job while getting paid by our company.

B: Oh. That's different. How do people have the time and energy to even think about doing that?

A: I don't know. I barely have the energy to finish my work for this job.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Practice using this expression in your next English conversation.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

conversation— n.oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas

corruption— n.dishonest or illegal behavior especially by powerful people

idiom— n.an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but must be learned as a whole

origin— n.rise, beginning, or derivation from a source

fired— v.dismissed or let go from a job

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 121: Let's 'Zero in' on Number Expressions

Date: 2023-06-10T22:00:38+00:00 | 637 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Language is not only made-up of words. Numbers are also important to communicating our thoughts. So, today, we talk about some common English expressions that use numbers.

Let's start with zero and the expression to zero in.

Zeroing in means directing all of your attention on something or someone. We often say what that something is. For example, the defense lawyers were able to zero in on the testimony of an important witness and find problems with it. Here is another example, I know a woman who can zero in on any relationship problem and find a solution.

This expression can also mean to take aim directly at something. For example, when taking a picture, a photographer might zero in on a subject. And it is the job of a quarterback in an American football game to zero in on a receiver – the player catching the ball.

Other words that help to explain the expression to zero in are to focus and concentrate on. As verbs, these words both mean to direct your attention on something or someone.

Now, let's move to the numbers six and seven. If something is at sixes and sevens, it is in a state of confusion or disorder. In other words, it is all messed up!

At sixes and sevens may also mean a state of disagreement between two or more people. For example, when the manager left without a word the workplace was at sixes and sevens. Nobody knew which way was up! (If you don't know which way is up – you are very confused.)

Word experts say this expression may have started in the 1300s. At that time, it meant taking a careless risk. Around the middle of the 1600s, the meaning changed to mean a state of confusion.

Being at sixes and sevens is the opposite of being a ten.

If something is a ten, it is really great. It is perfect or nearly perfect. This usage comes from the highest rank on a scale of one to ten. For example, on a scale of one to 10 my recent trip to Bangladesh was a ten. I loved every minute!

Now, let's talk about our last expression: to 86 something. If you 86 something, you get rid of it. You throw it out, or you don't use it. If I pitch an idea to a group and they 86 it, they do not want it and do not plan to use it.

Experts at Merriam-Webster's online dictionary explain that this expression may have come from 1930s business slang meaning that an item was sold out. Maybe. Other experts think the only reason to 86 something means to get rid of it is because 86 rhymes with nix. "Nix" means to cancel or get rid of something.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Have fun using these number expressions in your next English conversation.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

focus—v. to direct attention on something so that it becomes clearer

concentrate on—v. (phrasal) to direct thoughts to something

scale—n. a series of numbers meant to rate or show the strength or quality of something

pitch—v. to talk about something in favorable ways to get people to accept it

slang—n. special language used by a particular group : an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed of invented words, changed words, and exaggerated or humorous figures of speech

item—n. an individual thing that is separate from others

rhyme—v. to have two or more words that end in the same sound

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 122: Are You Prepared 'to See How the Sausage Is Made'?

Date: 2023-06-17T21:59:31+00:00 | 592 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about a kind of food -- sausage. Sausage can be made from any kind of meat, along with spices, herbs, sometimes vegetables, and even fruit. My favorite sausage is made from chicken, apple, and the herb sage.

To make sausage, the ingredients are mixed together and then shaped into individual servings.

High-quality sausage uses high-quality ingredients and costlier cuts of meat. Some sausages are made from parts of the animal that many people may not normally eat. But everything gets mixed up so much that you do not really know what is in the final product.

For this reason, seeing the sausage-making process might be a bit unpleasant for some people. In other words, some people who like to eat sausage may not want to know how it is made. If they see all the separate ingredients, they may never eat sausage again.

And that is where we get the expression to see how the sausage is made.

If you want to see how the sausage is made, you want to see a complex or messy process. You want to know the secrets, even if they are not very pleasing.

We use this expression for any situation or process that happens away from the view of others. And most people would find that situation or process unpleasant.

For example, many people like to buy clothing that does not cost much money. But they may not want to know how the clothes are made so cheaply. They would rather not know how the sausage gets made.

There are other similar expressions.

You can also say we want to shine a light on something. This expression means you want to reveal or expose something unpleasant or possibly even illegal.

Another similar expression is to pull back the curtain on something. This one really explains the behind-the-scenes nature of all these expressions. A curtain is a piece of cloth or fabric that covers a window. It can hide what is happening inside a room. So, if you pull back the curtain on a process or way of doing something, you reveal how something is created or how it operates in private.

And if you pull back the curtain on a person, you reveal how they act when they are away from public view. You reveal their true personality or you expose their true intent.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Enjoy using these expressions the next time you want to show the unpleasant side of something.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

spice— n. a plant product (as pepper or nutmeg) that has a strong pleasant smell and is used to season or flavor food

herb— n. a plant or plant part used for making medicine and seasonings

ingredient— n. one of the substances that make up a mixture

messy— adj. marked by confusion, disorder, or dirt : untidy

view— n. range of vision

reveal— v. to make known

expose— v. to make known

behind-the-scenes— adj. being or working out of public view or in secret : revealing or reporting the hidden workings

intent— n. set on some end or purpose

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 123: 'In The Hot Seat' Is Not Where You Want to Be

Date: 2023-06-24T21:59:23+00:00 | 745 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Have you ever found yourself in a difficult situation – one where you had to explain yourself; where you felt like all eyes are on you; and where others were questioning your actions?

If so, you may have been in the hot seat! That is our expression for today.

The “hot seat” is not a nice place to be. To be in the hot seat can be used in several different situations.

It can be a situation where you need to defend yourself or share information. If you are questioned by the police or a detective, you are definitely in the hot seat.

A difficult job interview or school exam can also make you feel like you’re in the hot seat. It can be an unpleasant and uncomfortable situation.

If you are in the hot seat, someone may be closely observing your movements and actions.

For example, parents often put their children in the hot seat. They may want to know where they go, who they are with, and what they are doing. These questions could feel like an interrogation. As with the earlier police example, an interrogation and being in the hot seat go hand in hand.

Teachers and school officials can also put students in the hot seat. If students are accused of doing something like cheating on a test or damaging school property, a teacher might put them in the hot seat to get information.

The “hot seat” can also be a position of uneasiness or embarrassment. For this situation, we have another saying. If you put someone on the spot, you have also put them in the hot seat. For example, let’s say my best friend is married to a man who isn’t very honest. When I see Mr. Dishonest at a restaurant holding hands with another woman, I could put him in the hot seat by asking, “So ... what’s going on? here”

If you are in the hot seat, you may also be faced with severe criticism or judgement. At work, you may find yourself in the hot seat if you fail to finish a project on time.

Here’s another example. Let’s say Alice is in charge of the company’s yearly party. It is a big deal for employees and their families. But she told everyone the wrong date. So, when no one showed up, she found herself in the hot seat with her boss.

Here are some notes on usage.

In this idiom, we use the definite article “the” and not the indefinite article “a.” So, we don’t say someone was “in a hot seat.”

Now, let’s talk about the preposition “in.” Some online dictionaries give examples of this idiom using the preposition “on” – to be on the hot seat. I commonly hear in the hot seat and not on the hot seat. Both are correct. But in the hot seat sounds more natural.

The usage of this idiom goes back to the early 1900s. Some word experts say that it may have come from the use of electric chairs for executions. Other experts say the idiom may come from the card game poker. In poker, players in the "hot seat" are under the most pressure to bet or play their cards.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ...

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

interview— n.a formal consultation usually to evaluate qualifications (as of a prospective student or employee)

interrogation— n.a formal and systematic questioning

go hand in hand- idiomatic phrase in close association

cheat— v.to use unfair or dishonest methods to gain an advantage

embarrassment— n.state of feeling self-consciously confused or distressed

execution— n.a putting to death especially as a legal penalty

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 124: 'All Thumbs'

Date: 2023-07-01T21:59:37+00:00 | 494 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this show we explore words and expressions a little more deeply. We give you synonyms – words that mean close to the same thing. And we use the expressions in a conversation.

Today we talk about our hands – more specifically our thumbs.

Most of us have one thumb and four fingers on each hand. Our thumbs let us perform certain tasks. But what if all our fingers were replaced with thumbs? Those tasks we normally perform with ease would become much more difficult.

In fact, we would lose the ability to do many things with our hands. Our movements would become careless and clumsy. We would drop things all the time.

And that is what the saying to be all thumbs means. If I am all thumbs, I lack grace with my hands. I am klutzy. So, people might call me a klutz.

They might also call me butterfingers. Imagine your fingers are coated in butter. They would be very slippery. And it would be hard to pick things up.

Now, let's hear the expression "to be all thumbs" in a conversation between two friends.

A: Hey, I'm planning a surprise party for Nicholas. I'm bringing the food and ice. And Cassidy is bringing the drinks – about 50 bottles of wine and lemonade. Can you bring the cake?

B: I have a better idea. I'll pick up the drinks. Why don't you ask Cassidy to bring the cake?

B: Cassidy is all thumbs. She'll end up dropping everything and then we won't have drinks at the party.

A: Good call. She is pretty clumsy. Actually, at the last party she dropped the cake. On second thought ... I'll have her bring the ice. If she drops the bags of ice, it'll only help break it up.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

clumsy – adj. lacking skill or grace in movement

klutzy – adj. to be careless in movement; klutz – n. a clumsy person

slippery – adj. causing or tending to cause something to slide or fall

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 125: American vs. British English

Date: 2023-07-03T21:56:33+00:00 | 887 words | Source

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Now the VOA Learning English program Words and Their Stories!

The fourth of July is Independence Day in the United States. On that day, we celebrate the decision by early American leaders to declare independence from Britain.

While people in both England and the U.S. speak English, the two types of English can be very different.

First, there are differences in spelling. The British like the letter “u” and have kept it in many words. Americans have dropped it. Somewhere in our language history, we decided that “labor,” “color” and “favorite” were just fine without the “u” next to the “o.”

But our differences go beyond spelling. Sometimes, we use different words entirely.

Here, we live in apartments with elevators. Over there, they live in flats with lifts.

We put diaper on our babies and push them in strollers. The British love their babies just as much as we do, but they use nappies and prams instead.

We power our cars with gas. They use petrol.

And, if we need to look in our car’s dark trunk for something, we use a flashlight. They would use a torch to search their dark boot.

Then there are idioms. Some British and American idioms have the same meaning, but use different words. For example, in the U.S. if you want to add your opinion to a conversation, you put in your two cents. In the U.K., they put in their tuppence (or two pence) worth. Makes sense. They have pence and we don’t.

Another example is the idiom about discussing the same issue again and again, especially if it cannot be resolved.

We say, “Don’t beat a dead horse!” The British, on the other hand, advise against flogging one. And, if you are keeping secrets in the United States, you have skeletons in the closet. In Great Britain, your skeletons would be hiding in a cupboard.

But the real fun begins when we start exploring idioms and expressions that are unique to each country.

Let’s start with “Bob’s your uncle.” To an American ear, that is a weird expression. And it has nothing to do with any relative you may or may not have named Bob. It is just a way to finish a set of simple instructions.

What is the equivalent -- the different but equal saying -- in the U.S.? Americans might say, “and there you have it!” Or sometimes, more dramatic people will say, “Ta-da!”

For example, imagine you are explaining to someone how to use your new fancy, coffee maker.

You explain: “First, you grind the beans. Then you put them in the side container and pour water in the main container. Push the button and ten minutes later -- ta-da! -- you have a pot of coffee!

Sometimes over a fresh pot of coffee, you may want to have a long talk with a friend. You might even throw in a little gossip. We call that a chat, or if it’s a short conversation, chit-chat. The British would call it a “chin-wag.”

If a British person says, “I’ve got the hump,” we might think they are sick and need to see a doctor. But in fact, when Brits say they have a hump, it means they are mildly annoyed or upset. In the U.S., some informal ways to say we are upset are “I’m ticked off” or “I’m miffed.”

Now, when Americans are really surprised by something, we can say we “are at a loss for words.” Or more informally, we simply say we are “shocked” or “blown away.”

Across the Atlantic in the U.K., they are “gobsmacked.” In the U.S., we don’t get smacked by gobs. Ever.

Finally, a familiar word used by both countries but in different ways is “cheers.” We use the word over drinks when we are wishing someone good health or congratulating an accomplishment. The British use “cheers” to mean “thank you.” For that, we Americans say, “Thank you!”

Now, we don’t expect you to pick sides. Both American and British English have their strong points. But thanks for listening to Words and Their Stories, a program that teaches American English.

Cheers! I mean, thanks.

Anna Matteo wrote this for VOA Learning English. Kelly Jean Kelly was the editor.

apartment– n.a usually rented room or set of rooms that is part of a building and is used as a place to live (British =flat)

elevator– n.a machine used for carrying people and things to different levels in a building (British =lift)

diaper– n.a piece of cloth or other material that is placed between a baby's legs and fastened around the waist to hold body waste (British =nappies)

stroller– n.a small carriage with four wheels that a baby or small child can ride in while someone pushes it (British =prams)

trunk– n.the enclosed space in the rear of an automobile for carrying articles (British =boot)

flashlight– n.a small electric light that can be carried in your hand and that runs on batteries (British =torch)

flog– v.to beat or whip (someone) severely

smack– v.to strike so as to produce a smack

gob– n.lump : a large amount

skeleton– n.the structure of bones that supports the body of a person or animal

closet– n.a usually small room that is used for storing things (such as clothing, towels, or dishes)
(British =cupboard)

fancy– adj.pricey and fashionable

grind– v.to crush or break (something) into very small pieces by rubbing it against a rough surface or using a special machine

gossip– n.information about the behavior and personal lives of other people

Article 126: Differences Between Board, on Board, Aboard

Date: 2023-07-08T21:59:09+00:00 | 566 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Today, we discuss the wordboard.

As a noun, board has a couple of meanings.

It can be a long thick piece of wood or other strong material – like a diving board. A board can also be a group of people who make decisions for an organization. An example is a board of directors.

As a verb, board means several things.

Board can mean providing food for someone regularly. For example, a college student's costs include housing and food, called room and board.

Board can also mean closing off parts of a building with pieces of wood. Sometimes in scary movies, people board up the doors and windows to keep monsters from entering.

Board, on board, aboard

Board, on board, and aboard are all used differently.

At a train station, we sometimes hear a conductor say, "All aboard," as the train is getting ready to leave. And the captain of a ship might say, "Welcome aboard," as you climb on the boat.

However, we say you board a plane, train, or boat when you get on it. And we say you are on board once you get on.

If you agree with an idea or a process, we also say that you are on board with it. But we never say you are aboard with it. And if you are very excited about an idea or process, you do not just get on board, you jump on board!

We also use the term onboarding to describe the process of starting a new job. This is the process in which new workers learn about a company, work rules, and things related to the job.

At VOA Learning English and many other organizations, all workers are required to attend onboarding and other training. So, we say the training requirement affects everyone across the board.

We use the expression across the board when something affects every part or every individual within a larger group. For example, when the government raises taxes on all income levels, it affects everyone across the board.

Experts say, across the board comes from a horse-racing bet. It means the same amount is bet for a horse to come in first, second, and third in a race.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

We hope you are on board with the expressions and use them in your next English conversation!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

scary—adj. something that causes fear or makes people afraid

monster—n. a strange and horrible imaginary creature

conductor—n. a person who takes tickets on a train

bet—v. to put money at risk in hope of winning more money by guessing the outcome of a game or a competition

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 127: 'To Sink or Swim' Is Up to You

Date: 2023-07-15T22:00:53+00:00 | 605 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we use them in short stories.

Today we talk a great about a great activity to keep healthy and cool. In hot weather, there is nothing better than swimming in cool water. Swimming is a great way to beat the heat and get exercise.

But swimming is not only for fun. Knowing how to swim can save your life. If you do not know how to swim, you could sink in the water. And it can happen fast. So, today we talk about the idiom to sink or swim.

To sink or swim means you either quickly succeed at something or quickly fail.

To sink or swim suggests that you will either succeed or fail based on your own skills. Others may have taught you or helped you to prepare for something. But, the final responsibility is yours. So, we use this idiom to describe a high-pressure situation where your success or survival depends on your ability to perform.

We sometimes pair the idiom sink or swim with the expression to be thrown into the deep end-- as in the deep part of a pool. A parent, teacher, or coach could throw a child into the deep end to see if the child will sink or swim, although it is not likely. Usually, it means to put someone in a situation to see how they do.

For example, let's say you have been preparing for an English test for many weeks. If you pass it, you may be able to get a better position at your job. You had a great teacher who helped you. But on test day, it's sink or swim. Success is up to you.

Sink or swim can also describe a situation where you must succeed quickly or you will fail fully. There is no middle ground. It is a win or lose situation.

In these situations, we can also say, "it's now or never." This means the time to prove yourself is ... now. You will not have another chance. All your preparation has come to this moment ... whatever that moment is. You need to rise to the occasion.

Sink or swim situations can also be called make or break events. They can either make you better. Or they can break you. If the situation is very serious and the risks are very great, you can also say do or die. You either take action or you will definitely fail.

Luckily learning English is not a do or die situation. And VOA Learning English will be here to help you grow your English skills -- so you can swim, instead of sink, in the test pool!

And that's all the time we have for Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

idiom—n.an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but must be learned as a whole

pool—n.a swimming pool : a small deep body of water

middle ground—n.standpoint or area midway between extreme or opposing positions, options, or objectives

occasion—n.a need that arises : a time at which something happens

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

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Article 128: Seeing 'Double'?

Date: 2023-07-22T22:00:46+00:00 | 702 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about one of those English words that changes meaning depending on the words added to it. “Double” is just such a word.

It is such a useful word that we should discuss it on the double! That means quickly. If I say, “Get here on the double,” it means get here as soon as you can. Please.

But that is just one of the many uses of this versatile word.

“Double” means two of something. So, if you double upon something, you increase the amount by two. For example, if I plan to enter a swimming race, I might want to double upon my training. So, if I train one hour a day, I would increase my training to two hours a day.

Now, if you add “down” to “double” you get something completely different. If you double down, you stick to a position or undertaking even if it is not a good one. You are not willing to change your position at all. For example, instead of apologizing for a poorly worded statement, the politician doubled down and said it again. Here, we could also say he dug in his heels.

Now, if something does double duty, it serves two purposes. For example, an exercise bike serves double duty if I can also dry my towels on it. People can also do double duty. That means they do two jobs or the work of two people.

Let’s combine “double” with the word “back.” If you double back, you turn around and come back the same way that you came. One time I took a hike and got a little lost. So, instead of continuing, I just doubled back: I returned the way that I came.

A delayed reaction to something that takes you by surprise is called a double take. We usually say do a double take. For example, I did a double take when I saw my co-worker after a year. She had a new haircut and a tattoo. I had to double-check if it was even her. When I looked again and made sure it was my friend, I told her how much I liked her tattoo. Then she doubled over with laughter. As it turns out, it was a temporary tattoo. When we double over, we bend over and cannot stand up straight because of laughter or from pain.

For some reason, certain “double” words are not good.

For example, double-crossing someone means to cheat them. A double-cross is a betrayal. We could also use the word double-dealing which has a similar meaning.

Double talk is language that appears to be meaningful but, in fact, is a mixture of sense and nonsense. And double speak is language used to trick people by hiding some of the truth.

A double standard is a set of principles or rules that apply differently and usually more severely to one group of people than to another. For example, people are not surprised if an older man dates a much younger woman. However, those same people may criticize a woman who dates a much younger man. That is a common double standard because the outcomes are so different.

And that’s the end of this Words and Their Stories. I hope you enjoyed this exploration of the many word combinations using “double.” You may want to double upon your English lessons by practicing with the combinations of this very useful word.

Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

versatile—adj. something with many different uses

dig in—v. to take a position and to be unwilling to give up that position

tattoo—n. a permanent picture written in ink on a person’s skin

betrayal—n. to hurt someone who trusts you or who can expect you to deal with them honestly or impartially by moral or ethical rules

principle—n. (often pl.) a moral rule or belief that people use to decide what is right and what is wrong

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 129: 'Beating a Dead Horse' Is Pointless

Date: 2023-07-29T22:00:41+00:00 | 562 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we even use them in short stories.

Today's idiom does not sound nice. In fact, it sounds quite cruel.

Today, we talk about beating a dead horse.

Why would anyone do something as pointless as beating a dead animal? Well, that is how we use the expression: to describe something that is a useless thing to do. You are just wasting your time. It is not productive. There is no point.

Merriam-Webster's online dictionary says this expression comes from the mid-19th century. Back then, some people may have beaten horses to make them go faster. At the time, this was often thought of as an acceptable practice.

But beating a dead horse would be pointless – because it's dead. No amount of beating will change that fact. We often use this expression in the negative. We say things like “I don't want to beat horse ...” or “Not to beat a dead horse...”

Now, if you are a horse lover and don't want to talk about beating one, please do not worry. We have many other expressions and idioms that have a similar meaning.

Let's say your friend talks about the same problem. They do not take your advice and they do not seem to want to accept any solution. If you don't want to say to them, “Now you're just beating a dead horse,” you can say, “Look, we've gone over the same ground and nothing has changed. So, can we please change the topic?”

When you go over the same ground, you talk about the same thing over and over again.

There is another expression with the word “ground” that means the same thing as “beat a dead horse.” If I have a problem and talk about it too much, I have run it into the ground. Running something into the ground means you have talked about it to death. You have talked about it to a nauseam. This means you are making other people sick over it.

So, it is not a good idea to dwell on an old topic. Hearing about the same thing over and over again is tiring. Many people have lost good friends from belaboring a point or an issue.

And that is all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

But join us again! We explore so many expressions and idioms in this program. In fact, each week we teach new ones. Not to beat a dead horse, but we really are a great resource for learning English.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

cruel— adj. ready to hurt others; without humane feelings

negative— adj. showing the opposite of something else

ad nauseam— adv. to a sickening or excessive degree

dwelling— phrasal v. to think or talk about (something) for a long time

belabor— v. to explain or insist on excessively

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

Article 130: 'Run Something Up the Flagpole' to Test an Idea

Date: 2023-08-05T21:59:52+00:00 | 568 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Great ideas can be the lifeblood of any project. That means they can bring a project to life or even back from the dead. From redesigning a home to creating an educational product, bold, creative ideas are valuable.

But often even a great idea needs a little work. It may need tweaking, meaning you need to make small changes. So, before sharing an idea with a large group, we may want to share it with a smaller group. We can test it out first, before putting the idea into action.

But first, let's talk about getting that big idea.

You may have heard of brainstorming. This is an idea-creating activity. When we brainstorm, we say ideas as quickly as we think of them.

In informal situations, we can call this throwing spaghetti at the wall. Why, you may ask? Well, cooked spaghetti is sticky. If spaghetti is cooked enough, it will stick when you throw it against the wall. If it is not cooked enough, it might not stick.

Good ideas stick too. In brainstorming, we often say we throw ideas around. And the good ones stay or stick. But as we said earlier, even if an idea sticks, we may want to test it out before sharing it with a large group of people.

That is when we can run it up the flagpole. Running an idea, plan, or proposal up the flagpole is a way to test interest or get feedback. The full phrase is "run it up the flagpole and see if anyone salutes." Military members salute when our flag is present and when they hear the first note of the national

anthem.

Here is another example: When writing these stories, I often run my ideas up a flagpole. I respect the opinions of my co-workers and often take their suggestions on board— meaning I take them into consideration. So, I like bouncing ideas off them.

And that is a more common way to express this idea. Bouncing something off someone is a way to know their thoughts. You are asking their opinion and are looking to see their reaction. Bouncing ideas around is a good way to gauge interest— to find out what people think.

So, the next time you have an idea, and you are unsure about it, run it up the flagpole! Bounce it off some friends! With the right people, you will soon know if it is good, bad, or needs work.

And that is all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time...

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

lifeblood—n. the most important part of something

bold—adj. strong, clear and without fear

tweak—v. to change something a little to improve it

feedback—n. advice or criticism given to a person or group providing a product or service

salute—v. to honor (a person, a nation, an event, etc.) by a conventional military or naval ceremony

pitch in—v. to contribute to a common task

gauge—v. to judge the qualities of someone or something

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

Article 131: Learn When to Wear 'Kid Gloves'

Date: 2023-08-12T21:59:43+00:00 | 564 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, notes on usage, and use them in conversations.

Today we talk about a piece of clothing – gloves.

We wear gloves to protect our hands. When the weather is cold, we wear gloves to keep our hands warm. When we do difficult outdoor work, we might wear work gloves. And when we clean indoors, we might wear rubber gloves to protect our hands from chemicals.

But when do we wear “kid gloves”?

Kid gloves are made from the skin of a young goat, also called a kid. Kid leather is very soft. So, kid gloves are perfect for holding objects such as silverware and art without leaving fingerprints. Years ago, many servants would wear kid gloves.

But today, we use the expression kid gloves to describe a way of dealing with certain people or situations. People who are sensitive require kid gloves. And situations that are complex and delicate often need the kid-glove treatment.

However, when we use kid gloves to talk about people, it is a little different than when we talk about situations.

To treat something with kid gloves is to handle a situation carefully and with tact. When we do something tactfully, we do it in a thoughtful way. Tactful people deal with people and situations very well. They are diplomatic.

Handling a situation with kid gloves is the opposite of being a bull in a china shop. If you are a bull in a china shop, you handle a situation very carelessly. (We talked about this idiom on another Words and Their Stories.)

Kid-glove treatment shows special skill and sensitivity. People who need kid-glove treatment might be very sensitive, meaning their feelings are easily hurt. Or they might be fussy and demanding. For example, really famous actors or pop stars might need the kid-glove treatment.

Now, let’s hear the idiom used in a conversation between two friends.

A: What are you doing this weekend?

B: An old friend is visiting me. We were best friends all through middle school and high school.

B: Well, I hope it will be.

A: Why do you say ‘hope’?

B: Well, she just went through a very nasty divorce from her high school sweetheart. She’s still very sensitive about it. So I have to handle her with kid gloves and not talk about our high school days.

A: Sounds like a little kid-glove treatment is just what she needs. And you can talk about the future instead.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

rubber—n. an elastic substance obtained from the milky juice of various tropical plants

sensitive—adj.easily hurt or damagedespecially:easily hurt emotionally

delicate—adj.easily unsettled or upset : resulting from or requiring skill or careful treatment

tact—n.the ability to deal with others without upsetting them :tactfully—adv.

fussy—adj.easily upset : hard to please

nasty—adj.morally disgusting or degrading

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

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Article 132: Make Your Home 'Spick-and-Span'

Date: 2023-08-19T21:59:14+00:00 | 398 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, examples, and notes on usage. And sometimes we use them in conversations.

Today, we talk about an expression to describe something, like a home, a vehicle, or an extremely clean object. The expression is spick-and-span.

Word experts are not sure where spick-and-span came from. But they agree that the expression was first used in The Diary of Samuel Pepys in 1665: “My Lady Batten walking through the dirty lane with new spick-and-span white shoes...”

If your shoes are so white and so clean, we can call them spick-and-span. We might even say they look brand spanking new.

If spick-and-span and brand spanking new are too long and you want to use just one word, here is a good one: immaculate. If something is immaculate, it is completely and totally clean. It is spotless, meaning it does not have one single imperfection, bad mark, or blemish.

Our living spaces as well as our appearance and our clothes can be called immaculate. However, spick-and-span is commonly used to describe spaces. And an American company even smartly named their cleaning product Spic and Span. That is “spic” without the letter “k.”

As far as usage, spick-and-span, immaculate, and spotless can be used in any situation. Brand spanking new is a bit more casual.

Now, let’s hear the expressions spick-and-span used in a couple of examples.

After the birthday party, my house was a disaster. So, I spent hours cleaning it, and by the end of the day, it was pick-and-span. You couldn't even tell there had been a party!

My co-worker wants everything to be immaculate. Even if I think the office is pick-and-span, she will still find something else to clean.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Practice using the expression pick-and-span the next time you want to describe something very clean.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

blemish— n. a mark that makes something imperfect

casual— adj. suited for ordinary or everyday use

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is here.

Article 133: What Does 'On a Shoestring' Mean?

Date: 2023-08-26T21:59:12+00:00 | 640 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give you definitions, examples, and notes on usage. Sometimes we even use them in conversations.

Today we talk about a common object. Shoestrings are very useful for keeping our shoes on. But they are also useful for describing a situation where money is tight, meaning there is not much of it.

A budget is the amount of money available for some purpose. So, if you are on a shoestring budget, you do not have a lot of money. You have just enough to get by. If you can get by on very little money, you are able to live on a shoestring. Sometimes we shorten this expression and just say “on a shoestring.”

We have other ways of describing this situation. For example, you might say you are living paycheck-to-paycheck. This means you get your paycheck but by the time your next one comes, you have used all your money to pay your bills.

Living paycheck-to-paycheck can also be called living hand-to-mouth. The money goes right into your hand and then you must buy the most basic necessities— food. You do not have money to spend on extras. Everything you earn goes to pay for your immediate needs – things like, food, shelter, medicine,

and transportation.

But now let's go back to our shoestrings. You can do a lot of things "on a shoestring."

For example, if you can travel on a shoestring, you travel very cheaply. You do not spend money on costly hotels. You look for good deals. You might use coupons, discount offers or other ways to save money. And you may plan to travel at less costly times. People who travel on a shoestring are often called budget travelers.

I learned how to travel on a shoestring when I studied in China. As a student, I did not have much money. So I traveled everywhere by train and stayed at universities. Traveling on a shoestring let me go to many more places.

But how did shoestring come to describe a tight budget – one with little money? Well, some word experts say it comes from people who sold small items on the streets. These items often included shoestrings.

Now let's hear two friends use this expression.

A: Hey, I hear you're going on vacation next week. Where are you off to?

B: First, I'm going to Paris and then heading to Barcelona. Finally I'll finish up my trip in Milan.

A: That is some trip! You must have saved up for a long time to have enough money for that kind of travel budget.

B: Not at all! I am an expert at traveling anywhere on a shoestring. In Paris, I'm staying with friends. In Barcelona, I found a cheap dorm room at a university. And in Milan, I'm working on a farm in exchange for a free room and meals.

A: Wow, you are REALLY good at shoestring travel. By not spending a lot of money on hotels, you're able to go to more places.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and This Stories.

Are you learning English on a shoestring? If so, keep listening to VOA Learning English. Our high-quality content is free!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

tight– adj. characterized by such difficulty

basic– adj. of, relating to, or forming the base or basis

necessity– n. something that is necessary

earn– v. to receive money in return for effort and especially for work done or services completed

cheaply– adv. available at low cost or at less than the true value

coupon— n.a voucher entitling the holder to a discount for a particular product

discount— adj.selling goods or services for less than their regular

dorm room— n. a large sleeping room containing several beds in a college of university

Article 134: Explore from Your 'Armchair'

Date: 2023-09-02T21:59:33+00:00 | 629 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, examples, and notes on usage.

Today we talk about a piece of furniture used for sitting. As the name suggests, an armchair has extensions for resting your arms. So, armchairs are more comfortable than other chairs. In fact, they are so comfortable that people sit in them for hours.

Besides being a kind of furniture, Americans use the word “armchair” in front of other words. They do this to describe different sorts of people and the experiences they might or might not have.

For example, some experiences can be called vicarious. If you live vicariously, you experience things through other people. You do not actually do the thing you are interested in yourself. Rather, you enjoy the activity by watching or reading about what others do.

Armchair detectives are not real detectives investigating crimes. An armchair detective enjoys reading detective novels or watching true crime shows. Armchair detectives may even try to solve a crime. But all their efforts are done from the safety and comfort of their homes.

Living vicariously through others can be a wonderful chance to escape. Let's say you do not have the time or money to travel. But you still want to experience the pleasure of traveling. You can read about places that you would like to visit. You can watch travel documentaries about them too. And you can do these things from the comfort of your own home. So, you could call yourself an armchair traveler.

If you enjoy watching and reading about people who do dangerous activities -- such as climbing Mount Everest or free diving into the depths of the ocean -- you might be an armchair adventurer.

However, we also use “armchair” to describe another sort of person. If someone does not have responsibility for a job but talks about it from a distance, we can use the word “armchair” to describe them. Also, if someone is not an expert in a subject, but gives advice anyway, we could use the word “armchair.”

For example, an armchair strategist gives strategies that are more theoretical than practical. This means they are talking about a problem but are not actually involved in solving it.

In the same way, an armchair general gives advice on going into battle ... from a safe distance. Armchair generals are not involved in a real battle.

In the U.S., a favorite term comes from American football. Armchair quarterbacks comment on a football game from the comfort of their own chair. They criticize and insult the players who actually play the game while they themselves have never played it.

But the use of the term “armchair quarterback” goes far beyond the world of sports. So, you could hear the term used to describe anyone who does not do an activity or have responsibility but still makes sharp comments or criticizes others who work at the job every day.

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

furniture—n. things found in the room of a home or business such as chairs, tables, sofas, and shelves

comfortable—adj. causing a feeling of ease and enjoyment and not pain

vicarious—adj. something that is not felt by oneself but through others

documentary—n. a kind of movie that tells a real story and that does not use actors but real people

strategist—n. a person who is skilled at making detailed plans to reach goals that extend over a long period of time

theoretical—adj. having to do with the theory of how something should work rather than how people know something works

practical—adj. having to do with reality rather than what is possible in the future or imaginary

Article 135: What Is 'Empty Nest Syndrome'?

Date: 2023-09-09T21:59:16+00:00 | 452 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, examples, and notes on usage.

Today we talk about a word from the animal world – a nest. For some animals, especially birds, a nest is a shelter and a place to raise their young. So, it should not be surprising that we use the word “nest” to talk about our homes.

A nest can describe a comfortable home. And if you like to nest, you like to make your home comfy and cozy. In fact, a childbirth expert may tell pregnant women to expect strong nesting feelings to develop late in their pregnancy. This common experience is a way a woman’s body prepares for the arrival of the new baby.

However, feathering your nest is quite a different thing. If you feather your own nest, you are not making your home comfortable by adding feathers. You are making yourself rich, especially in a way that is unfair or dishonest.

But let's get back to nesting.

An empty nest is a family home where the children have grown up and left. So, an empty nester is a parent whose children have grown up and left home.

Some parents may feel sad or lost when they become empty nesters. This is called empty nest syndrome. While parents may feel sad, most children are happy to become independent and fly the coop. "To fly the coop" is a very informal expression that means the children have left the family home.

A coop is a small structure people make for domesticated birds -- namely chickens: hens and roosters. We call these shelters either a "chicken coop" or a "hen house." But, for some reason, we never say "hen coop" or "chicken house."

Online, you might see the expression "fly the nest." That might be more of a British English saying. In the States, when often "fly the coop" rather than "fly the nest" to mean children have left home.

However, the expression "fly the coop" has another meaning. If someone flies the coop, they leave suddenly or secretly. For example, we could say a criminal who snuck out of prison flew the coop.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Once you are finished learning all the English you can, you might have to fly the VOA Learning English coop! But until that happens, keep listening!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

comfortable—adj. a pleasant feeling of ease without tension

comfy (comfortable) and cozy—adj. feeling at ease, warm and secure

domesticated—adj. not wild, cared for by humans for farm or home use

sneak out of—v. to quietly or secretly get out of a place or a requirement

Article 136: 'Icing on the Cake' Is As Good As It Sounds

Date: 2023-09-16T21:59:00+00:00 | 553 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore English words and expressions. We give you examples and notes on usage.

Today we talk about a delicious dessert made from flour, butter, sugar, and flavorings such as vanilla, chocolate, or my favorite, coconut. We are talking about cake!

Cake is a commonly served sweet treat at celebrations. And the word also appears in several English idioms.

Back in 2022, we taught the idiom to have your cake and eat it too. This means to have the best of both worlds. You do not have to choose between two good things. Another expression is a piece of cake. This describes something that is very easy to do or finish.

Because of all the sugar and butter, we probably should not eat too much cake. But it is so good! And sometimes having a lot of something good is better. That is the message of today's show.

Most cakes are made up of two parts: the part made from flour and the sweet topping, or icing.

Now, a cake without the sweet icing on top is already great. After all, it's made with lots of butter and sugar. It's sweet and satisfying. So, the icing is not really necessary. But it makes the cake extra special.

And that is the meaning of the idiom icing on the cake. Something already good is made better by the addition of something else. If you describe something as icing on the cake or the icing on the cake, you mean that it makes a good thing even better, or sweeter!

Let's hear an example.

She loves her new job and her new co-workers. So, getting her own parking spot was the icing on the cake! She hates looking for parking.

The idiom icing on the cake has another meaning. It can be someone's greatest accomplishment or victory.

Here is an example of that usage.

He had achieved the highest level of success in the company. So, his fancy new title was simply icing on the cake.

We have another dessert saying that means about the same thing. Some cakes or ice cream dishes have a special topping: a sweetened cherry.

So, if something is the cherry on top, it is an addition that turns something good into something great!

The Taylors bought the house without even knowing it had a large garden in the back. That was the cherry on top since they both love to garden.

Sometimes we use the 'cherry on top' when making an appeal for assistance.

Let's say, I really need a friend's help. I might say, "Please help me! Pretty please with a cherry on top." This specially worded appeal often does the trick and the help comes! But, just know that it can also make you sound a little desperate!

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo!

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for Learning English.

delicious— adj. appealing to one of the bodily senses especially of taste or smell

dessert— n.a usually sweet course or dish (as of pastry or ice cream) usually served at the end of a meal

flavoring— n.a substance added to food or drink to give it a desired taste

accomplishment— n.an ability, social quality, or skill gained through training or practice

fancy— adj.impressive

desperate— adj.being beyond or almost beyond hope

Article 137: No Need to 'Gild the Lily'

Date: 2023-09-23T22:00:02+00:00 | 687 words | Source

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Now it's time for Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage.

Before we talk about today's idiom, let's talk about words that you will need to know – gilt and gild.

“Gilt” as a noun is the gold, or something that looks like gold, laid on a surface. It can also be an adjective. “Gild” is a verb. It means to cover with a fine layer of gilt. Sometimes we add gilt to a plain material like wood to make it look better. In fact, entire buildings can be gilded to make them more pleasing to the eye.

Word experts say American writer Mark Twain created the term “Gilded Age.” In the 1873 novel, *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*, he and co-writer Charles Dudley Warner made fun of newly rich people. They discussed how these people would cover wood and other objects with a thin layer of gold to make them look more costly.

So, when you gild something you could be trying to cover up something ugly. But sometimes we may try to improve something that cannot be improved. It is already wonderful just the way it is. And our attempts to make it better can make it worse.

Take for example, a lily. Lilies are beautiful flowers. Like many beautiful things in nature, they do not need any additions to make them more beautiful.

And that brings us to the idiom *gild the lily*.

If I “gild the lily,” I add some unnecessary decoration to something already beautiful. The thing I add is superfluous. It is not needed.

Imagine if someone added a really bright shiny gold frame to the Mona Lisa painting. The frame is so bright that it is hard to see the smile on the famous woman. That would be *gilding the lily*.

However, we use this expression to talk about anything, not just artwork or objects. We *gild the lily* anytime we try to improve something that is already excellent.

For example, my friend has good bone structure and lovely skin. She's just gilding the lily when she wears makeup.

Here is another example. Once I went to a beautiful garden. It had flowers of every height and color. It had a fish pond and was completely lined with beautiful trees and bushes. The garden was beautiful and peaceful. It was perfect. And then the owners built a tall structure in the middle of it. The structure was made almost of entirely of stained glass, like church windows. And while it was beautiful, it was truly gilding the lily. When the sun shone through it, you could not see one flower.

A: I got carried away with the decorations on the birthday cake.

B: Yeah, you really went overboard with the sprinkles. The cake was so pretty and now I can't even see it!

Experts on the website Meriam Webster explain where the expression came from. The website says that "gild the lily" comes from Shakespeare. But the expression has changed over the years. In his play *The Life and Death of King John* the line is actually "to paint the lily."

Here is the shortened form from that play -- Act 4, Scene 2: "To gild refined gold, to paint the lily / To throw a perfume on the violet.... / Is wasteful and ridiculous excess."

These days we just say "gild the lily."

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

layer— n. one thickness or fold over or under another

ugly— adj. horrid or unpleasant especially to the sight

decoration— n. something that decorates or beautifies

superfluous— adj. going beyond what is enough or necessary

stained glass— n. glass colored or stained (as by fusing metallic oxides into it) for decorative applications (as in windows)

sprinkles— n. small particles of candy used as a topping

perfume— n. the scent of something sweet-smelling

ridiculous— adj. extremely silly or unreasonable

excess— n. an amount beyond what is usual, needed, or asked

We want to hear from you.

Our comment policy is here.

Article 138: 'Boilerplate' Language Is All Business

Date: 2023-09-30T22:00:17+00:00 | 466 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about a type of writing -- boilerplate. Boilerplate language is the writing in documents such as contracts. The language is standardized. This means the words are well established and used by many people. The language is widely recognized as acceptable. It is not creative, nor does it change very much.

So, when it comes to things like business documents, legal contracts, and training manuals, boilerplate is a good thing. You don't need or want creative language in those sorts of documents.

However, in writing other kinds of stories, boilerplate has a different meaning.

If a piece of writing is not special or creative, we can call it boilerplate. The words hackneyed and trite have related meanings. Hackneyed or trite writing is commonplace and repeated too often. There is nothing special about boilerplate writing.

Now, let's hear boilerplate used in some examples.

I'm not signing any contract without my lawyer looking at it first. I don't care how boilerplate it is.

The writing in the novel was boilerplate. It showed no creativity.

The writing job was not difficult for the college student. It was mostly boilerplate type stories.

Where did "boilerplate" come from?

The website Meriam-Webster.com explains how the term "boilerplate" came to mean standard or non-creative writing.

Boilerplate comes from syndicated stories used especially by weekly newspapers. These stories were ready-to-print and required no additional writing.

Boilerplate stories were not usually hard news. They were stories that just filled space in the newspaper. So, the term boilerplate can mean ordinary, mediocre writing.

In the past, these stories were sent on flat, metal plates. These story plates looked like plates used to make steam boilers, devices used to make steam for heat or power. So, they were called "boiler plates." Soon, the term "boilerplate" came to mean the actual printed material on the plates as well as to the plates themselves.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Hopefully, you don't find our materials at VOA Learning English to be boilerplate.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

standardized—adj. to be regular, normal, and predictable because of similar language, spelling and usage rules

training manual— n.a book of instructions for a specific job or task

hackneyed— adj.lacking in freshness or originality because it is repeated often

trite— adj.hackneyed or boring from much use,not fresh or original

syndicate— v.to sell material for publication at the same time in many newspapers, periodical publications, or to broadcast on television or the radio

mediocre— adj.of medium or low quality, ordinary

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

Article 139: How Do You Stay 'In Shape'?

Date: 2023-10-07T21:59:00+00:00 | 602 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give you definitions, examples, and notes on usage.

Today, we talk about fitness and exercise. Keeping in shape is a common expression for staying physically fit!

What sort of exercise do you enjoy? How do you get in shape? If you are already in shape, how do you stay in shape?

I used to walk a lot for work and that kept me in good shape. Five days a week I would walk to the train station, walk to the office and then climb stairs. At lunch, my coworkers and I would take a walk outside. Our office is in a beautiful area of Washington, D.C., surrounded by museums and monuments. So that adds up to a lot of walking!

But then, in 2020 like so many others, I started working from home. I became worried that without all that walking, I would quickly get out of shape! So, I made time for more swimming and short walks around my neighborhood. Those two kept me in shape.

Using the word “shape” when talking about fitness and health makes sense. Sometimes, we can describe the human body in terms of size and shape. But we can also use the word “shape” to talk about our projects, our activities, our actions and behaviors.

So, shape up also means to correct bad behavior. For example, a boss might warn an underperforming employee to shape up. The boss may take this expression one step further. She or he might add a threat by saying shape up or ship out.

Talking about ships, we also describe things that are clean or running smoothly as shipshape. A ship that is orderly and clean runs more smoothly and is safer. Remember, on a ship, you can be very far away from help. So, keeping things in good order prevents accidents and big problems.

So, what happens if a situation or a project was in trouble but is now going well? Well, we can say things are shaping up. If it's not going well, we can say the project is in bad shape.

Now, let's hear two friends use some of these expressions.

A: Hey, how's the project going?

B: It's going well. Everything is shipshape now.

A: What do you mean 'now'?

B: Well, last week we ran into some trouble. An employee wasn't pulling his weight and things weren't getting done.

B: I told him, "Shape up or ship out."

A: That's pretty harsh!

B: Maybe, but he shaped up. Now he's a valuable member of the team. I think he was overworked and dealing with some personal issues.

A: We all run into trouble sometimes. Hey, talking about being overworked ... let's take a break in a bit. I need a walk!

B: Sounds good. The project is in good shape. But I have to make sure I stay in good shape too!

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. We hope you enjoyed learning some "shape" expressions and verbal phrases.

Practice using them the next time you want to talk about getting or staying physically fit.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

fitness—n. physical health and strength

museum—n. a building where interesting or valuable things are collected, shown to the public, or studied

monument—n. a building, artwork or place dedicated to the memory of a person or event

neighborhood—n. the people living near one another

to pull your weight—idiom to do a fair share of work

harsh—adj. something that is unpleasant or difficult to accept

We want to hear from you.

Our comment policy is here.

Article 140: The Bad Side of Roses

Date: 2023-10-14T21:59:00+00:00 | 586 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's program, let's talk about flowers; but not just any flowers -- roses.

Who doesn't love a beautiful, sweet-smelling rose? The ancient Greeks and Romans connected roses with Aphrodite and Venus, the goddess of love. In modern times, you give a red rose to your true love and a yellow one to your true friend.

But roses also have a bad side -- thorns.

A thorn is the very sharp part of some woody plants, like blackberry bushes and roses. A prick from a thorn is painful and can cause you to bleed. So, a rose has both beauty and pain.

That is where the saying every rose has its thorns comes from. It means that rarely is something completely good. Even a very pleasant thing, event, or situation can have a bad or unpleasant side. You also could say, there's no rose without a thorn.

Actually, there are some kinds of roses without thorns. But let's not go down that garden path and just stay with our expression for today.

Now, here is an example of how to use the expression, every rose has its thorns.

Let's say you were on a game show and won a new car and a trip to Mexico. You are very excited but then find out that you must pay taxes on all the winnings. As you get ready to pay the big tax bill, you could say: "Well, every rose has its thorns."

"Thorn" has another meaning. It can also be something or someone that bothers you. A thorn in your side is a small problem, not a serious one. After all, thorns cause pain, but they are not going to kill you.

A friend who always borrows money from you could become a thorn in your side. She is annoying but not a serious problem. But what if her money troubles led to bigger problems for her?

Let's say she cannot pay her bills, and she is in danger of losing her home. In that situation, we can say she has made for herself a bed of thorns. This expression describes a painful, difficult, or unpleasant situation.

On the other hand, if she finds a way to make a lot of money, and she can pay off her debt, we can say she is now sleeping in a bed of roses. That is a really pleasant place to be.

Sometimes though, we use a bed of roses in a negative form to describe an unpleasant situation, like in this example:

A: Hey, how's everything going? A couple of months ago you told me you were struggling to pay your bills.

B: I was totally broke. I had no money at all.

A: That sounds really stressful.

A: It was no bed of roses; I can tell you that! I can't tell you how happy I am to be out of debt!

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. We hope that your English studies have not become a thorn in your side. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

prick— v.to pierce slightly with a sharp point

go down that garden path- idiom to cause (someone) to go, think, or proceed wrongly

annoying— v.causing irritation

debt— v.something owed

negative— v.marked by denial, prohibition, or refusal

broke— v.having no money

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 141: How Do You Define Success?

Date: 2023-10-21T22:00:45+00:00 | 648 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

We all want to be a success in life. But success can look different from person to person. Perhaps the key to success is really knowing yourself. What do you want? What are your skills and strong suits? What are you really good at and what are you not?

Climbing the ladder of success also requires different strategies in different industries. If you want to be a success in a traditional corporate environment, you may have to wear business clothing like a suit. As they say, you may have to dress for success.

If you want a creative job, you may need to wear the latest fashions. Again, English has a common expression about clothes and future job goals: "Dress for the job you want, not the one you have."

However, success takes more than just the right clothes. It also takes hard work. Oftentimes others do not see all the hard work that goes into a project. They think success comes suddenly, for example overnight. Let's say an unknown writer makes it big with her first book. People may call her an overnight success. But they do not know about the many years she spent studying and writing.

Another ingredient in the recipe for success is a plan. To reach your goal, you need to get organized and break the goal down into doable steps. You know what they say –if you fail to plan, you plan to fail.

Many English phrases make the road to success sound like a real physical path -- something we could find on a map.

Real roads are paved with materials such as asphalt. But when we talk about success, the roads to it are paved with different materials. Sometimes we say the roads are paved with gold. This suggests a place where success, especially financial wealth, is easy to come by.

For some people the road to success is paved with hard work or luck. Others may find their road to success is paved with failures. Learning from their failures taught them how to succeed.

Often if you follow the right road, you can achieve your goal. Then, life is filled with the sweet smell of success. You have the world at your feet. You are riding high. You've got it made and are killing it. You are golden. As you can see, we have many expressions describing success.

But make sure that you do not lose sight of what really makes you happy and successful. Some people become a victim of their own success. This means you start having problems because of your success. And that explains our final popular English saying, a gentle warning: Be careful what you wish for: you just might get it.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

How would you define success for your English studies? And do you have a plan to reach it? Go to our website and comment on the story. Or you can send us an email to this address: LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

In the subject line, write Words and Their Stories and "success."

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

strong suit– n. something in which one excels

strategy– n. a careful plan or method

fashion– n. a common style especially of dress during a particular time or among a certain group

ingredient– n. something that enters into a compound or is a component part of any combination or mixture

recipe– n. a set of instructions for making something (as a food dish) from various things

paved– n. to lay or cover with material (such as asphalt or concrete) that forms a firm level surface for travel

asphalt– n. any of various compositions of asphalt having different uses (as for pavement or for waterproof cement or paint)

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 142: 'Birds of a Feather ...'

Date: 2023-10-28T22:00:00+00:00 | 499 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, examples and sometimes notes on usage.

Have you ever found yourself in a group of people with similar ways of thinking and interests to yours? They understand you. They really get you. They may even be wearing similar clothing to yours.

We have a great expression for this: Birds of a feather flock together. This means people of the same kind or with the same tastes and interests often find each other.

Artists may spend time with other artists. Lawyers often talk about legal issues or court cases with other lawyers. And people who love languages like to discuss grammar and words with other language-loving people.

We have many similar expressions, and many of them use the word “mind” or “brain.”

If someone thinks like me, I can say we are like-minded. I can also say we are of like mind or of the same mind.

There is also something called a hive mind. In a beehive, the bees all work together to achieve the same goal. People who are part of a hive mind have similar thoughts, ideas, and opinions. They often work together to discuss an issue or solve a problem.

And sometimes, I can joke that I share the same brain with those who share my thinking and attitudes.

If you are a spiritual kind of person, you can call them your kindred spirits. If you are more of a science person, you can say you are on the same wavelength.

And if you are a person who likes to make things, you can use these two expressions: cut from the same cloth, cast from the same mold.

All these expressions mean the same thing -- you feel a strong connection to someone and feel very similar to them.

We have another expression that can also be used in this situation. But we only use it when we have a similar idea with another person: great minds think alike.

Welcome to our family!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

flock— v.to gather or move in a crowd:— n.a group of animals (such as birds or sheep) assembled or herded together

attitude— n.a position assumed for a specific purpose

hive— n.a container for housing honeybees : a colony of bees

kindred— n.of a similar nature or character

wavelength— n.the distance (as from crest to crest) in the line of advance of a wave from any one point to the next corresponding point:a certain line of thought or behavior that reveals a common understanding

cast— v.to give a shape to (a substance) by pouring in liquid or plastic form into a mold and letting harden without pressure

mold— n.the frame on, around, or in which something is constructed or shaped

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 143: 'Straight from the Horse's Mouth'

Date: 2023-11-04T22:00:30+00:00 | 535 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's show, we will be talking about an animal that is as impressive and beautiful as it is useful -- the horse.

Today's expression is straight from the horse's mouth. "Straight from the horse's mouth" is about the way we get information and — with this expression — that means directly.

When we hear something from the source, we can say we heard it first-hand. It is coming from a primary source.

When we use this expression, we can drop the word "straight" if necessary. So, if you hear something from the horse's mouth, you hear it from the person who has direct personal knowledge of the information.

For example, a co-worker of mine, Andrew, likes to play the piano. But don't take my word for it, let's hear it straight from the horse's mouth.

ANDREW: I really like to play the piano.

The opposite of this expression would be through the grapevine. That is a very indirect way to get information.

Now, let's talk about origin. Experts are not sure how this expression started. However, there are two common explanations.

One traditional explanation is about buying horses. Before buying a horse, a possible buyer would look into the horse's mouth. This is because you can tell a bit about a horse's health and age from its gums and teeth.

Another explanation involves horse racing. At the horse races, people talk about which horses will win and which ones will lose. The most valuable opinions are from the people who know the horses the best – the riders and trainers. Since you can't ask the horse, these people are the next best thing. "Straight from the horse's mouth" suggests the most knowledgeable source of information.

So, this expression can also mean from a reliable source. The information is coming from a trustworthy person. It may even be the definitive source, meaning the best authority.

Now, let's hear the expression used in another example:

A: Hey, guess what? Stella is moving to Toronto! She's so excited.

B: Are you sure? She just bought a house a year ago.

A: She told me herself last night over dinner.

B: I just can't believe it. I mean, she also just got a promotion and a raise at her job. It doesn't make sense.

A: Well, whether it makes sense or not, that's what she told me.

B: Maybe you misheard her.

A: I didn't. I heard it straight from the horse's mouth – Stella's!

And that's all the time we have on the show today.

If anyone asks you where you learned this expression, tell them you heard it straight from the horse's mouth – from VOA Learning English.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

primary–adj. happening or coming first

gums–n. (pl.) the tissue inside the mouth around the teeth

reliable–adj. able to be trusted to provide what is needed; dependable

definitive–adj. considered final or settled as the best or most correct

promotion–n. an increase in job rank or position

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

Our comment policy is here.

Article 144: Are You 'Sitting Pretty'?

Date: 2023-11-11T21:59:00+00:00 | 410 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about being in a good place. And we begin with an old American pop singer.

When Karen Carpenter sings about being “on top of the world,” she describes feeling happy, thankful, and being in a great place.

If you are on top of the world, you are in a great position. You are happy with life.

When things are really going your way, you can also say you are sitting pretty. Sitting pretty, means you are in a very favorable situation. You love your job. You have a nice home. And your finances are in good order.

This expression can also mean you are in a good, safe, and secure position. You don't need to worry about the future.

It can also mean you are in an advantageous position. For example, when a friend of mine bought property, she found herself in a price war with another buyer. However, she was sitting pretty for several reasons: She offered a big down payment and a flexible move-in date.

This example shows how sitting pretty can have a little difference in meaning than other similar expressions. It can suggest that you are in a good situation, especially when others are not.

As we said, we have other expressions that mean about the same thing as being on top of the world and sitting pretty. If you are in a great situation and have a favorable position, you can also say you have it made. You are ahead of the game. You are going places.

If you feel great about your life and just feel great in general, you might say you are on cloud nine. The origin of this cloud expression comes from the field of agriculture. The Farmer's Almanac explains that scientists wanted to make recording cloud observations easier. So, they rated clouds zero to nine. Zero represented the lowest clouds and nine the highest clouds.

Word experts say this is where the expression to be on cloud nine probably comes from. If you're on cloud nine you'll be very high up which may also describe your feelings.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

When it comes to your English studies, we hope all of you are on cloud nine.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

advantageous—adj. helpful; favorable

down payment—n. a part of the full price paid at the time of purchase or delivery with the balance to be paid later

flexible—adj. readily changed or changing

Article 145: Older, More Diverse America by the Year 2100

Date: 2023-11-15T21:56:00+00:00 | 549 words | [Source](#)

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The U.S. Census Bureau is a federal agency that researches information about America's population, housing, and economy.

The latest Census Bureau report shows that the U.S. population will decrease with low immigration, and older adults will outnumber children by the end of the century. The report also says that white, non-Hispanic people will account for less than 50 percent of the population.

The Census report offers an idea of what the nation may look like in the future. But it cannot predict unexpected events like a worldwide pandemic.

Paul Ong teaches public affairs at the University of California, Los Angeles. He said such predictions can help the U.S. prepare for change, from health care for old people to the number of schools for the young.

“Seeing that possibility also opens up opportunities for action,” he said.

Population changes caused by birth and deaths are more predictable. They may also be caused by changes in immigration policy. Because of that, the Census Bureau offers three different predictions through the year 2100 based on high, medium, and low immigration.

In all three situations, the U.S. will become older and more diverse. If there is low immigration, the population will decrease; medium or high immigration will increase the population.

By 2029, the report estimates that older people will outnumber children, with 71 million people over 65 as compared to 69 million under the age of 18. The aging of the population is important because this will mean fewer workers. An aging population also means more deaths than births.

The report estimates that, by 2025, the share of the U.S. population that is white and not Hispanic will be under 50 percent for the first time. Also, Asians will pass Hispanics as the largest group of immigrants by race or ethnicity.

Under the medium immigration estimate, the U.S. population reaches its highest total at more than 369 million people in 2081. After that, the Census Bureau predicts a slight population decline, with deaths

overtaking births and immigration.

By the end of the 2090s, the report estimates that foreign population will make up almost 19.5 percent of people in the U.S. The number is currently at 13.9 percent.

In the past, immigration was linked to economic opportunity in the U.S. Today, immigration is caused by climate change, social issues related to dictators and violence, as well as ever-changing feelings about immigrants in the country.

These issues make immigration more difficult to predict today, says Manuel Pastor, a professor of sociology at the University of Southern California.

Aliana Mediratta is a 20-year-old student at Washington University in St. Louis. She welcomes a future with a more diverse population. She believes immigration “is great for our society and our economy.”

But that optimism is affected by issues that seem to be getting worse, including climate change and gun violence.

“I feel like I have to be optimistic about the future,” Mediratta said. She thinks that if she believes the worst will happen, it might stop her from doing the morally right thing, even if it is hard.

Mike Schneider reported this story for the Associated Press. Gena Bennett adapted it for VOA Learning English.

opportunity—n. situations that make something possible

diverse—adj. including different kinds of people

medium—adj. in the middle

optimism—n. hopefulness and confidence about the future

Article 146: 'State-of-the-Art' Is the Best of Its Time

Date: 2023-11-18T22:00:00+00:00 | 500 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, examples, and notes on usage. Sometimes we use them in short conversations.

When it comes to learning a language, using words in conversations is not a state-of-the-art learning method. It is a traditional method that has stood the test of time because it works.

So, what method would be considered state-of-the-art? Talking with an artificial intelligence robot or using some other cutting edge computer technology would be considered state-of-the-art. It would be the newest and best available.

The phrase "state-of-the-art" also describes the highest level of development.

We can use state-of-the-art to describe advancements in scientific fields. Any major scientific progress can be described as state of the art.

State-of-the-art can also be called top of the line or best in its class.

We can also say something is the pinnacle of technology, or the peak of performance if it is state-of-the-art. Another way to express this thought is to say it is on the forefront of technology, development or advancement in a particular field.

Something that is state-of-the-art is innovative.

These terms all have a similar meaning: something is the latest and greatest.

Some word experts say this phrase originated in the early 20th century. It is now very commonly used in both formal and informal situations.

Now, let's hear some of these terms used in a conversation between two friends.

A: Wow, what do you have there?

B: This is my new coffee machine. It is state-of-the-art.

A: I can see that! It's really impressive.

B: It has an on/off setting that I can control from my phone.

A: You can start your coffee from across town.

B: Yes, I can! The bean container is split into four parts. So, I can have different kinds of coffee.

A: That is a great innovation!

B: It gets better. This machine is the pinnacle of coffee technology! Its state-of-the-art technology can also steam milk and add a choice of five different flavorings.

A: Well, enough talking! Let's have a cup of coffee! I'll take mine with caramel flavor and extra frothy milk.

B: Um, yeah. That's going to have to wait for a bit.

B: I don't know how to use it yet. But I will after I read this 20-page instruction book.

A: Got it. I can help. But first ... I'll go get us some coffee.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

conversation –n. An informal talk between two or more people

pinnacle –n. the highest point of something

peak –n. the top of something, such as a mountain, that comes to a sharp point

forefront –n. the leading position

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

Our comment policy is here.

Article 147: Take a Moment to 'Count Your Blessings'

Date: 2023-11-25T22:00:13+00:00 | 790 words | Source

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Now, the VOA Learning English program Words and Their Stories.

There are certain times of the year when we stop and think about all the things that make us happy or bring us joy. Some people even make a list of these things. In English, we have a saying for this: to count your blessings.

When we count our blessings, we note all the wonderful things in our lives. This helps us to appreciate how good life is.

Thanksgiving is a time when many Americans count their blessings. The United States observes this holiday on the fourth Thursday in November.

Counting your blessings is important. It shows that you are grateful. Gratitude is a feeling of appreciation or thanks. When people count their blessings, they can say it like this: "I am thankful for my family. I am thankful for my friends. I am thankful for my health."

It is better to be grateful for our blessings than to take them for granted. When we take something for granted, we do not appreciate it. Sometimes we are not appreciative of our good fortune and blessings until they are gone.

But now, let's take a step back. What exactly is a blessing?

In English, the word "blessing" has at least two meanings. As we said, a blessing is something that brings you happiness or helps you. To religious people, a blessing is approval and help from a higher source-- God.

A blessing can also be a sign of approval. It gives you permission to do something. For example, a traditional marriage custom involves a blessing. If a young man wants to marry a young woman, he may want to first get her family's blessing.

Give thanks for small blessings

Now, when we want to show our recognition of all the little things that prove helpful, we sometimes say "give thanks for small blessings." We often say this expression in the middle of a troubling or difficult time.

So, let's say a friend of yours is angry about a flat tire on his car. But then he stops and thinks for a minute and says, "Well, at least I have a car. I should count myself lucky and give thanks for small blessings."

Now, not all blessings are simple and easy to recognize. Some are more complex than others. That brings us to the expression "mixed blessing."

A mixed blessing is something that is both good and bad. For example, being really beautiful can be a mixed blessing. On one hand, you look great and may be treated really well by some people. On the other hand, you look great and may be treated badly by other people. So, when we use this expression, we often use the terms "on one hand" and "on the other hand."

Blessing in disguise

Here is another blessing expression. It is a little more complicated: a blessing in disguise.

First of all, a disguise hides something that you do not want seen or noticed. For example, a secret agent might wear a disguise to hide her identity. Or a bottle of perfume might disguise an unpleasant smell.

So, a blessing in disguise is a bad event or situation. But the outcome or result is actually good.

Here's how to use the expression blessing in disguise.

Things are great! For starters, I got fired last month.

Oh. Sorry. So, why are things great? Getting fired is terrible.

Well, yes. But this time it was truly a blessing in disguise. You see, after I was fired I found a new job -- a better job that I really love. And it pays more.

And that's all the time we have this week for Words and Their Stories.

Now it's time for you to "count your blessings." What are you thankful for? You can tell us in the Comments Section.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

When I am worried and I can't sleep I count my blessings instead of sheep. And I fall asleep counting my blessings...

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English. George Grow was the editor. The song at the end is "Count Your Blessings (Instead of Sheep)" sung by Krista Branch.

appreciate—v. to understand the worth or importance of (something or someone) : to admire and value (something or someone) : to be grateful for (something)

grateful—adj. feeling or showing thanks : feeling or showing thanks to someone for some helpful act

gratitude—n. the state of being grateful

take them for granted—expression to never think about something because you believe it will always be available or stay exactly the same

source—n.a cause or starting point

tire—n.a rubber cushion that usually contains compressed air and fits around a wheel (as of an automobile)

perfume—n.a substance that emits a pleasant odor

reunion—n.an organized gathering of people who have not been together for some time

fired—adj.dismissed from a job

Article 148: Merriam-Webster Chooses ‘Authentic’ as Word of the Year

Date: 2023-11-27T21:55:10+00:00 | 653 words | Source

No media source currently available

The dictionary company Merriam-Webster chose the word “authentic” as its word of the year for 2023.

Something that is authentic is real or true.

The publisher celebrated its 20th anniversary of choosing a word of the year on Monday. Speaking to The Associated Press, or AP, dictionary editor Peter Sokolowski said the world is in a “crisis of authenticity” in 2023. “What we realize,” he said, “is that when we question authenticity, we value it even more.”

Sokolowski said the word is often looked up on Merriam-Webster’s website, but in 2023 it was searched for even more than usual.

He noted that authentic is an important word in a world where artificial intelligence software permits people to create “deepfakes” or false videos that look real.

Often, Sokolowski said, words become “words of the year” because searches match world events. However, this year, there was a general increased interest in the word “authentic.”

The AP noted that authenticity was a popular subject for discussion in 2023. People such as Taylor Swift and Prince Harry looked for authenticity in their performances and writing. Even businessman Elon Musk discussed authenticity at an event in February when he urged company leaders and politicians to operate their own social media accounts in order to “speak authentically.”

Authenticity is important in education, Sokolowski said. He said we are in a time when students can use artificial intelligence tools such as ChatGPT to complete writing assignments to avoid work.

“We don’t always trust what we see anymore,” he said.

The dictionary includes a number of descriptions to help people understand the word’s meaning. It notes something that is authentic is “not false,” “true to one’s own personality,” and “something made or done the same way as an original.”

How the word is picked

Merriam-Webster says it filters out some common search words such as “effect” and “affect” that are always among the top searches. The online word game “Wordle” also increases searches for some words as players check letters and words before they play them.

Some other possible words for 2023 included “X” after Musk changed the name of the social media service formerly known as Twitter. Others include “EGOT” after the actress Viola Davis won a Grammy award and “elemental” after Pixar released a new movie in June.

However, the company settled on authentic one year after choosing “gaslighting.” Gaslighting is a word that is used to discuss the act of misleading someone over a long period of time. In a way, it is the opposite of authentic.

Other words that were popular in 2023 but did not win “word of the year” included “rizz,” a slang word that has to do with charm or appeal. It is a shortened form of the word charisma.

“Implode” became a popular search in 2023 after a vessel used for undersea exploration was lost in June. Experts say the Titan vessel likely imploded or broke apart because of the high water pressure in the deep sea.

“Coronation” was looked up often in May when Charles III was crowned King of England.

“Kibbutz” is a word that came up in recent weeks after the terror group Hamas attacked the Israeli “communal farms or settlements” near Gaza on October 7.

You can visit Merriam-Webster’s website to look at more words that did not quite make the cut to become “word of the year.”

Dan Friedell adapted this story for Learning English based on The Associated Press story.

dictionary—n. a book that contains definitions of words in a language

match—v. to have two things that are related to each other or are linked in some way

personality—n. the qualities that make a person who they are

original—adj. something that is produced for the first time and is not a copy of something else

make the cut—v. (phrasal) to continue to the next level of a competition; to do enough to continue

We want to hear from you. What is your personal “word of the year?”

Article 149: It's Time to 'See the Light'

Date: 2023-12-02T21:59:00+00:00 | 718 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

In many places, the holiday season in December can be a magical time. During this month, many cultures celebrate with festivals of lights. From Amsterdam in the Netherlands to Sydney, Australia; from Lyon, France to many cities in Japan -- lights are used to lift the spirits and to celebrate.

So, today we will talk about a few expressions that use the word “light.”

The first is to be a beacon of light. A beacon of light gives hope and happiness to others. If you have ever been called a beacon of light, take it as a big compliment. A person who is a beacon of light makes things better for everyone around them. A beacon of light can be a person who helps guide others to safety, much like a lighthouse does for ships and boats.

These people can even cast light on the darkness in our lives. When we cast light on something, we make it better. The expression can also mean that we explain something more fully or expose some unknown parts of an issue or problem. Some people like to say, “Let me cast a little light on the subject,” before they explain something.

After someone casts light on a complex or difficult issue, you might begin to see the light. If you see the light, you understand something. Often, you have realized a difficult truth. For example, years ago my friend refused to believe that her boyfriend had a drinking problem. But when he was arrested for drunk driving, she began to see the light. She got him help and now he has been alcohol-free for many years. So, he saw the light, too.

This expression is very different from seeing the light of day--although they sound similar.

When something sees the light of day, it is made available to others. For example, some people write stories and poems. But these works never see the light of day. They stay hidden in a desk drawer or notebook.

To see the light of day can also mean to be born or to come into existence. Let's say you worked on a big project for many months or even years. You will probably feel very excited when it finally sees the light of day.

Now, let's talk about “bad light.”

Bad lighting can make even the most beautiful person look bad in a picture or video. So, it is not surprising that seeing something in a bad light means to form a bad opinion of something or someone.

Sometimes our habits and attitudes can be seen in a bad light. For example, a scientist was seen in a bad light by her coworkers. They said she was not a team player.

Now, let's hear these some of these expressions used in a discussion between two friends.

A: Wow, you look awful. Are you sick?

B: No. I haven't slept in a week.

A: Why? What's wrong?

B: My roommate started playing the bag pipes. They are SO loud. And she plays late at night!

A: The bag pipes?! Oh, that's too bad. Well, have you told her to stop?

B: No. She's a really nice person. So, I don't want her to see me in a bad light. I mean, we all do annoying things, right?

A: Yes. But, we all don't play the bag pipes late at night. Look, you need to do something. You need your sleep! You could hide her bag pipes. Hide them somewhere so they will never see the light of day again!

B: You are so mean! But you are also right. I'm beginning to see the light. I'll say something later. But for now (yawn) can I crash on your couch. I'm beat!

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

beacon—n. a very bright light such as a light on a lighthouse

compliment—n. a comment on how good something is or an expression of praise

expose—v. to show something that was unknown or covered up earlier

habit—n. a regular behavior

attitude—n. a way of feeling or thinking that affects a person's behavior

crash—v. (informal idiom) to go to sleep after being very tired

beat—adj. (informal) very tired

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is here.

Article 150: AI, Hallucinate, Authentic or Rizz for Word of the Year

Date: 2023-12-09T21:59:00+00:00 | 642 words | Source

No media source currently available

As the year 2023 comes to a close, English language dictionary publishers are announcing their choices for word of the year. The words usually come from popular usage, news events, or things that are on people's minds.

Collins, a British publisher, has named "AI" as its word of the year for 2023. AI, short for artificial intelligence, is a term that describes "the modeling of human mental functions by computer programs."

AI is increasingly becoming a part of everyday life. Just this year, the Beatles released a song with help from AI. The American toy company Mattel now uses AI to design new toy cars. A Kuwaiti news organization used AI to create "Fedha", a female presenter to read the news. AI has also been used to identify an asteroid that could one day present a threat to Earth.

One of the best-known AI programs is ChatGPT. The program can have a discussion with people, write books, and create images. The program learns from a large database of books, online materials, and other media.

It can produce human-like writing. But, sometimes, its writings are not correct or do not make sense. When artificial intelligence produces such information, people say that the program has “hallucinated.”

The British dictionary publisher Cambridge chose “hallucinate” as its word of the year. It says the word “gets to the heart of why people are talking about AI.”

To “hallucinate” means to seem to see, hear, feel, or smell something that does not exist. But when used in connection to AI, it means to produce false information.

Cambridge says, “generative AI is a powerful tool but one that we’re all still learning how to interact with safely and effectively.” The publisher adds that “AI hallucinations remind us that humans still need to bring their critical thinking skills to use these tools.”

The American publisher Merriam-Webster chose “authentic” as its word of the year.

Merriam-Webster says it has seen a major rise in searches for “authentic” in 2023. The publisher says the searches are driven by “stories and conversations about AI, celebrity culture, identity, and social media.”

Authentic has several meanings, including “not false,” “true to one’s own personality” and “made or done the same way as an original.”

With the rise of artificial intelligence, Merriam-Webster says the line between “real” and “fake” has become increasingly unclear.

Other words Merriam-Webster considered include “deepfake,” “coronation,” “indict” and “rizz.”

The editors of the Oxford dictionary left the selection for Word of the Year to language lovers.

Over 30,000 people voted and selected four finalists for word of the year. They were “Swiftie” (fans of Taylor Swift), “situationship” (an informal romantic or sexual relationship), “prompt” (an instruction given to an artificial intelligence program), and “rizz.”

If you are not familiar with “rizz,” it is time to learn its meaning. It is Oxford’s word of the year. “Rizz” is believed to come from the word “charisma.” Oxford says it means having “style, charm or attractiveness.” It can also mean the “ability to attract a romantic or sexual partner.” The word is popular among Generation Z -- people born during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

“Rizz” can be used as a verb, too. To “rizz up” means “to attract, seduce, or chat up (a person).”

Oxford editors said they chose “rizz” as “an interesting example of how language can be formed, shaped, and shared within communities, before being picked up more widely in society.”

Hai Do wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

asteroid— n.any of the small rocky celestial bodies found especially between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter

celebrity— n.a famous or celebrated person

original— adj.relateing to or being the origin or beginning

coronation— n.accession to the highest office

indict— v.to charge with a crime by the finding or presentment of a jury (such as a grand jury) in due form of law

seduce— v.to persuade to do wrong : to persuade to have sexual intercourse

Article 151: When Does a Problem 'Snowball'?

Date: 2023-12-16T21:59:00+00:00 | 542 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

If you live in a part of the world that is experiencing winter right now, it might be snowing.

But even if you do not live in a snowy climate, try to image cold, snowy weather. Imagine having a snowball fight with your friends. A snowball is, of course, a ball of snow. But not all snow makes good snowballs. If the snow is too light and dry, it will not hold together. It is powdery. Wetter snow makes for great snowballs. You can pack it into a tight ball, which is great for throwing.

A snowball might hurt a bit, but it would not cause a lot of damage. But imagine that snowball rolling down a hill. As it rolls, it picks up more and more snow. It gets bigger and bigger until it crashes into something and causes damage!

And that gives us “snowball” as a verb.

Dictionary.com defines the verb “snowball” as becoming “larger, greater, more intense...” very quickly.

If something like a project, campaign, or business snowballs, its progress rapidly increases and grows. For example, after a photographer posted a picture on Instagram of a monkey protecting a human baby, her followers snowballed to over 1 million within a week!

However, when we use this expression the ending results are usually not good. Something that snowballs in a bad way goes downhill quickly. For example, when we do not take care of small problems, they can snowball into bigger ones.

Now, let’s hear an example using the verb “snowball.”

A: I have a friend who lied about knowing sign language on her resume. She thought no one would ask her to actually prove she knew sign language. But her boss asked her to. In fact, he set up a big meeting with the deaf community and assigned her to act as a translator. She lied about why she could not attend

the event. But her boss surprised her with an unplanned meeting. That is when he found out that she did not know how to sign. Her lie on her resume quickly snowballed into a workplace drama that got her fired from her job.

Next, let's talk about the expression snowball effect.

A snowball effect is a situation where one action or event causes many other similar actions or events. And these actions or events grow and grow bigger and more problematic – just like a snowball rolling down a hill.

A snowball effect is similar to a chain of events. However, with a chain of events, one thing leads to another. But these events do not necessarily intensify or grow bigger.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Hopefully, using resources on VOA Learning English is having a snowball effect on your English studies ... in a good way!

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

climate– n.a region with specified weather conditions

powdery– adj.resembling or consisting of matter in a finely divided state

intense– adj.existing in an extreme degree

resume– n.a short account of one's career and qualifications

translator– n.to turn into one's own or another language

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is here.

Article 152: 'Tis the Season!

Date: 2023-12-23T21:59:00+00:00 | 698 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about the word “season.” We use this word in many different ways.

“Season” can refer to one of the four parts of the year. For example, Washington, D.C. is in a part of the United States that has four seasons: winter, spring, summer, and autumn. Some parts of the U.S. do not have four seasons.

“Season” can also describe the periods marked by warmth and growth or cold weather and falling leaves. For example, when the weather becomes warmer and days are lighter longer, the growing season begins for some plants. When the weather gets colder and the days darker, the hibernation season begins for some animals.

We also use “season” to describe periods that are only related to the weather. For example, some areas of the world have rainy seasons and dry seasons. Some parts of the U.S. have a tornado season. And in other parts of the world there are monsoon seasons.

“Season” can also refer to the time before and during a major holiday. December is a busy holiday season in many parts of the world. Holidays include Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe and the Winter Solstice. December is often a time to take a break from work and spend time with loved ones.

Speaking of Christmas, when we say ‘tis the season we are talking about something dealing with this holiday – its good side and its not-so-good side. For example, let’s say I give a co-worker a big box of homemade cookies. They might say to me, “Thanks! But why are you giving me so many cookies?” I can answer, “‘Tis the season!”

Here is another example. If I go out to a store and it is packed with holiday shoppers, I could complain to a friend. And they could respond, “Well, ‘tis the season!” What they really mean is this: At this time of the year, stores are usually very busy with Christmas shoppers.

In fact, Christmas is like an open season on shopping deals. “Open season on” something means that it is being hunted, targeted, or in this case ... bought.

“Open season” also describes a period of time when a particular activity or opportunity is unrestricted. It is widely available. This term probably comes from hunting. Hunting traditionally has many restrictions. People can hunt only at certain times of the year and even then, there are restrictions on which animals and how many you can hunt. Fishing too has similar restrictions. But if it is open season, there are few restrictions.

As in our earlier shopping example, we can use this term for just about anything that is targeted with few restrictions. When talking about the best times to travel, for example, it is a good idea to travel off-season. If few people are traveling, it is a good time to find cheap air travel, hotels, and rental cars. It is open season on travel deals.

And like hunting season, we can have other “seasons” too. For example, beach areas are popular during tourist season. And people with allergies probably do not like hay fever season or allergy season.

So, “season” can simply mean a time of the year marked by a special activity. Sports seasons, for example, are popular with fans of sports.

We also have different seasons in our lives: Our time as children, going off to college, becoming parents, helping our aging parents, starting new careers or starting retirement. These are all different seasons of life. And they all have different aspects to enjoy and to be thankful for.

And that’s the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ...

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

refer to – v. (phrasal) to talk about or describe

hibernate—v.to pass winter in a resting state :hibernation—n.

complain—v.to say that you are unhappy with something

cheap—adj.not costly; low cost

rental—adj.something you have paid for the temporary use of

allergy—n. a condition of being especially sensitive to things like pollen, mold or foods which can make a person suffering from it feel sick

career—n. the period of working and doing a job in one's life, especially within one field or profession

aspect—n. a part of something

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is here.

Article 153: The World in Other Words in 2023

Date: 2023-12-29T21:55:00+00:00 | 780 words | Source

No media source currently available

Many people consider choices from dictionary publishers, including artificial intelligence, authentic or rizz, to be “words of the year.” But the Associated Press reported on some words used in other parts of the world that have been gaining popularity.

So today, we will look at other words from around the world for 2023.

Password child in Australia

In Australia, the local Macquarie Dictionary has been selecting a “word of the month” all year. One was “cozzie livs,” a word that Australians use to complain about the high cost of living. Another was “murder noodle” for a snake in a country that is home to the world’s most poisonous snake.

But “password child” is a word that many parents can recognize. Australians use the term to describe children seen as favored over their brothers or sisters because their name is used in their parents’ passwords.

Kitawaramba in Kenya (Swahili)

Paul Mackenzie, a cleric in the East African nation of Kenya, said the word “kitawaramba” on his way to court. He was accused of asking his followers to starve themselves in order to meet Jesus. More than 400 people died as a result.

The unfamiliar word appeared to be a threat. Now Kenyans use it to warn others that something bad might happen to them for their actions.

Bwa kale in Haiti (Creole)

Criminal groups have brought violence, including killings and kidnappings, to the daily lives of people in Haiti, an island nation in the Caribbean Sea.

Civilians have been fighting back and saying “bwa kale” as they chase suspected criminals. “Bwa Kale” means “peeledwood” in the Haitian Creole language.

The term had long been used to express male dominance and power. Now it has spread overseas. A video on social media shows a group of Latino soccer fans saying “Bwa kale!” after their team beat an opponent.

Spy balloon in the United States

No other word represents the tension between China and the United States more than “spy balloon.”

It began when a Chinese balloon entered U.S. airspace over Alaska. The balloon then flew slowly and stayed over some western states that were home to sensitive military areas. U.S. warplanes followed it for several days before shooting it out of the sky over water off the coast of South Carolina.

China protested the downing and called it an attack on a “weather balloon” by U.S. military forces. A witness to the downing of the balloon compared it to a “Top Gun movie.”

■ (zei) in Japan (Japanese)

The top Buddhist leader at the Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto wrote the word ■ (zei) in a closely watched yearly event.

The Japanese public chose “zei,” which means taxes, to best represent the year 2023. Many expect taxes to increase to pay for the country’s military buildup. Under the latest national security plan, Prime Minister Fumio Kishida’s government aims to double Japan’s yearly defense spending to about \$69 billion. That would make the country the world’s third largest military spender after the U.S. and China.

■■■■■ (shan dao hou zi) in Taiwan (Mandarin)

■■■■■ (shan dao hou zi) or mountain road monkey was first used to describe young Taiwanese who like to ride motorcycles fast through the country’s winding mountain roads.

But the term became a popular expression for young people’s economic pressures after a 20-minute film on YouTube called *The Life of a Mountain Roadmonkey*.

In the movie, the “roadmonkey” lends his girlfriend money to improve her bike, but she cheats on him and leaves him. In debt, he works overtime to make money, does not have time for friends, and finally dies in a crash.

His story started a discussion about the low pay and long hours for many in Taiwan, where housing and traditional “success” are often out of reach.

The nones around the world

In many countries, there has been a big increase in the number of people who select the word “none” when asked about their religion.

The nonbelievers, atheists, or agnostics have become known as the “nones.”

The “nones” are believed to make up of 30 percent or more of the adult population in the United States and Canada, as well as several European countries. Japan, Israel and Uruguay are among other nations where large numbers of people are “nones.”

And that’s the world in “other” words for 2023.

I’m Mario Ritter, Jr.

Hai Do adapted this Associated Press report for VOA Learning English.

complain–v.to express your unhappiness about a situation or something someone has done

peel–v.to remove the skin or outer layer from a fruit or similar object

dominance–n.the quality of being the most powerful or the leader of others

We want to hear from you.

Our comment policy is here.

Article 154: Goal! Do You Have One for 2024?

Date: 2023-12-30T21:59:00+00:00 | 518 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

December 31, 2023, means the new year 2024 is nearly here! At this time of the year, many people set New Year’s resolutions. Many people want to make a change in life and others set a goal.

So, today we talk about the word goal. You may know this word because you shout “goaaaal” when your team scores. It is exciting! It is also exciting when we reach our personal goals.

A goal is something we want to reach. It is something we work toward. It is important to have goals in life and a plan to achieve them. A football player’s goal is to score a goal, and a goalie’s goal is to stop a ... goal.

Let’s continue talking about sports. Many sports involve not only goals but also a goal line. A goal line gives the space on the field in which you can score or make a goal.

Let’s talk about American football for a minute. That sport involves tall goal posts. To make a point, a kicker can kick a football between the posts and score. Now, imagine if you are kicking that ball. You have the goal posts in your sights. You kick! It looks good! It looks like the ball is going to go between the posts. But then, at the last minute, someone moves the goal posts, and your ball does not go through.

To move the goal posts as you are kicking the ball would not be fair. If someone moves the goal posts, they are changing the rules of the game or a situation to meet their own needs.

Let's say you are building a house for someone. Both of you agree on a design, plan and price to build the house, and a date to complete the building. As the date of completion arrives, the soon-to-be owner wants to change the design of the house. She says that she wants the new design for the same price.

You could say that she has moved the goal post! Or you could say that she has moved the goal line because some sports use a line and not a post. And some sports use both.

People who have the goal line or goal post moved on them may fall short of their goals. If you fall short of your goal you do not accomplish it. You do not succeed.

To reach your goals, it is a good idea to have a plan. Set out small steps you can do to reach your goals. And when you complete those small steps on your way to your end goal ... make sure to celebrate! And make sure no one moves the goal line on you.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next year ...

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

resolution— n.a promise to yourself to do or to not do something

score— v.to win or get a point, goal, etc. in a competition, sport, or game

achieve— v.successfully bring about or reach

accomplish— v.to bring about (a result) by effort

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is here.

Article 155: Do You Color Inside or Outside the Lines?

Date: 2024-01-06T21:59:00+00:00 | 495 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today, let's talk about a common art activity – coloring.

Coloring books are common objects of play and learning for children around the world. In recent years, coloring books for adults have grown popular too.

Children usually color with wax sticks called crayons. But, you can also use color markers, pens, and pencils.

Adding color to black and white images is fun and often calming. You just choose a color and fill in the space created by the lines. In fact, children are often taught to stay inside the lines when they color.

Apparently, this idea does not come naturally. Child development experts say very young children begin by scribbling on a coloring page. They do not pay attention to the lines of the picture. The result is a colorful but often messy-looking picture.

Then between the ages of two and five they start coloring inside the lines. This progression shows an improvement in many skills: fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination, space and object awareness, and more.

Many children are taught to color inside the lines. As a result, many adults do the same. This makes this finished artwork look more organized and proper because you followed the images' guide lines.

That is why the expression coloring inside the lines means to think or act within generally accepted guidelines. If you color inside the lines, you follow the rules. You stay in the lines or you play by the book (not the coloring book ... but the rule book).

We can also say you stick to the script. A script contains the spoken words performers must say out-loud in a play, movie, or show. Sticking to the script means you do not change the lines you are given.

Such people can also be said to toe the line. That expression comes from foot racing.

On the other hand, people who color outside the lines do not follow rules. They are rebels. Rebels reject rules. They color outside the lines and think outside the box. Instead of sticking to the script they go off script. They improvise.

Just as with rule-followers, we have just as many word phrases and expressions for rule-breakers. They break new ground. They are ground-breakers. They buck traditions. Used as a verb this way, "buck" means to oppose or resist.

Next time you want to describe these two kinds of people you will have plenty of expressions to choose from!

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo!

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

scribbling— n. a piece of writing or a drawing that is done quickly or carelessly

messy— adj. lacking neatness or precision

coordination— n. the harmonious functioning of parts for effective results

awareness— n. knowledge and understanding that something is happening or exists

buck— v. oppose, resist : bucking the system

mold— n. the frame on, around, or in which something is constructed or shaped

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 156: Walk Before You Can Run

Date: 2024-01-13T22:00:00+00:00 | 495 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we use them in short conversations.

Today we talk about the process of learning to do something.

For example, if you want to play a musical instrument, you need to learn how. You must take small steps. You learn how to hold or sit at the instrument. You learn how to read notes and how to play basic chords. Then you progress to short, easy songs.

In other words, you need to take baby steps.

Babies can look funny when they are learning to walk. Their steps are unsure; their knees do not quite bend fully. They do not walk straight and often fall down. The more they walk, the steadier they get on their feet. Soon their unsteady baby steps lead to a smoother, often speedy, gait.

We often use the term to describe how to reach a complex goal. Small baby steps can lead to the bigger goal.

We will often use the term to suggest that someone slow down and be patient.

A similar English expression goes, “You have to walk before you can run.”

Let’s listen as two friends use these idioms.

A: Hey, how are your piano lessons going?

B: Slowly. I want to play a real song. But my teacher has me working on these same set of chords over and over again! They are difficult and boring at the same time.

A: I’ve been playing piano for years, and chords are important. They are the foundations of music. You need to know how to walk before you can run.

B: I know, I know! But I also **MUST** be able to play a song by next month.

A: Why are you in such a hurry? Learning music requires patience. Take baby steps!

B: Please no more advice! I told a friend I could play the piano. And now she wants me to play at her children’s birthday party.

A: Oh, in that case. I have other advice for you.

A: You reap what you sow.

B: Thanks a lot. ... Hey what are you doing next month...?

Learning a language is a lifelong process. To keep yourself from burning out, take baby steps. Learn a little every day, and soon your English will be fabulous!

And that's all the time we have this Words and Their Stories!

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

basic-adj. simple, not difficult

chord-n. a group of three or more musical notes that are played or sung at the same time

steady-adj. balanced and stable

gait-n. another word for the way a person or animal walks

boring-adj. not fun, exciting or interesting

fabulous-adj. impressive or exciting

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 157: Marathon or Sprint?

Date: 2024-01-20T21:59:00+00:00 | 557 words | [Source](#)

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, examples, and notes on usage.

Today we are talking about expressions that come from two very different types of races – a marathon and a sprint.

A marathon is a foot race that happens over a long distance. It is a test of endurance. A sprint is a short race and tests speed. These two races each require different running methods to win.

During a sprint, a runner does not center on time or distance. Instead, they simply try to run as fast as they can, using their full energy from the very start of the race.

But things are different in a marathon. If a racer started out running as fast as possible from the beginning, he or she would likely quickly run out of steam. This method, or strategy, would probably not result in success. Instead, marathon runners need to pace themselves. Pacing means considering the task you need to complete and the resources you have available. Possible resources include time, energy and money.

Just like during a marathon, a person involved in a long-term project might consider pacing themselves. This is because long-term projects are more like marathons than sprints.

A well-known saying describes life as a marathon, not a sprint. This means people need to learn to be patient and not become worried if their life plans or dreams take some time. Things like finding a good job, creating a nice home or developing friendships all can take time.

There is also a similar expression to consider: Slow and steady wins the race.

Now, let's hear two friends use these expressions in a conversation.

A: So, are you excited to move and start a new job?

B: I am! I want to learn about the city, make new friends, decorate my new apartment, and accept my new job!

A: That's a lot to focus on! It takes time to settle into a new place and feel at home. You don't want to get burned out.

B: That's a good point. But I really just want to start over and make a great life.

A: Well, that takes time. You know what they say, life is a marathon not a sprint.

B: I know. But I can't wait! I feel like sprinting!

A: I understand that feeling. I have an idea. I'll come visit in a couple of months and remind you to pace yourself.

B: Ok, you've got a deal!

We can say that Learning English is also like a marathon, not a sprint. If you keep studying day by day, little by little, your English is sure to get better over time.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories!

Until next time ... I'm Andrew Smith.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

endurance—n. lasting for a long time, hard to tire out

run out of steam—expression. to lose energy or get tired

pace—n. the rate of speed at which something is done in order to finish without getting too tired

patient—adj. the ability to wait for something

steady—adj. something that is strong and keeps working over time

ace—v. to do something very well

burn out—v. to lose interest in doing something; or to lose the ability to do work — such as when a light bulb no longer works

Article 158: Snow Day? Don't Be 'Left Out in the Cold'

Date: 2024-01-27T22:00:00+00:00 | 653 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we use them in short conversations.

In a recent science report we explained about a weather system called the polar vortex. It caused a snowball effect on extreme weather around the world. The event led to record-high temperatures in many parts of the world. But much of North America had to deal with extreme cold. Some areas recorded temperatures as low as minus 20 degrees Celsius.

In an earlier Words and Their Stories program, we explained how to use the expression snowball effect to describe a situation where one action or event causes many other similar actions or events.

Are you thinking that there must be many more English expressions related to snow, ice, and cold weather? You are right! The term “snowball effect” is just the tip of the iceberg!

Or, to put it another way, we have many more expressions in American English related to the cold weather. So, today we will explore some winter words and expressions.

In the dead of winter, many people like to skate on frozen lakes. But watch out! You don't want to skate on thin ice. That is dangerous. If it breaks you could fall into the cold, dark water below. You could even drown.

So, the expression skating on thin ice serves as a warning. For example, if a friend is always late to work, you might tell him he is skating on thin ice with his employer.

But, you might not want to say anything to your friend. Maybe it is none of your business when your friend arrives at work. So, you decide to put your warning on ice.

To put something on ice means to suspend action on something – a temporary halt. In fact, today a co-worker asked me to put my project on ice, so I would have time to help her with today's lesson.

When we put food on ice we preserve its quality for a time. We can wait to eat it later and it will still be good.

What about when we break the ice, though? That sounds dangerous, right? However, it just means reaching out personally to a stranger. Like in this example:

A: Hi Matt. Have you met our new teacher, Jennifer?

A: Why don't you break the ice and introduce yourself this afternoon?

B: I certainly will.

Ice is not all we might face in winter. Sometimes the snow is so deep we cannot even get out of the house. At those times, you might say there is asnowball's chance in hellI'm leaving home today.

Hell is fiery and extremely hot. A snowball has no chance at survival there. So, the expression describes something that is impossible.

Now that we are stuck inside the house, we say we aresnowboundorsnowed under. And we often usesnowed underto describe a situation in which we have too much work to do.

American children usually love asnow day! That phrase is used to mean schools are closed. Students might spend the day outdoors throwingsnowballsor building asnowman. Or maybe they stay inside, covered up in a warm blanket next to a hot fire,snug as a bug in a rug.

We use the expressionsnug as a bug in a rugto describe a soft, warm and safe position or situation.

Sounds like a great place to be, especially during a snow storm. I mean, no one wants to beleft out in the cold. That can really hurt, physically and emotionally!

Sometimes we use this phrase,left out in the cold, when someone has rejected or forgotten us.

We will never leave English learnersout in the cold, to be sure! Especially not inthe dead of winter!

And that'sWords and Their Stories.

Hai Do wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

preserve- v. to keep something in its original state or in good condition

introduce- v. to make someone known to someone else

Article 159: Do You Have a 'Doppelgänger'?

Date: 2024-02-03T22:00:00+00:00 | 621 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now,Words and Their Stories,from VOA Learning English.

English borrows from many other languages. And today we talk about a word that comes from German – doppelgänger.

The word “doppelgänger” comes from Germanfolklore. The online dictionaryMerriam-Websterdescribes the old story. All living creatures have aspiritwho isinvisiblebut exactly the same as the living person. But just because you can't see them, doppelgängers are notghosts. They are sometimes described as “the spiritual opposite ornegativeof their humancounterpart.”

Even though the word comes from spiritual folklore, we use it in a very real way. When two people look very similar, we can call them doppelgängers.

English has other expressions that have a similar meaning. If someone looks like someone else, you can call them a look-alike, spitting image or mirror image.

Let's hear two friends use some of these expressions.

A: Were you at the airport yesterday?

B: No. I haven't been to the airport in over a year.

A: Are you sure about that?

B: I think I would know if I were at the airport. Why do you ask?

A: Well, if you weren't there, then I ran into your doppelgänger. She was a mirror image of you!

B: Wow, I've heard about doppelgängers. But I didn't think I really had a look-alike out there in the world.

A: Well, you do. And they are on their way to Costa Rica.

B: I wish I could trade places with my doppelgänger!

If you know someone who looks exactly like another person, you can also call them a dead ringer.

Experts say this expression comes from American horse racing, and usage began in the late 19th century.

Sometimes, racehorse owners would race a horse under a false name and pedigree. They did this to trick people who bet money on race results. These horses were called "ringers."

Here is how to use this expression in a sentence: My best friend in college is a dead ringer for George Clooney. When we're out in public, he gets asked for his autograph all the time.

In the expression "dead ringer," the word "dead" does not mean lifeless. In this case, it means exact or precise. It is a way to add emphasis, or highlight something. For example, if I am sure that my friend is right about something, I can say she is dead right. We can also say someone is "dead wrong" if they are most certainly wrong.

The next time you want to describe two people who look the same, you can choose any of these expressions.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ...

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

folklore— n. customs, beliefs, stories, and sayings of a people handed down from generation to generation

spirit— n. a force within a human being thought to give the body life, energy, and power

invisible— adj. incapable by nature of being seen; not perceptible by vision

ghost— n.the soul of a dead person believed to be an inhabitant of the unseen world or to appear to the living in bodily likeness

negative— adj.extending or measured in a direction opposite to one chosen as positive

counterpart— n.one remarkably similar to another: a thing that fits another perfectly

pedigree— n.lineage or line of ancestors of a person or animal: purity of breed recorded by an ancestral line

precise— adj.exactly or sharply defined or stated

emphasis— n.the act or fact of giving stress to a word or syllable when speaking: special attention or importance given to something

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 160: Why Do Married Couples 'Tie the Knot'?

Date: 2024-02-10T21:59:00+00:00 | 533 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give you definitions, examples, notes on usage, and sometimes we even use them in a conversation.

Valentine's Day is February 14. Because it is close to that day that celebrates lovers, we talk today about a romantic idiom: tie the knot.

To tie the knot is an informal term for getting married. In some marriage ceremonies, a knot is actually tied around the couple's hands with a piece of cloth or ribbon. This is done as a symbol of unity.

This wedding tradition can be called a handfasting ceremony.

Several websites claim that this is an ancient Celtic wedding tradition. The couple holds hands while someone else ties their hands together with material. This represents the two people being physically and spiritually tied to each other.

But let's go back to the word "knot."

A knot is an interlacing of string, ribbon, rope, or similar material that forms a connection between two, or more, loose ends.

The word "knot" can also describe a mass or lump of disordered material that is tangled. Some knots are hard to untangle. For example, if your hair has knots, the ends have become tangled together, and it cannot be straightened or combed. When talking about hair, having knots is not a good thing.

Knowing how to tie knots is important in many activities including sailing. For example, rope is used to secure sails. While sailing, you might want ropes to stay knotted at times, but you also need to be able to release knots quickly, at a moment's notice.

With a marriage, you want to stay knotted together. You do not want the bond to be easily broken.

There are other ways to say to tie the knot. In a formal situation, you can say two people have been wed. A very informal expression is to get hitched.

Now, let's hear two friends use the expression "to tie the knot."

A: Hey, I have a wonderful secret about our good friends Finn and Polly. They are tying the knot next month!

B: What? Finn and Polly? Are you sure?

A: Yes! Polly told me last week while we were bowling. She's on my bowling team.

B: I cannot believe that.

A: Well, believe it. But she made me promise not to say a word. So, don't tell anyone.

A: Why? Finn and Polly have been dating for years.

B: I'm not shocked about that. Polly ... bowls?? I had no idea.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

conversation—n. talking or a talk between two or more people

romantic—adj. related to love between two people or to romance

informal—adj. not used in official or serious writing or speech

symbol—n. an object that represents an idea

interlace—v. joined in a way that involves crossing thread, string or rope over and under

tangle—v. to become disordered and twisted together

bond—n. a strong, lasting connection

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 161: US Presidents Like to Make Up Words, Expressions

Date: 2024-02-17T21:59:00+00:00 | 738 words | Source

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And now Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

The third Monday of February is known as Presidents' Day in the United States. So, for today's Words and Their Stories, we look at some of the famous and not-so-famous presidential words and their stories in history.

From Teddy Roosevelt's lunatic fringe to Joe Biden's malarkey, the words and phrases said by U.S. presidents are often as unique as the American experience.

"We're really creating our own institutions through language," said Paul Dickson. He is the writer of Words from the White House: Words and Phrases Coined or Popularized by America's Presidents. If you coin a word or phrase you create it.

Thomas Jefferson, America's 3rd president, is said to have created more than a hundred words. One of the words is authentication— the act of proving or showing something to be true. Another word from Jefferson is Anglomania. It means to have extreme affection for all things English. The ending -mania means to be crazy about something.

Abraham Lincoln, the country's 16th president, is known for making powerful speeches during the Civil War. One of his best-known phrases, "A house divided against itself cannot stand," is drawn from the Bible.

Historians note that Teddy Roosevelt, the 26th president, was the first president to use media to connect with the public. And he added several memorable words and phrases to American English.

Dickson says, "Teddy Roosevelt creates this huge body of slang." The words include pack rat, loose cannon, lunatic fringe, and bully pulpit— among many others.

A pack rat is someone who collects things that they do not need.

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A loose cannon describes a dangerous and uncontrollable person.

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Lunatic fringe describes people whose opinions are extreme and different from many others. And a bully pulpit is an important position, such as the presidency, that provides a chance to instruct, lead, or inspire others.

In addition to slang, some presidents created slogans. A slogan is a short phrase used in advertising or political campaigns to get attention.

America First came from Woodrow Wilson, the 28th president, in 1915, and not Donald Trump, the 45th.

The 29th president, Warren Harding, gets credit for coming up with the term Founding Fathers. This describes the creators of the U.S. Constitution.

Before Calvin Coolidge, the 30th president, no political campaigner had ever called himself a law-and-order candidate. This means they support police efforts and enforcement of laws.

The 33rd president, Harry Truman, came up with the phrase do-nothing Congress. He is also famous for the saying, If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.

Sometimes presidents changed names to better describe their purpose. Dickson says, "It was Franklin D. Roosevelt who changed the name of the 'Report to Congress' to the State of the Union."

Critics & criticisms

However, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the 32nd president, brought criticism when he said, "Well, it's pretty iffy as to where the Supreme Court stands on this." Iffy is another way of saying something is uncertain or unknown. His critics felt that the American president should use "proper" English.

In 1961, Dwight Eisenhower, the 34th president, was praised for using the term military-industrial complex to warn against the powerful alliance of the military, government, and private corporations.

But then he was criticized for using the word finalize in a speech. By adding -ize, he turned the word "final" into a verb.

Major papers at the time wrote that it was not "proper English" and called the word "meaningless."

Dickson says necessity is the reason presidents continue to create new words.

There was a solid majority from Richard Nixon, the 37th president. And Barack Obama, the 44th president, used shovel-ready to describe public work projects that were ready to start immediately.

When Joe Biden, the 46th president, ran for the White House in 2019, his campaign slogan was no malarkey. Malarkey is believed to be an expression often used by Irish Americans to describe insincere or meaningless talk.

And that, my friends, is no malarkey. I hope you enjoyed this special presidential Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Dora Mekouar wrote this story for VOA News. Anna Matteo adapted it for VOA Learning English.

unique—adj. being the only one of its kind

slang—n. the special terms or expressions of a particular group or field

slogan—n. an attention-getting word or phrase used to publicize something (as a campaign or product)

proper—adj. following the established traditions of refined society and good taste

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 162: Influence Others from a 'Bully Pulpit'

Date: 2024-02-24T21:59:00+00:00 | 582 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about a way to share ideas, thoughts, and opinions – a bully pulpit. This common two-word noun sounds aggressive. But is it? Let's explore!

We'll start with the word "bully."

Usually when we use the word "bully," we are talking about a person who is cruel or threatening to others.

As a verb, if you bully someone you treat them in a cruel, insulting, or aggressive way. Bullies usually threaten those who are weaker or smaller than them.

Now the word "pulpit." A pulpit is a raised platform used in preaching or conducting a worship service.

So, together a bully pulpit sounds like a preacher who is bullying others. But that is not what it means.

A bully pulpit is a public-facing position – especially a political office. It provides a way to share or spread your ideas widely. If you have a bully pulpit you have a position of influence or power.

Experts say that a bully pulpit comes from the 26th president of the United States, Theodore Roosevelt. When he was in office, he once said, "I suppose my critics will call that preaching, but I have got such a bully pulpit!"

Roosevelt observed that his time in office at the White House was a platform for speaking out for what he believed in. He could influence others. He understood that his presidency was his bully pulpit.

When then President Roosevelt used the term "bully," he meant something excellent or first-rate. This is an older meaning of the word. And these days we often use it as an interjection, saying "Bully for you!" to cheer another's success.

Now, let's hear this term used in a short conversation.

A: Hey, what are you doing this evening? What to grab a bite?

B: I wish I could. But I have a board meeting for my swimming pool.

A: I thought you quit that board?

B: I did. But I have to attend one last meeting to hand off my notes to the new secretary.

A: Why are you quitting? I never heard the full story.

B: I'm quitting because of the board president. She uses her position as a bully pulpit. Instead of making the pool better, she lectures the rest of us on all kinds of issues.

A: It's a swimming pool? What issues come up?

B: Oh, you name it! We have to hear her views on everything from recycling to dog parks to the evils of potato chips. Hey, if you have time would you like to replace me on the board?

A: Yeah ... no thanks.

While today, bully pulpit is most often used in the world of politics, we can also use it in other areas. The president of a company can use that position as a bully pulpit -- so can the principal of a school, leaders of media sites, interest groups and more.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ...

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

preach— v.to deliver a sermon

interjection— n.a word or cry expressing sudden or strong feeling

conversation— n.oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas

board— n.a group of persons having managerial, supervisory, investigatory, or advisory powers

quit— v.to bring to an end

lecture— v.to reprove formally

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 163: Read the Riot Act

Date: 2024-03-02T22:00:00+00:00 | 469 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

In life, there are times when we must tell others about their bad behavior or unsafe actions. Sometimes that means giving them a strongly worded warning or scolding them. We can also read them the riot act.

A riot is a violent public disorder. And that is where the expression comes from.

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary says it dates back to the early 1700s England, when opponents of King George I began a series of protests.

The British government wanted to stop the protests. So, they passed a law called the "Riot Act." It permitted officials to break up gatherings of 12 or more people by reading a speech out-loud. If the protestors did not leave, they would be guilty of a crime punishable by death. By 1819, "riot act" was also being used more generally for any severe warning or reprimand.

The law is no longer enforced across the pond, as we sometimes refer to Britain. But the term to read the riot act is still alive and well today.

We read someone the riot act to severely scold them. Reading the riot act can include some shouting – and, in fact, often does.

We can use this expression in just about any situation where someone has made a big mistake – at work, with our friends, and with our family.

Now, let's hear it used between two friendly coworkers who are talking about a family situation.

A: Wow, who was that on the phone? I could hear her yelling at you all the way over here.

B: It was my aunt reading me the riot act.

A: Why? What did you do?

B: Well, I forgot to go to her house for dinner last night. And she made all my favorite dishes.

A: Oh. That is a big mistake. I'm not surprised she read you the riot act.

B: And it was her birthday.

A: Oh wow. I'm surprised she is still speaking to you.

B: I know! I feel awful! So, to make it up to her, I'm taking her out to dinner at a restaurant that serves HER favorite dishes.

If VOA Learning English stopped teaching English, our listeners would have every right to read us the riot act.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

scold– v.to find fault noisily or angrily : to criticize severely or angrily

reprimand– n.severe or formal criticism

across the pond– idiomatic expressionthe other side of the Atlantic Ocean

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 164: 'Dip Your Toes' or 'Take the Plunge'?

Date: 2024-03-09T21:59:00+00:00 | 495 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about trying something new or something you are unsure about.

People can react differently to these kinds of situations. Some people may want to jump right in feet first. They may want to take the plunge!

And some people may want to test the waters. They may want to dip their toes in first.

Which kind of person are you? Well, imagine you are standing on the edge of a lake or swimming pool. You want to get into the water, but you don't know the water's temperature.

Do you jump right in? If you do, you may be more bold and adventurous.

Or do you want to dip a toe into the water before you decide? If so, you may be more cautious and careful.

If you dip your toes into something, you start doing it slowly and carefully. You are not sure if you will like it. You want to test the waters before beginning something, or before taking the plunge.

Testing the waters means you get a feel for something before committing to it. For example, if you want to move to a new city, you probably want to test the waters first by going there for a short stay.

Taking the plunge is the opposite of dipping your toes. When you take the plunge, you jump right into something. You do not wait or hesitate.

We use the expression dip your toes in for many situations. You may want to try an activity briefly to find out if you like it first. It can also mean you start something very carefully before becoming involved in something that you are not experienced at.

Now, let's hear some of these expressions used in a non-water related situation.

A: Hey, I'm going ballroom dancing this Saturday. Do you want to join me?

B: Ballroom dancing? I know nothing about ballroom dancing.

A: That's fine! This place I found is perfect for you. Before the dance starts, they give a free class to beginners.

B: Yeah, I don't know. Maybe I'll just go and watch. You know ... dip my toes in. I like to know what I'm getting into first.

A: Sure. But I promise you ... after the first 5 minutes you are going to want to jump in feet first!

That is all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

If you are new to VOA Learning English, there's no need to dip your toes in first. Just take the plunge! Visit our website to find more stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

cautious— adj. careful about avoiding danger or risk

hesitate— v. to hold back in doubt or indecision

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 165: When Do You 'Go Against the Grain'?

Date: 2024-03-16T18:00:55+00:00 | 541 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Have you ever looked closely at a piece of wood? If you have, you might have noticed its beautiful grain.

When talking about wood, grain describes the appearance of cell fibers in the wood. A wood's grain is important when choosing the right sort of wood for a project. Different kinds of wood have different grains, which affect their appearance, strength, and usefulness.

Paying attention to a wood's grain helps you to know how to work with it. For example, if you are cutting a woodboard with the grain, you would use a tool called a rip saw. If you are cutting across the grain, you would use a crosscut saw.

Cutting against the grain is more difficult. If you work against the wood grain, you might tear out pieces of wood or even damage your tools.

And that brings us to our expression: to go against the grain.

If you go against the grain, you do something differently from what is normal or usual.

An idea or action that goes against the grain is difficult to do or accept. Usually, it goes against a person's ideals, beliefs, or principles.

If an idea or action goes against the grain, it is the opposite of what you believe is right or normal. You might find it difficult to accept. In some situations, it takes courage to go against the grain of what others are saying or doing and stand up for what you believe in.

Let's say a friend of yours is offered a sales job. To do the job well, he must convince people to buy things they don't need. He is a very honest man. So, for him this job goes against the grain.

To go against the grain can also mean to do things differently from others. Sometimes we want to go against the grain. We don't want to do things the way everyone else does. Artists often try to go against the grain and ignore the common, popular trends of the day.

Now, let's hear the expression used between two friends.

A: Did you hear about Jenny taking that corporate banking job?

B: I did! I'm really happy for her.

A: Happy? You must be kidding. Jenny is an artist. In college, we used to protest against big banks.

B: I know we did. But life is different now. We're older and have bills to pay. And I think Jenny wants to send her little sister to college.

A: I know. But a corporate job? Jenny? It just goes against the grain for her.

B: Look, we need to support our friend. Anything less would go against the grain for me.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

board—n. a flat piece of wood used for building things

convince—v. to persuade a person to do or believe something

trend—n. the way things are going; a general direction of change

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 166: When Is Something 'Ancient History'?

Date: 2024-03-23T22:00:00+00:00 | 474 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Do you like to learn about ancient history? If you do, you could call yourself a history buff. If you are a “buff,” you have a strong interest in a subject and want to learn all about it.

History buffs can have a special interest in a particular historical period in the past. For example, they might read a lot about ancient Greek or Roman history. History buffs might be interested in ancient Mesopotamia or Carthage. Or perhaps the ancient Mayans or Incas would be up their alley. If something is up your alley, it goes along with your interests. It is something you want to know more about.

However, English speakers use the expression ancient history in other ways. And many have nothing to do with exploring cultures from long ago.

For example, if something is ancient history, it is no longer meaningful or relevant. It is outdated or totally forgotten. Something that is ancient history is old news.

Let's say a business owner wants to modernize and update her workspace. She says she wants to get a new fax machine. But then, her young son tells her fax machines are ancient history.

Ancient history can describe events in a person's past. Let's say a co-worker always talks about his time in high school. When he asks about yours, you might say that your high school days are ancient history. You barely remember them.

Sometimes we use ancient history to mean something has been completely forgotten – even if it is a fairly recent event. It just feels like it happened a long time ago.

For example, two friends of yours want to start a business together. Last month, it was a café. Now, their latest idea is offering storage units for rent. When you ask about the café idea, they might say, “Oh,

that idea is ancient history. We've moved on from that."

We also use ancient history in another way. Sometimes ancient history means an issue has been resolved and is no longer a problem. It is water under the bridge. Water under the bridge is another idiom that means a problem no longer exists.

For example, let's say you had an unpleasant experience with a good friend, but it happened years ago. You both value your friendship and choose to forgive and forget. The problem is no longer an issue between the two of you. It is ancient history.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

relevant—adj. something that is important to the current situation

rent—n. paying the owner of property like a home, car or machine for its temporary use

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 167: What Are Your 'True Colors'?

Date: 2024-03-30T22:00:00+00:00 | 599 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's show, we talk about colors.

Sometimes we talk about our feelings with words describing colors. For example, if I am feeling down or a bit sad, I can say I am "blue." If I'm angry, I might say that I see "red." If I'm out of sorts or really unhappy, I can say I'm in a "black" mood. If I want something that someone else has, I can say I'm "green" with envy.

All these different feelings can be represented with colors. But what about your "true colors?" What does it mean to show your true colors?

If we show our "true colors," we are true to ourselves. We show what we are really like. We reveal our true nature, character, or personality.

For example, I have a friend who loves the sun and sea. When she is at the beach, she shows her "true colors." She's very active -- swimming in the sea, walking along the beach, and enjoying other outdoor activities. When she is away from the beach, she doesn't seem herself. She is often inside and not very active.

However, showing one's true colors does not always mean something good. Some people may present themselves in a way other than how they really are. They might seem to have positive characteristics. They act kind, pleasant, generous, or helpful. But in fact, they are really the opposite. They are not showing their "true colors." They keep their "true nature" hidden.

A: You know, I thought Mack was easygoing. But then I worked with him on a big project.

B: I know exactly what you mean. He's easygoing and fun to work with when he gets his way. But if you question any of his ideas, he shows his true colors.

A: That is exactly what happened! I suggested an alternative to his idea, and he became really rude... and mean.

Some word experts say the expression "true colors" dates back to the 1700s and comes from the world of sailing ships. Colored flags were, and still are, used to show what country a ship was registered to and to communicate with other ships at a distance. The ship's colors were its flags.

Pirates' ships would sail under "false colors," meaning under a friendly flag. They would do this to get close to other ships without raising concern. Then, when the pirates were close enough and ready to attack, they would raise their "true colors."

Show your true stripes

Another expression with a similar meaning is to show your stripes. Stripes can be your true nature and something you cannot hide or remove. However, this expression is less common.

Marisa showed her true stripes when her back was against the wall. When she had no way out of the problems that she had created, she blamed everyone ... everyone but herself, that is.

And that's this week's Words and Their Stories. Until next time...

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

envy—n. the unhappy feeling of disliking someone because they have or are something that you are not

reveal—v. to show or uncover something

character—n. the deep qualities that make a person who they are and form their personality

generous—adj. being considered someone who gives freely without worry or hesitation

alternative—n. a choice or choices other than the one being considered

rude—adj. behaving in a way that appears loud and unsociable

back was against the wall—idiom: in a bad position in which one is forced to do something in order to avoid failure

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 168: Is It Real or Bogus?

Date: 2024-04-06T22:00:00+00:00 | 501 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

You can trust that we are actually Voice of America Learning English. We are the real deal. We are authentic.

In other words, we are not bogus.

Bogus is an adjective that means fake or phony. Something bogus is not genuine. It is a fraud. It's fraudulent.

For example, the man's huge diamond ring was bogus. He told everyone it was a real diamond. But actually, it was just a piece of glass.

Bogus can describe something that is alien.

If something like an explanation or reason is bogus, it's not true. For example, an employee might call her employer to say she needs a sick day off from work. But during the call, her boss hears loud, live music in the background. The employee was clearly at a music show. Her reason for not being at work was bogus.

We could also say the employee's excuse did not hold water. Her excuse for missing work sounded bogus. It was not believable. It didn't hold water.

Experts at the online dictionary Merriam-Webster explain that bogus began as a noun. In the early 19th century in the U.S., a bogus was a machine that made counterfeit, or fake, money.

Here's a fun fact: You can call bogus, counterfeit money funny money.

Here is another word related to bogus—sham. Sham, a noun, describes a fake, made-up situation. We use sham to cover up the truth.

Let's hear some of these terms used in a short story.

Two roommates work together at a bank. One day, they decide to steal all the gold and jewelry held in the bank's safe. So, they plot. They plan it out. First, they need an alibi. Where can they be while the robbery is actually happening? They create a bogus alibi. They tell police that at the time of the robbery, they were together at a volunteer event, cleaning up a local park by the town's river.

But after checking out their alibi, police brought the two in for questioning. Then detectives searched their shared apartment and found all the gold and jewels from the bank robbery.

What made the police suspect them? Can you guess what detectives found at the river park that proved their alibi was a sham? A dirty park and river! They both had a huge amount of trash! Clearly, no clean-up event had ever taken place.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

authentic— adj. not false or imitation : real, actual

bogus— adj. not genuine

phony— adj. not genuine or real : intended to deceive or mislead

genuine— adj. not pretended : sincere, honest

fraud— n. an act of deceiving or misrepresenting : trick

did not hold water— idiom: to not be or not appear to be true, verifiable, or able to be supported by facts

counterfeit— adj. made in imitation of something else with intent to deceive

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 169: Many People 'Thank Their Lucky Stars'

Date: 2024-04-13T22:00:00+00:00 | 592 words | Source

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Now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Looking up at a star-filled night sky can be one of the most beautiful sights to see. It can fill you with awe and amazement. It can also take us away from our worldly troubles and problems.

A long time ago, people may have looked to the stars for more than inspiration and entertainment. Ancient star-gazers may have looked to the stars to find good luck. In modern times, people who believe in astrology also look to the stars for guidance and advice on how to improve their lives.

Stars have served us in many ways throughout human history. So, it is not surprising that we have an expression that thanks them.

When we say, thank your lucky stars, we are expressing gratitude for something. We use this expression to show our appreciation for something good in our lives. For example, I thank my lucky stars for my health and also a career that I love.

We often use the expression with the word “should.” For example: My friend should thank her lucky stars for her amazing brother. He has helped her many times over the years.

This saying means that you should be grateful for your good luck. Thanking the stars in ancient times may have been a type of superstition. But these days, it simply means we are thankful.

Let's hear what some of my co-workers thank their lucky stars for.

First is Dan Friedell:

I thank my lucky stars for the people who came before me and taught me lessons about life I put into practice today.

And here is Dorothy Gundy:

I thank my lucky stars that the rain has stopped and the children can play outdoors.

Sometimes we use the word “count” in this expression. Saying I count my lucky stars doesn’t change the meaning. For example: I count my lucky stars for my family and friends.

Now let’s hear this expression used in a conversation:

A: Are you okay? You look terrible.

B: I rear-ended a garbage truck on my drive over here.

A: Oh no! Was anyone hurt?

B: No, thankfully. But I really damaged my car. It’s going to cost a lot to fix it.

A: Well, crashing into the back of a trash truck will do that. What happened?

B: I dropped a piece of chocolate and looked down for a minute to find it. When I looked up, the trash truck was stopped right in front of me.

A: Wow. You should count your lucky stars that you weren’t seriously injured.

B: I know! I’m very thankful. And I need to be more careful. But in my defense ... it was really good chocolate.

We here at VOA Learning English thank our lucky stars for all of our listeners.

What do you count your lucky stars for? Tell us in the comment section or send us an email at Learningenglish@voanews.com.

And that’s all for this week’s Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

awe— n.a feeling of mixed fear, respect, and wonder

inspiration— n.the act or power of moving the mind or the emotions

gratitude— n.the state of being grateful :grateful— adj.appreciative of benefits received

appreciation— n.a feeling or expression of admiration, approval, or gratitude

superstition— n.a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, or trust in magic

conversation— n.talking or a talk between two or more people

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 170: Are You the Windshield or the Bug?

Date: 2024-04-20T22:00:00+00:00 | 538 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Life has its ups and downs. We all have good days and bad days. Sometimes life seems easy, sometimes difficult. We can't always feel on top of the world every day.

Today, we explore some idioms and expressions that describe this common condition of life.

A windshield is the transparent screen, usually of glass, on a vehicle. It protects the people inside. But to many insects a windshield can also be a screen of death.

Take a drive in America in the warm months, especially on higher speed roads, and watch as bugs meet their end on the windshield glass.

And that is where we get our first expression: Some days you're the windshield, and some days you're the bug.

On our good days, we reach our goals. We get things done. On those kinds of days, we are taking care of business. We are killing it! On those days we are the windshield.

But then our luck changes. Things don't go our way. We may be down in the dumps or just down on our luck. For whatever reason, we are not at the top of our game. On these days, we are the bugs.

This expression is very informal. So, it is not very serious. Similar expressions include "peaks and valleys." Peaks are high while the valleys are low. You can also say "you win some, you lose some." And sometimes we refer to life as a "rollercoaster ride." Rollercoasters are famous for their high climbs and sharp drops.

Now let's hear two people use some of these expressions in a short conversation.

A: Hey, what's wrong? You look a little down.

A: Well, you know what my Grandma Gardenia used to say, "Some days you're the windshield and some days you're the bug."

B: Today I'm definitely the bug.

A: I'm sure things will look better tomorrow. Granny Gardenia also used to say, "you win some, you lose some."

B: You know ... you're right. We all go through tough times.

A: That's the spirit! (sighs) Every time I hit a rough patch, Granny Gardenia would say, "Don't let a little setback get you down. Tomorrow is a new day!"

B: Thanks for the encouragement. I appreciate it.

A: Don't thank me. Thank my grandma. It's impossible to be down in the dumps around Granny Gardenia.

The British band Dire Straits has a song about the subject of life's good times and bad. It's called The Bug. The song reminds us that we should enjoy the good times because they are temporary. As the song goes: sometimes you're the windshield/sometimes you're the bug.

Do you have a similar expression in your language? Let us know in the comments section or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

transparent— adj. transmitting light so that objects lying beyond are entirely visible

dump— n. a disorderly or undesirable place

conversation— n. talking or a talk between two or more people

rough patch— n. a period of problems in your life

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 171: To Pull or Not to Pull Punches

Date: 2024-04-27T22:00:00+00:00 | 776 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Sometimes in life we have to break bad or difficult news to friends, family members, work partners and sometimes even strangers.

Some people may do this indirectly. They may want to soften the immediate effect the news will have on the person. We might tell only part of the truth. When we do this, we are “pulling our punches”

But there are other times when we do the opposite.

We speak directly, presenting the hard facts and little else. We might do this in emergencies, when facing danger, or other times when the complete truth is required. In these cases, we are “not pulling any punches.”

When someone does not pull any punches, they say things that might be hurtful or frightening. They know the information may be troubling. But, the information is usually thought to be more important than the unease it may cause.

If you don't pull punches, you speak your mind. You tell it like it is. You don't mince words or sugar-coat the truth. Mincing words means to soften or weaken your words especially for the sake of being polite. Some people mince words when they are afraid to tell someone the truth. And if you sugarcoat something, you make it sound more pleasant or acceptable than it really is.

People who don't pull punches can also be called straight-talking, blunt, or frank. In fact, sometimes we use "blunt" and "frank" when we break bad or difficult news to someone. We might say, "Look, I need to be frank with you," or "I hate to be blunt but ..." and then you're blunt. You don't pull your punches.

When talking with this kind of person, we always know where we stand. We never have to guess. This can be a good thing.

However, when we are on the receiving end of a person who doesn't pull any punches, we also need a thick skin. Much of what we may hear might hurt a little ... or a lot. Just as a thick skin protects some animals from attacks, it also protects people from hard, cold truths that are hard to hear. But with a "thick skin," we can better absorb the "punch" of tough news.

When you don't pull any punches, you also act without restraint or limitations. You don't hold back. You are all in.

The phrase "to not pull any punches" comes from boxing. If you pull a punch in the boxing ring, it means you restrain your power. You purposely hit your opponent with less force than is possible.

Word experts say that in the 1930s people began to use this phrase more widely. These days you can pull your punches or not pull any punches is just about any situation.

Now let's hear two friends use this phrase and related terms in a short conversation.

A: Okay, here is my movie script.

B: Oh wow! You finished it! Congrats!

A: Now I really need some outside opinions. I'm way too close to the material.

B: That is a great idea. But I don't think I'm the person to ask.

A: Why? You have really good taste in films, and I know you'll tell me like it is.

B: That's the problem. I am brutally honest. It's impossible for me to pull any punches.

A: That's exactly what I need – honesty! Tell me what you really think. Don't hold anything back.

B: You say that now. But when you hear my criticisms, you may feel differently.

A: No way. I have a really thick skin. It's impossible for a little criticism to hurt my feelings.

B: Okay, I'll read it and give you my notes. But the last person who asked me to read her manuscript still isn't talking to me.

A: Oh. Wow. You really don't pull any punches, do you?

B: You've been warned.

Do you have a similar expression in your language? Let us know in the comments section or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

mince words to soften or weaken your words especially for the sake of being polite

brutally— adv. in a manner so as to cause loss or suffering

blunt— adj. being or characterized by direct, brief, and potentially rude speech or manner

frank— adj. free in expressing one's true feelings and opinions

opponent— n. one that takes a position opposite another in a competition or conflict

manuscript— n. a document submitted for publication

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is here.

Article 172: What Good Comes from 'Casting a Wide Net'?

Date: 2024-05-04T22:00:00+00:00 | 641 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Sometimes in life, you may want to have as many choices as possible. For example, let's say you need a new job. You want to look far and wide. You do not want to limit your options. In this situation, you may want to cast a wide net.

Casting a wide net means to search a very wide area.

To cast a wide net is an expression that probably comes from fishing. For some types of fishing, you attach a hook to a line on a fishing pole. Then you cast the hook into the water. This will only catch one fish. However, casting a net into the water can catch many fish!

When you cast a wide net, you might search a wider area, or you might aim to catch something bigger. For example, if someone looks for a partner, he might cast a wide net by searching — the world. He might be willing to move anywhere. He would have no limits to where he might go.

People who cast a wide net want to have many choices or options. They broaden their search or widen the qualities they are willing to accept.

There are many related expressions that describe similar ideas. One is to cast your net wide. Others include considering all options or exploring all opportunities.

Casting a wide net also means you leave no stone unturned. You look thoroughly. You search high and low for what you want.

Now, let's hear this expression used in two discussions. The first is at work:

A: So, how's the search going for a web designer?

B: Surprisingly, it's going slowly. So far, only five applicants have responded to the job announcement.

A: Five? In this job market, I thought resumes would have been pouring in.

B: Well, I only sent the job advertisement to one employment agency.

A: That's not enough! We need to cast a really wide net this time.

B: Right. I'm on it. I'll be casting a really wide net today!

Now, let's hear two friends use the same expression:

A: So, how is your online dating search going?

B: Not well. It's difficult to find the perfect partner.

A: Well, no one is perfect. What qualities are you looking for?

B: I'm looking for a person who is tall, 1.9 meters or taller, with a good job but not in politics or acting. And they must have a master's degree.

A: Hmmm ... the height and job criteria might be a bit limiting.

B: Oh, I'm not done. They must also live within 10 kilometers of me, love dogs ... big dogs, and they can't be a smoker. Oh, they must be active outdoors but especially with water skiing and rock climbing. Oh, and they must be a vegetarian.

A: I think if you want to meet more people and have more options, you may want to cast a wider net.

B: Maybe you're right. I know. I'll take off the dog criteria. If they like cats ... I guess that's okay.

Do you have a similar expression in your language? Let us know in the comments section. Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@VOANews.com

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

option—n. one of at least two choices

cast—v. to throw using a wide motion or a stick or rod to widen the path of the object being thrown

net—n. a large number of connected lines used to catch fish

hook—n. a curved piece of metal used to catch fish

broaden—v. to make something wide or more spread out

criteria—n. a standard on which a judgment or decision may be based

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is here.

Article 173: It's Time to 'Separate the Wheat from the Chaff'

Date: 2024-05-11T22:00:00+00:00 | 539 words | [Source](#)

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's show we talk about an expression that likely came from wheat growers a long time ago. Preparing harvested wheat involves an important step—separating the wheat from the chaff.

Chaff is the outer covering of grain, the husk and other matter around the grain. Grain must be separated from chaff before it can be used for food. In farming, separating the wheat from the chaff is called winnowing or threshing.

In English, the expression “separating the wheat from the chaff” means to decide which people or things in a group are good or important and which ones are not. Who or which things can you live without?

This idiom describes a kind of sorting process.

For example, if you are planning to go on a long hiking trip, you have to decide which things are necessary to carry with you and which things are not. Food and water need to make the cut—they need to be included. A long, heavy novel to read might not be such a good idea. If you do not separate the wheat from the chaff, your backpack will be too heavy.

This idiom can also mean that you decide which things are valuable and which things have little worth.

For example, let's say you are organizing a large neighborhood yard sale to raise money for a local charity. Many neighbors donate things they no longer need. Some are valuable and should get a high price. But other things are not worth much and should be low in cost. In this case, taking your time to separate the wheat from the chaff is time well spent. You do not want to see something valuable sold for too little money. It is for charity, after all.

This idiom can also mean to separate people or things that are of high quality from those that are of low quality.

Let's say you are hiring someone for a top position in your company. When you send the announcement out, you receive hundreds of applications. This is the first round of the process when you must separate the wheat from the chaff. You must determine the most qualified applicants for the second round of the process that would include phone discussions and interviews.

For a last example, let's talk about learning English. Online, you can find many resources that teach English. But they are not all good. It is up to you to separate the wheat from the chaff. Hopefully VOA Learning English makes the cut.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

winnow—v. to sort grain by throwing it in the air or using air to separate the grain from unwanted plant material

thresh—v. to beat the grain-bearing part of a cereal (such as wheat) to separate it from the chaff (unwanted plant material)

charity—n. an organization that supports a cause with money and assistance

application—n. a written request to be part of a company or organization that includes background and personal information

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 174: Ways to 'Divide and Conquer'

Date: 2024-05-18T22:00:00+00:00 | 641 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's show, we talk about a strategy for winning or for completing a big task. That strategy is called dividing and conquering.

With this strategy, you gain an advantage by creating divisions within a group. You might try to turn your enemies against each other. You try to keep control over a group of people by creating problems among them. You could also make a group of people disagree and fight with one another. When you do this, they will likely be too busy fighting each other to think about fighting you.

For example, the police detectives tried to divide and conquer warring drug dealers. The drug dealers were so busy fighting each other, they made mistakes and got arrested by police.

However, you must be careful when trying to divide and conquer. The people you are trying to divide may band together. This means they form an alliance. They overcome their differences, work together,

and turn against you.

Now, this expression is not just used when talking about defeating people. We can also divide and conquer when trying to complete a difficult task.

If you want to complete a complex task, it is helpful to have several people working on it at the same time. You would divide the tasks and delegate them to others. That way, you can conquer - or complete - the task.

Here's an example. Let's say you are working on a big project with some co-workers. The project is complex and has many moving parts. So, instead of everyone working on the same things at once, you decide to divide and conquer. You assign each person a different task. In the end, the project gets done smoothly and on time.

Now, let's hear some friends use this expression this way. They are preparing for a surprise birthday party and have lots to do.

A: Okay, change of plans. Samantha just texted. She canceled her work meeting and will be here in two hours, not four.

B: Two hours?! That's not enough time! We'll never be ready for her surprise party. You need to stall her. But don't make her suspicious.

A: If I try to keep her away, she'll know something's up. She knows us too well.

B: You're right. What are we going to do??

A: First, calm down. What still needs to be done?

B: The food needs to be cooked, the cake and drinks need to be picked up, the living room needs to be decorated, and the gift needs to be wrapped. We'll never finish in time!

A: We will! We just need to divide and conquer! You keep cooking. I'll text Claudia and ask her to pick up the cake on the way over. Then I'll text Gwen. She can pick up the drinks. When Steve gets here, he can wrap the gift and decorate. He's good at those things.

B: Ok, sounds like a plan! Wait a minute. What will you be doing?

A: I'm busy! Dividing and conquering doesn't happen by itself.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

If you have a big goal, maybe it's time you divide and conquer it. Break it down into small tasks and get them done.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

conquer—v. to get or gain by force of arms: to defeat by force of arms: to be victorious

advantage—n. the fact of being in a better position or condition : something that helps the one it belongs to

band together—phrasal verb to form a group in order to do or achieve something

delegate—v. to assign a task or responsibility : to entrust to another

stall—v. to distract attention or make excuses to gain time

something's up—set phrase indicates that a situation is or seems suspicious, peculiar, or out of the ordinary

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 175: Many Handy 'Hand' Expressions

Date: 2024-05-25T22:00:00+00:00 | 762 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Every day, we do countless things with our hands. So, it's not surprising that we have many "hand" expressions that describe how we do something. These hand expressions could be called handy... meaning they are useful.

When we do something with our bare hands, we do it on our own, usually with much effort. When we use this expression, we are expressing pride in something we have done.

For example, let's say I decided to build my own gardening shed -- a small outdoor building for gardening supplies. It was hard work and took me days to finish. But at the end of the project, I could proudly say that I built it with my own bare hands.

Feeling proud and finishing a big project go hand in hand. They go together!

Let's say you are asked to lead a project. You want it to be successful. You want it to be on time and on budget. So, you lead with a firm hand. If you lead with a firm hand, you are strict. You follow all the rules closely. You don't let jokes or laziness affect your team's progress. Teachers can teach with a firm hand. And parents can parent with a firm hand, too. Having a firm hand and being strict go hand in hand.

Heavy hand = oppressive

A firm hand is not the same as a heavy hand. If a person or organization has a heavy hand, they use a lot of force or power to control people and events. A heavy hand is often considered a bad thing. When you deal with a situation with a heavy hand, you could be seen as oppressive. Someone who is heavy-handed is severe or harsh when dealing with others or when dealing with a situation.

Sometimes we call this an iron hand or even an iron fist. A fist is a closed hand that is used for hitting.

High-handed = arrogant & condescending

Now, what kind of person has a high hand? Someone who has a high hand is domineering. They like to be in control. They are bossy.

Sometimes we use the adjective high-handed.

High-handed people do not consider the rights, concerns, thoughts, or feelings of others. They look down on people. In other words, they are arrogant and condescending.

Hand expressions can also describe our involvement in a situation. Let's look at a couple examples.

A friend of yours asks you to find a manager for her company. But you don't know anyone who fits the job description. So, you don't suggest anyone. You don't have a hand in the selection. If you have a hand in something, you have helped to make it happen.

Your friend was able to find someone for the job through another person – someone you know. Let's call him Bob. You know Bob, and you don't trust Bob. So, you warn your friend. But they don't take the warning seriously. In the end, Bob is a terrible choice. He steals a lot of money from your friend's company. Your friend is furious! And you feel bad.

Clean hands = innocent

But in this matter, your hands are clean. You did nothing wrong. In fact, you tried to warn your friend. We use this expression to state innocence in a bad situation.

Here's another example. Let's say you are babysitting some children. They want to make a cake. And they make a total mess in the kitchen. Flour, sugar, and broken eggs are everywhere. When their parents come home and see the mess, you can say you did not have a hand in it. The kids did it all. All you did was turn on the oven.

Maybe these kids do this every time you watch them. You are tired of it – even though they do make tasty cake. So, you throw your hands up! When you throw your hands up, you are tired of fighting something. It is a sign that you give up.

A good word that describes this feeling is exasperation. People who are exasperated are tired of something, and they often throw their hands in the air.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

bare-adj. lacking clothing

pride-n. reasonable self-esteem; confidence and satisfaction in oneself

strict-adj. severe in discipline

oppressive-adj. cruel or harsh without just cause

harsh-adj. making many or difficult demands

domineering-adj. inclined to exercise arbitrary and overbearing control over others

arrogant-adj.showing an offensive attitude of superiority

condescending-adj.showing or characterized by a patronizing or superior attitude toward others

furious-adj.exhibiting anger

mess-n.a disordered, untidy, offensive, or unpleasant state or condition

exasperated-v.having or showing strong feelings of irritation or annoyance :exasperation-n

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is here.

Article 176: Be Bold. 'Break the Mold'!

Date: 2024-06-01T22:00:00+00:00 | 479 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today, we talk about making things.

When you make things using a mold, the material takes the shape of the mold, and everything comes out the same. So, if you have a mold of a duck and put clay inside it, you will have a lot of ducks made out of clay with the same shape. They will look exactly like each other.

Now, if you break the mold, you have to shape the clay by hand to make one duck at a time. As a result, all of the hand-made ducks will look different. Each one is special and unique.

That is where we get the expression to break the mold.

The dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster says to break the mold means “you do something in a completely new way.”

Those who break the mold usually try to find new ways to deal with a problem. They do things differently from what has been done before. They try new methods and do not follow what is usually done.

We also call these new ways and methods fresh, one-of-a-kind, or novel.

For example, after a toy company lost money for three straight years, the owner tried something completely different. She asked young children to develop new toys for the company. And it worked. The new toys sold very well. So, we say she broke the mold of toy development by asking children instead of experts to design new toys for the company.

We also use this expression to break the mold to “describe a very unusual or admired person.”

Let’s look at the story of Barack Obama, the 44th president of the United States. His father was a black man from Kenya; his mother was a white American from the Midwestern state of Kansas. By 2009, only five Black Americans had ever served in the U.S. Senate. Yet, Obama defeated all other

well-known candidates to become the first Black American president in the country's history. Even those who did not vote for Obama agreed that he broke the mold.

The expression is usually used to praise someone. But people sometimes use it to describe someone a bit unusual as well. Used this way, we might say, "Well, they certainly broke the mold when they made her!"

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Do you have a similar expression in your language? Or do you have an expression or idiom you would like us to explain? Send us an email at LearningEnglish@VOANews.com.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo and Hai Do wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

mold— n. the frame on, around, or in which something is constructed or shaped

unique— adj. being the only one of its kind : being the only one : very unusual

novel— adj. new and not resembling something formerly known or used

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 177: Are You Strong 'Out of the Gate'?

Date: 2024-06-08T22:00:00+00:00 | 523 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

At the start of this program, we usually share the expression or idiom we are going to talk about. We do this right out of the gate so that listeners know what to expect.

Out of the gate means the very start of something -- like an audio program!

Some people are really good at starting things. Whether it is planning a fun family reunion or a serious work-related project, they are strong right out of the gate. Other people may be slow out of the gate. They take their time getting started, but they may be strong finishers.

So, out of the gate means the very beginning of something. We can also say at the outset.

Here is an example. As soon as I signed up for an online class, I had trouble with technology. I couldn't get logged in. I forgot my password. And then my computer crashed. I had so many technical issues right out of the gate! I had problems at the outset or at the very beginning of the class.

This expression comes from sports or activities that involve holding animals behind a gate until it is time to start. With horse racing, dog racing, and bull-riding, the animals all wait behind a gate.

When I was a child, my parents often took me to horse races. The horses were behind a gate as they waited to start the race. As soon as they were out of the gate, the race had started! That's also when my parents would start yelling. Right out of the gate, they would yell for their horse to win.

In English, we have other similar expressions.

Word experts say that the expression *right off the bat* is from baseball, cricket, or another sport where a bat is involved.

The batter hits the ball, the ball is in play and the actions of the other players begin. They are, more or less, waiting for that ball to be hit before they have something to do. So, if something happens *right off the bat*, it happens as soon as something starts.

Another similar expression is *from the get-go*. When we say *from the get-go*, we are also talking about the start of something.

Here's an example using that one. Let's say you start a new job. It's important to make a good *first impression* *from the get-go*. On your first day, you want to be on time and ready to work. As we like to say, you don't get a second chance to make a first impression.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

reunion— n.a reuniting of persons after separation : an event where people come together after a period of separation

outset— n.a beginning, a start

impression— n.an especially marked and often favorable influence or effect on feeling, sense, or mind

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

Our comment policy is [here](#). Or send us an email at VOALearningEnglish@voanews.com

Article 178: Being 'Put Through the Wringer' Is Not Fun

Date: 2024-06-15T22:00:00+00:00 | 496 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about a physical action called “wringing.” That is “wring” beginning with a silent “w.”

The dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster describes the verb “wring” as squeezing or twisting something like clothing to remove moisture or liquid. You can also “wring” someone to get more information.

In the old days, people used a “wringer” to remove water from their clothing. With a wringer, you put clean but very wet fabric between two rollers and turn the handle to squeeze water out.

Imagine if that was your hand instead of your clothes. Ouch! That would really hurt. And this gives us a common expression: to put through the wringer.

When someone is put through the wringer, they face a very difficult or unpleasant experience.

Now, let's hear the expression used in a conversation between two friends:

A: Hey, I heard you trained with Julia for your race. How did it go?

B: It was hard. Julia was really tough on me. She put me through the wringer! And I couldn't walk for days afterward.

For another example, let's say you are looking for a new job. The employer wants you to go through several weeks of difficult training and then pass a test at the end. You can say you were put through the wringer.

However, when writing this expression, make sure that you write "wringer" with a "w" and not "ringer" that begins with an "r." The two words sound alike but are spelled differently and have completely different meanings.

A "wringer" with a "w" is the device we talked about earlier. It's used to remove water from clothing and fabric.

A "ringer" without a "w" is a person who "enters a competition under false representations." The term "ringer" can also refer to someone or something that strongly resembles another.

The verb "wring" with a "w" is also used to describe an action in which someone twists their hands together. They usually do this when they are nervous or worried about something.

And that gives us another expression: hand-wringing.

Merriam-Webster defines hand-wringing as an extreme expression of concern or guilt. The dictionary publisher noted a recent example written by Christopher L. Gasper on [BostonGlobe.com](https://www.boston.com) on February 18, 2023:

"For all the hand-wringing the NBA has done about players coming straight out of high school, the track record is good."

In other words, there is nothing to worry about having basketball players coming to the NBA straight out of high school.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

squeeze— v. to press together from the opposite sides of

twist— v. to pull off, rotate, or break by a turning force

fabric— n. cloth (as in clothing or bedding)

false– adj.not genuine:intentionally untrue:adjusted or made so as to deceive:intended or tending to mislead

refer– v.to have relationship : relates

resemble– v.to be like or similar to

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is here.

Article 179: It's Showtime!

Date: 2024-06-22T22:05:00+00:00 | 552 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's program, we visit the world of performing!

Thank you, thank you! Oh, you're too kind...too kind!

Whether you are seeing a play, concert, or movie, it is important to be on time for the show. The word *showtime* means the scheduled time a show is to begin. For example, if you go to a movie theater's website, you can get a list of *showtimes* for all the movies playing.

The meaning of *showtime* is simple. But, we often use the word in an interesting way.

When we say: *It's showtime!* we usually are ready to start something big or important. And it does not have to be a performance in front of a lot of people. It can be a big presentation for work or school. It can be something that you worked hard at and now you are ready: *It's showtime!*

We use the expression not just to say something has started. We also use it to suggest that we overcame difficulties and challenges along the way. Or we had to follow a long process.

For example, to produce this program, I first research the expression or idiom. I find definitions, examples, and sometimes similar words. Then I send it to the editor who checks for content and errors. After that, I find pictures to go with the lesson, get the music ready. I'm now ready to voice and produce the lesson! *It's showtime!*

Performing in front of people can make even brave, confident people nervous or scared. So, you can also use the expression *It's showtime!* before starting something that you are nervous about -- like a confrontation or argument. You need to plan what you are going to say and prepare yourself emotionally.

Then when you're ready ...it's showtime!

Let's say you want to ask for a raise at work. You plan what you are going to say. You practice in front of a mirror. You comb your hair and straighten your jacket. You feel confident. Now, you are ready. So, you say to your reflection in the mirror: *It's showtime!*

Now, let's hear two friends use this expression.

A: Hey, where have you been? I haven't seen you in weeks.

B: I have been preparing for something really big and really important.

A: Sounds exciting. What is it?

B: Next week, I am showing my invention to a group of investors. I'm so nervous! In a way, they are holding the future of my business in their hands.

B: Well, for my presentation, I have a very detailed business plan, market research and a prototype of my invention. I even bought a brand-new suit! Come tomorrow at 10 am...it's showtime!

B: Thanks! I'll need all the good luck I can get.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

editor— n.a person who checks and corrects texts before they are published

brave— adj.having or showing mental or moral strength to face danger, fear, or difficulty

confident— adj.having or showing assurance and self-reliance

reflection— n.the production of an image by or as if by a mirror

invention— n.an original device or process

prototype— n.an original model on which something is patterned

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is here.

Article 180: Learn Some 'Wave' Expressions

Date: 2024-06-29T22:05:00+00:00 | 711 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about something found in water — waves.

Surfers are experts at riding waves in the ocean. But even if you have never been in the ocean or tried the sport of surfing, you can still ride the waves.

If you ride the wave of something you gain from a widespread popularity or approval of something. The online dictionary Merriam-Webster defines it this way: “to experience a time when many people share a strong feeling or attitude about something at the same time.”

For example, let's say a woman runs for office but she doesn't have any political experience. She does, however, belong to a famous and popular political family. After she wins, many people say she rode the wave of her family's fame.

But this expression doesn't always mean taking advantage of something in a bad way. For example, a sports team may want to ride the wave of their recent wins to keep on winning.

Catching the wave is a similar expression. If you catch the wave, you also take advantage of an opportunity. You are at the right place at the right time.

Now, sometimes we aren't riding or catching waves, but making waves instead. When we make waves we do something that makes people notice us. Often they notice us in a bad way. And the waves we make cause problems -- similar to waves in water making trouble for boats and swimmers.

Here's an example. If you start a new job, it is usually not a good idea to make waves. When you make waves you create trouble and interfere with usual business operations. We can also say to rock the boat. This also means to cause problems.

We use the word "wave" in several phrasal verbs.

Let's start by combining it with "on" and "off."

Waving someone on is the same thing as giving them a sign to keep moving. For example, when police officers direct traffic they wave people on. The police are guiding drivers or walkers across roads. Waving someone on can also mean to encourage someone. If your friend is running in a race, you can wave them onto the finish line.

However, if you wave something or someone off, you cancel, dismiss, or refuse them. For example, when I offered help to the man who had fallen off his bike he just waved me off. He either didn't need or want my help or maybe was too embarrassed to accept it.

You can also combine "wave" with "down." To wave down someone or something is also a signal to stop. For example, you can wave down a friend or wave down a taxicab.

And if you wave something or someone aside you are either directing them or dismissing them. It depends on the situation.

Now, let's hear some of these "wave" terms used in a short example.

But this venue was different than most. It was outside and did not have a barrier around it. So, people without tickets started sneaking in. Someone would find a place where they could sneak in and wave on others to do the same. As a result the venue got so crowded that the security guards had to wave ticket-holders aside to a different entrance. And if you didn't have a ticket and hadn't snuck in, they just waved you off.

As my friend and I waited in line to enter, I warned her that the concert would be very crowded. But she waved my concerns aside. She didn't care. We went in anyway. But after the concert was over, I immediately waved down a taxi to go home. I had had enough of the large crowd.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

attitude— n.a particular feeling or way of thinking about something

advantage— n.superiority of position or condition

opportunity— n.a favorable combination of circumstances, time, and place:a chance to better oneself

encourage— v.to inspire with courage, spirit, or hope

dismiss— v.to send away:cause or allow to go

embarrassed— v.feeling or showing a state of self-conscious confusion and distress

concert— n.a public performance (as of music or dancing)

venue— n.a place where events of a specific type are held

ticket— n.a paper or token showing that a fare or admission fee has been paid

sneak— v.to go about in a sly or secret manner

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 181: Partners in Crime

Date: 2024-07-06T22:05:00+00:00 | 585 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage.

Do you have a friend, co-worker, or family member who you are very close with? Do you often work on projects or activities with that person? If so, the two of you could be called **partners in crime**.

And those projects or activities are not even illegal!

Partners in crime is an expression that describes two or more people who are very close to each other. But more than being close, they are usually involved in playful or adventurous activities. Even though the expression has the word “crime,” the activities are more often than not legal ones.

Originally the expression may have described actual criminals. But today, it does not. It is a fun, light-hearted way to describe close friends who may be involved in some kind of mischief. Not surprisingly, the expression is often used in mystery stories, films, and television shows.

The most famous example is **Partners in Crime**, a collection of short stories by Agatha Christie published in 1929. The stories were turned into a radio broadcast and then a television program.

A less popular example is the television show *Partners in Crime* from 1984 in the U.S., starring Lynda Carter and Loni Anderson.

Besides *partners in crime*, we also have a similar expression, *thick as thieves*, to describe very close friends who share information and secrets.

Now, let's talk about some more words that are similar or related to *partners in crime*.

Someone who is your *partner in crime* can also be called your *sidekick*. A *sidekick* is someone who is usually by your side.

If your *sidekick* is helping you in a social situation, like meeting members of the opposite sex, then we can call them an *wingman* or *wingwoman*. In airplane talk, an *wingman* is a pilot who flies his aircraft behind the leading pilot.

There are other more formal, or official, words to describe a *partner in crime*, such as *collaborator* or *accomplice*.

Although, you may want to be careful when using the word "accomplice." When talking about a real crime, an *accomplice* is a person who helps others do something illegal.

Now, let's hear this expression used in a couple of examples.

In the first one, two friends talk about a great party.

A: "How did you manage to throw such a great party? You thought of everything!"

B: "I couldn't have done it without my *partner in crime*— Emma! Where is she, anyway?"

A: Emma, your *party collaborator* is on the karaoke machine and is about to start the singing contest.

Next, let's hear this expression used in a work situation.

A: Are Michael and Evan working on another project together?

A: Those two have been *partners in crime* ever since they started working together.

B: You're right. And it's a good thing for us. They are a great team and *collaborate* really well together.

And that's all the time we have for this *Words and Their Stories*.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

mischief— n. action that annoys or irritates

sidekick— n. a person closely associated with another as a subordinate or partner : one who is another's pal, partner, or helper

collaborator— n. someone who works with another person or group

accomplice— n. one associated with another especially in wrongdoing

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here. Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

Article 182: What Gives You 'Food for Thought'?

Date: 2024-07-13T22:05:00+00:00 | 560 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We hope it gives you something to think about. In other words, we hope this show gives you some food for thought.

Food for thought is a set noun phrase. It describes something that should be thought about and considered carefully. The “food” can come from many different sources. A news story, an idea, an offer, an opinion, or advice can all give us food for thought—just to name a few.

When you give someone food for thought, you make them consider carefully, or think seriously, about something.

Food for thought can also make us see things in a new way. It can make us look at something with new eyes. Or we can say it opens our eyes or is eye-opening.

Now, let’s hear two friends use some of these expressions.

A: I read a story the other day about beekeeping. It was eye-opening. Did you know that some people use it as a way to reduce stress?

B: Really? I know it helps the environment. But I did not know that it also helps the beekeeper.

A: The story really opened my eyes to the possibility of beekeeping. So, I’ve decided to start this summer. Do you want to help?

B: No, thanks. I’m afraid of bee stings. But you’ve given me food for thought. Working to help the environment and reduce stress sounds like an interesting idea. Maybe I can find another way.

A: I’m sure you can!

Food for thought is meant to be processed or digested... just like, well, food! In fact, we sometimes use the word “digest” when talking about thoughts and ideas. Here’s an example:

The writer’s conference gave her much food for thought. It took her weeks to digest everything she learned.

Food for thought can be used in formal and informal situations.

There is a food-related phrasal verb that is similar to food for thought, although it is much more informal—to chew on something. Like eating food, when you “chew on” something, you think about it

thoroughly. Here's an example:

When my friend was offered a job he chewed on the offer for some time. In the end, he decided that the job was not for him and did not accept it.

If you want to sound more formal, you can use verbs like *reflect* or *contemplate*. Food for thought often leads to reflection and contemplation.

And that brings us to the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Recently, what has given you food for thought? Let us know in the comments section. Or send us an email at learningenglish@voanews.com.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

sting— n. a wound caused by a pierce with a poisonous or irritating chemical compound, as in a bee sting

digest— v. to take into the mind or memory

formal— adj. Language that is more structured and follows standard grammatical rules. It is often used in professional, academic, and official contexts.

informal— adj. Informal language is more commonly used in situations that are more relaxed and involve people we know well.

reflect— v. to think quietly and calmly

contemplate— v. to view or consider with continued attention

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is [here](#). Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

Article 183: Be Careful What You 'Bank On'

Date: 2024-07-20T22:05:00+00:00 | 580 words | [Source](#)

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On today's show, we take you to the bank.

Banks help us manage our money. When we make deposits, we put money in; when we make withdrawals, we take money out. Banks help us reach important life goals. We can borrow money from a bank to buy a house. A bank can loan us money to start a business.

So, we need to trust our banks. And that need for trust gives us some idiomatic expressions in American English that are connected to banks.

The first is simply to bank on something. If you bank on something, you trust it will happen. In fact, you count on it happening. Sometimes we use this expression to mean our strategy depends on something to happen.

Here are some examples:

When a city hosts the Olympics, they bank on drawing large crowds to see the games.

To win the election, the politician is banking on voters finding out about his opponent's scandals.

We often use this expression in a set phrase: to bank on the fact that something will happen.

For example, you can bank on the fact that a famous person caught doing something wrong will soon give a public apology. It is certain to happen.

You can bank on the fact that if I see chocolate cake, I will eat it. It is a given. It will happen.

If you are very sure something will happen, it's like money in the bank.

When we have money in the bank, we count on it to be there when we need it. Banks offer guarantees that they will protect our money. So, if something is like money in the bank, it is a guarantee. It is a certainty.

When we say "you can take that to the bank," we mean something is a sure thing. It is true or certain to happen.

We finish today's show with one more expression, which sounds like a funny situation.

If you laugh all the way to the bank, you make a lot of money with very little effort.

This expression also can mean that you are happy about making money from something that others think is unfair or even bad.

In other situations, it means that you make money from something that others think is a waste of time.

For example, when a woman started an organic homemade dog food business, her friends thought it was a silly idea. They even laughed at her idea. But it ended up being very successful and made her very rich. So, now she is the one laughing — laughing all the way to the bank!

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

If you want to learn English, the stories and programs at VOA Learning English can help you out. You can take that to the bank!

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

deposit— n. money deposited in a bank

withdrawal— n. an act or instance of withdrawing

especially : a removal of money from a bank account

depend— v.to place reliance or trust : to rely for support

scandal— n.a situation or event that is thought to be shocking and immoral and that everyone knows about : reports about actions or events that cause shock and disapproval:

organic— adj.relating to, producing, dealing in, or involving foods produced with the use of feed or fertilizer obtained from plants or animals and without the use of laboratory-made fertilizers, growth substances, antibiotics, or pesticides

silly— adj.not showing common sense or good judgment

Article 184: Let's Talk about 'Going South'

Date: 2024-07-27T22:05:00+00:00 | 661 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today, we talk about those times when things do not go as planned. All the planning in the world does not guarantee that your plans will happen the way you had planned.

Things can happen that are outside of your control. To talk about those times when things go awry, American English has two directional expressions: go south and go sideways.

Let's start with go south. If something goes south, it stops working or falls apart. It can also mean that something decreases in value or loses quality. We often use it to describe a situation where everything has gone wrong.

If your career goes south, you need to look for a new job. If your new computer goes south, it stops working. If a relationship goes south, the two people are heading toward a breakup.

And if a trip goes south, one bad thing after another happens. You miss your plane, your passport gets stolen, and the hotel loses your reservation. That makes for a vacation that has gone south.

Now, let's hear two friends use this expression.

A: So, how is your friend's new bakery doing? She opened it earlier this year, right?

B: She did. But then she ran into trouble. Her investor pulled out. And then her head baker quit. So, her business went south pretty quickly after that.

A: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. But I'm not surprised. You need a lot of money up front to start a business. And for a bakery ... you definitely need a baker.

B: Well it didn't help that another bakery with lower prices opened down the street. Her business was bound to go south after that.

Sideways is another direction you don't want your projects or efforts to go. As a direction word, sideways means to go to either side – not forward or backward.

As an idiomatic expression, to go sideways also means things do not go as planned. But this expression can be used a little differently from going south. Often when things go sideways, they go wrong in strange ways. In other words, things get weird.

Sometimes you want things to go sideways. For example, a good story often goes sideways. You think it's going to go in one direction but then there is a plot twist. Situations change and the story goes in an unexpected direction. Used this way, going sideways is a good thing.

But what about on a family camping trip? Let's hear this expression used in that situation.

A: How was your family camping trip?

B: It was okay. But some really strange things happened. Nature things...

A: Tell me more. What happened?

B: Well, the first night a raccoon stole all my food. The second night while I slept, spiders spun webs all over my tent while I slept. And then on the third day while I was swimming in the lake, a fish bit me!

A: That IS a lot of weird nature stuff. I didn't even know fish could bite.

B: Me neither! But I guess on a camping trip that's gone sideways... anything is possible!

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

awry-adv.off the correct or expected course

breakup-n.to end a romance

reservation-n.an arrangement to have something (as a motel room or a seat on a plane) held for one's use

sideways-adj. or -adv.from one side viewed the stage sideways : with one side forward turn sideways : to one side

idiomatic-adj.of, relating to, or conforming to idiom-n.an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but must be learned as a whole

weird-adj.very unusual or strange

plot twist- n.a writing device that introduces a big change in the direction or expected outcome of the plot in a story

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is [here](#).

Article 185: When Is Two Too Many? When It's a 'Double Whammy'!

Date: 2024-08-03T22:05:00+00:00 | 530 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program, we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give definitions, examples and notes on usage.

Today we talk about a word with an unusual history –whammy. A whammy can be a magical spell that brings bad luck. It can also be an attack or a damaging, destructive blow. A blow is an incident or event that hits you hard.

So, one whammy is bad. But what happens when you have two?

That is called a double whammy.

People traditionally say they have been hit with a double whammy!"

The online dictionary Merriam-Webster defines a double whammy as a combination of two usually unfavorable forces, circumstances, or effects. Two bad things happen at the same time to make something really unpleasant or difficult.

It can also mean that two bad things happen consecutively, or one after the other.

The origin of the expression is unclear. Some guess it comes from taking the word “wham” which describes a hard punch or blow and adding a -y ending which makes it sound funny.

Others say the cartoonist Al Capp popularized the word whammy in his 1950s comic strip Li'l Abner. A character named Evil-Eye Fleegle could stop someone by simply looking at them. The single whammy was a look with one eye, and the feared double whammy used both eyes.

Today, my friend Jonah lost his job. And then, on the way home, he fell and broke his leg. Talk about a double whammy! It has NOT been his best day.

Here is another example of the expression double whammy.

On their 3-hour hiking trip, the friends were hit with a double whammy. The first was a bad rain storm. They were forced to take shelter in a cave. Then they realized the second bad thing. They left all their food and water in the car.

There is another English expression that has a similar meaning –a one-two punch. The first punch is a difficult blow to take, but then the second one aims to finish the job. The expression comes from boxing where one punch is quickly followed by another from the other fist, or closed hand.

A boxer using a one-two punch is trying to knock out their opponent or to score points.

Both double whammy and one-two punch are informal expressions. One-two punch might be less popular than it once was. But double whammy appears in some surprising places in both American and British

English.

And that's Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

Do you have a similar expression in your language? Let us know in the comments. Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

spell—n. magic that used on a person, often to create a bad or damaging effect

circumstance—n. a situation

consecutively—adv. taking place one after another in a series

origin—n. the beginning point of something

punch—n. the act of striking with a closed hand, or fist

cartoonist—n. a person who draws simple pictures that tell stories

comic strip—n. a series of pictures telling, often funny, stories that appears in newspapers or books as a series that continues for a time

character—n. a person who appears in stories, plays, movies or TV who is not real

knock out—v. to strike a person so that they lose consciousness or cannot continue

Article 186: One Person's Trash Is Another Person's Treasure

Date: 2024-08-10T22:05:00+00:00 | 499 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

People around the world share many things in common. But we are also different from each other. Not only do we look, think, and act differently, but we also like different things. Even identical twins may look the same but are very different individuals.

On today's program, we will look at a few expressions to describe how no person is exactly the same as another.

The first expression involves trash and treasure.

When we say one person's trash is another person's treasure, we mean that something that one person may consider worthless could be highly prized or valued by someone else.

Let's hear an example of how to use this expression:

A: I really don't understand the appeal of Jackson Pollock's paintings. To me, they look like a team of monkeys painted them!"

B: I love Pollock's paintings. I see something new every time I look at them.

A: Well, I guess it's true what they say, one person's trash is another person's treasure.

Now, rubbish and garbage mean the same as trash. But, in this expression, we use trash because the "tr" intrash and treasure makes the expression sound more natural. It just sounds better.

And, sometimes, we use the word "man" in place of "person" such as one man's trash is another man's treasure. Again it is just easier to say.

Another expression with a similar meaning is different strokes for different folks.

This also means that different things appeal to different people. But as a set expression, we do not say "different strokes for different people." That just doesn't sound right.

Different strokes for different folks can also mean that people live in different ways and value different things.

For example, a perfect evening for my friend is to go out and dance all night long. For me, a perfect evening is to stay at home with a book and a cup of tea. Neither is a better way to spend the evening. So, we should not judge. Or in other words, different strokes for different folks.

When we want to say that we are all different and we like different things without judgment, we can also use the following expressions:

It takes all kinds to make the world go round.

To each his (her) own.

Whatever floats your boat.

They all mean ... whatever makes you happy!

And all of these expressions have the same general meaning: We are all different and unique.

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

identical twin— n. either member of a pair of twins that are produced from a single egg and who look exactly alike

unique— adj. being the only one of its kind

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is [here](#). Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

Article 187: Sometimes Help Is Just 'A Phone Call Away'

Date: 2024-08-17T22:05:00+00:00 | 664 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On today's show we talk about some expressions that deal with an important device in our lives – our phones.

With a smartphone, we can connect to the world. In fact, we can say smartphones give us the world at our fingertips.

Needless to say, we use phones to stay in contact with the people in our lives. We use them to reach out to our friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers.

So, when we tell someone that we are just a phone call away, what we are really telling them is that we are available. We are there for them. We often use this expression to offer help to someone who is in a difficult situation or just in need of a friendly voice.

For example, let's say my friend is having a hard time with an advanced English course. The assignments are difficult, the material is hard to understand, and his teacher has not been answering his emails. I can say to him, "Look, if you ever need help, I'm just a phone call away. Call anytime!"

It's good to be available to some people some of the time.

But maybe not all the time.

We all have someone in our lives who contacts us too much. They may blow up our phones with a flood of calls and text messages. When your phone blows up, someone is trying to contact you repeatedly.

Here's an example. Let's say your neighbor, Jana, is having trouble with another neighbor, Jake. And you are in the middle of it. They are both blowing up your phone with calls and texts about their disagreement. You can tell them, "Hold the phone! Just stop! Talk to each other and work out your problems because I've had enough."

The expression hold the phone is a way to say "wait" or "stop." We use it when we hear something surprising or when we have had enough of a situation.

And it doesn't have to be about phone calls or texts. For example, let's say a friend tells me that my favorite singer is coming to town. I can't believe it! So, I can say, "Hold the phone! Are you serious?" It's like saying, "Hold on a minute!"

Now, let's go back to your arguing neighbors, Jana and Jake. Let's say they take your advice. They are willing to work out their problems. They try to call each other but keep missing each other's calls. First Jana calls Jake, but he isn't available. Then Jake calls her back, but now Jana isn't available. They play phone tag like this for days until they finally speak to each other.

Tag is a child's game. One person is "it" and must chase and tag, or touch, the other children. So, phone tag is when two people try to contact each other but their calls go unanswered.

At least Jake and Jana are trying to work out their problems. When it comes to keeping relationships happy in the neighborhood, they are not phoning it in.

When we phone it in, we don't try our best at something. We don't give our best efforts. For example, some people who lose interest in their jobs might start phoning it in. They stop trying and do not do their best work.

That's not the case with us here at VOA Learning English. we are not phoning it in. We work hard every day to bring you new learning English content.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

tag— a game in which the player who is it chases others and tries to touch one of them who then becomes it

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here. Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

Article 188: Reaching the 'Tipping Point'

Date: 2024-08-24T22:05:00+00:00 | 395 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about an important time in a movement or experience. It is the moment when something cannot be stopped. There is a momentum or force pushing something forward or making it more known or popular.

One term for that kind of moment is tipping point.

The online dictionary Merriam-Webster defines tipping point as “the critical point in a situation, process, or system beyond which a significant and often unstoppable effect or change takes place.”

The tipping point can also be the time at which a change or an effect cannot be stopped.

For example, some scientists believe Earth may have passed the tipping point in global warming. Efforts taken now will not prevent environmental disaster. It is too late to stop the damage. In other words, that ship has sailed. When something reaches a tipping point it is too late to turn back. It is a point of no return.

Here is another definition. The online Cambridge Dictionary defines the tipping point as “a time during an activity or process when an important decision has to be made or when a situation changes completely.”

Used this way, we often say we reach, approach, or near a tipping point. Here are some examples:

In class, the students' anger toward their teacher reached a tipping point. She had again given them a test on a subject she hadn't taught.

Prices at the food store are nearing a tipping point. If they go much higher, people will just shop elsewhere.

Malcolm Gladwell wrote about the subject in his book *Tipping Point* published in 2002. He describes a tipping point this way: "The tipping point is that magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire."

For example, you could say, "The writer's best-selling second book was the tipping point in her career. Now, everything she publishes is popular!"

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

momentum— n. strength or force gained by motion or by a series of events

significant— adj. having much importance

approach— v. to draw closer to

trend— n. a current style or preference

threshold— n. the place or point of entering or beginning

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is [here](#). Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

Article 189: An Eye for an Eye

Date: 2024-08-31T22:05:00+00:00 | 549 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk to you about expressions dealing with payback, getting even, and revenge.

When a person wants to even the score, that person might have the proverbial eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth in mind.

The Merriam-Webster online dictionary describes it as a "repayment in kind as revenge for an injustice."

In kind means "in the same way."

The expression an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth is ancient. It appears in The Bible and in The Code of Hammurabi, a set of laws written by the ancient Babylonian king of that name.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth describes a way of thinking. It is the idea that retaliating in kind is the best way to deal with a crime or some other offense.

It is the idea that a person who causes someone to suffer should suffer in the same amount and in the same way. For example, if someone did something to hurt you, you would want to hurt them equally.

To remind others of the proverb, people often simply say an eye for an eye.

For some people, every second counts when they are looking to settle a score. For others, the revenge method might require patience. Some people wait years or a lifetime to get their revenge.

The way people settle the score can be very different. Some cultures have this expression: Revenge is a dish best served cold. The idea is that settling the score over time without emotion is the best way.

A similar expression is tit for tat.

Tit for tat is often used to describe diplomatic disagreements between nations. It is hundreds of years old. Both “tit” and “tat” mean the same thing: a “strike” or a “blow.” Experts say the expression changed from tip for tap to its present form after years of sound changes in the English language.

Tit for tat literally means blow for blow. Merriam-Webster says it is: “An equal return given for some wrong that’s been done.”

Now, let’s hear two friends use some revenge expressions.

A: Did you hear what happened to Tom? Someone slashed his tires! It cost him hundreds of dollars to replace the ruined tires.

B: That sounds awful. Does he know who did it?

A: He suspects it was his ex-girlfriend, Diana.

A: Well, he scratched up the paint on her car last week. I’m still friends with Diana and she told me a security camera caught him doing it. It cost her hundreds of dollars to repaint her car.

B: Well, it sounds like they’re even now. You know, an eye for an eye and all that...

And that’s Words and Their Stories. Until next time ...

Anna Matteo and Mario Ritter wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

revenge—n. hurting someone because they hurt you first

score—n. an accounting in numbers or some other measure that shows who is winning and who is losing in a competition

proverb—n. a short saying that expresses what people recognize as a truth or important idea

retaliate—v. to strike back against a wrong or attack

literally—adv.formally defined as

slash—v.to use a knife or similar instrument to cut into something and severely damage it

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 190: ‘Dead Giveaway’ Is Not as Dark as It Sounds

Date: 2024-09-07T22:05:00+00:00 | 501 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples, notes on usage and sometimes use them in short conversations.

Today we talk about an expression that sounds very serious and dangerous: a dead giveaway. A “giveaway” is just as it sounds: You give something to someone else.

But a dead giveaway has nothing to do with tragedy or death.

In this expression, the word “dead” has another meaning you might not have known about.

In some common usages, the adjective “dead” can mean exact, correct or complete. For example, if someone is dead right, they are completely correct and there is no doubt about it. And, if someone is dead wrong, they are totally wrong.

In some trades, the word “dead” is a really good thing. For example, when something is dead center, it is exactly at the center. In building, dead level means perfectly horizontal—just what you want. However, you never say “dead plumb.” Plumb already means perfectly vertical.

So, a dead giveaway is a detail or action that gives away the truth completely and totally. It is like a clue that answers a question. A dead giveaway shows a truth, fact, or intention in an obvious way.

In other words, a dead giveaway leaves little room for misunderstanding.

Now, let’s hear the expression in some examples.

A completely dark house and a huge pile of mail outside the door were two dead giveaways that no one had been home in quite some time.

She said that she was staying home for the night. But with all the makeup on her face, her hair styled, and her party clothes on, her appearance was a dead giveaway. She was clearly going out.

The expression on his face was a dead giveaway that he was guilty. He couldn’t even look me in the eyes!

English has another expression that is similar. A telltale sign is an important detail or fact that clarifies the truth. It gives more supporting evidence.

We often pair telltale with the words “sign” or “symptom.”

Let’s hear some examples:

Well, my friend has missed work all week and hasn’t responded to my calls. Those may betelltale symptomsof a bigger problem.

When the parents returned from their trip, they sawtelltale signseverywhere in the house that their children had thrown a party.

And that’s all the time we have for thisWords and Their Stories.

Until next time, I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

horizontal–n.a line that is goes from side to side perfectly as though it is following the horizon

vertical–adj.going up and down at a right angle from the horizontal

intention–n.what someone means to do

obvious–adj.without doubt or confusion; clear and straightforward

symptom–n.the sign that something is present, especially a disease

makeup–n.products that are put on the face to improve a person’s appearance

styled–adj.being formed and shaped to look appealing to others

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy ishere

Article 191: What Is Your 'North Star'?

Date: 2024-09-14T22:05:00+00:00 | 682 words | Source

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Now,Words and Their Stories,from VOA Learning English.

In life, there are times when we lose our way, bothliterallyandfiguratively.

We might get lost walking in the woods or sailing at sea. Those are examples of being literally lost. We could also lose our way while on our career path. That is an example of being figuratively lost.

If you are physically lost and do not have acompass,you could use the stars in the night sky to know which way to go, especially the North Star.

Experts at NASA, America’s space agency, say this about the North Star: “If you’re in the Northern Hemisphere, it can help youorientyourself and find your way, as it’s located in the direction of true north (or geographic north, as opposed tomagneticnorth).

They add that the North Star is not the brightest star in the sky. But it is usually easy to see, even from cities.

The North Star can also help if you get lost figuratively.

As the world changes around you and grows more complex, you can look to your North Star to help guide you. Your North Star can keep you focused and on track. It reminds you of what is important.

Some people may say their North Star is their guiding light. It is something very important to them, and it keeps them on the right path.

Your North Star can also be your personal mission statement. It can include your principles and guiding beliefs. Your North Star can give your life meaning and direction.

For some people, their North Star may be a religion. For others, it might be a purpose, like teaching people to read. Or a North Star can be a mix of important things.

A similar term for North Star is your moral compass. Like the North Star, a moral compass points you in the right direction.

There is another term that is linked to the North Star. A lodestar is also a star which is used to find one's way. And it can also mean a person who serves as an inspiration, model or guide.

The Merriam Webster online dictionary explains that both meanings of "lodestar" date back to the 1300s. The English poet Geoffrey Chaucer used both meanings of the word in his poems. However, by the 1600s, the literal meaning fell out of common use. Today, we still use "lodestar" in a figurative way meaning something or someone who guides us.

During a difficult or important time, many things can act as your North Star or lodestar.

For example, when a woman went through a difficult divorce, her close friend was her lodestar and helped her through it.

Another example might be when a music teacher and musician moved to a new city. He did not know anyone. He felt lost and alone. So, music was his North Star. It kept him busy, provided him with employment, and later led to great friendships with other musicians.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

literally—adv. the actual definition of a word or how it is normally used

figuratively—adv. an imaginative use of words that is not direct or literal

compass—n. a device that, in its simplest form, points to one of the magnetic poles of Earth

orient—v. to put something in the right position related to other things

magnetic—adj. having the qualities of magnetism

focus—v. to place your energy and attention in one place

on track—phrasegoing as expected and in the right direction

mission statement—n.a statement of purpose in which a person or company says what they mean to do and what causes them to do it

principle—n.a moral rule or belief that helps you know what is right and what is wrong

inspiration—n.something that provides energy and ideas to carry out an action

divorce—n.the action or an instance of legally ending a marriage

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expression in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is here.

Article 192: How to Use 'Swimming' to Deal with Life's Situations

Date: 2024-09-21T22:05:00+00:00 | 668 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Swimming is a great exercise for staying healthy. But it can also be a life saving skill and help to keep you from drowning.

However, in some bodies of water, swimming might be difficult. For example, in very deep, choppy or fast moving water swimming can be hard and even dangerous.

Choppy water has many small, fast, close waves usually created by wind.

Water currents and tides can be very strong. It is easier to swim with them and not so easy to swim against them.

On today's show, we talk about several English expressions that use "swim" to describe different ways to face a situation -- especially danger, difficulty, or any hardship.

Let's start with swimming in rivers. Let's say you jump in a river and swim downstream. That means you are swimming with the current of the water. This makes swimming easier and faster.

So, the expression to swim downstream means using the easy way to get something done.

However, when you swim upstream, you have to fight the flow of the water. In some rivers or other bodies of water, swimming upstream is nearly impossible.

As an expression, swimming upstream means you take a more difficult path to do something. You make it harder for yourself.

Dealing with money is not my strong suit. In fact, last year I was drowning in debt. Every month when bills arrived, I felt like I was swimming upstream. So I went to a financial advisor. Now I'm free of debt and staying on a budget.

Now, if you are swimming in the ocean, sea, or other large body of water, you may be fighting the tide. Swimming against the tide is another expression. It means you are fighting against very powerful forces. And odds are you will not come out the winner.

Swimming with the tide or current, is much easier. Again, this means you have taken an easier path. You have chosen an easier way to do something.

All of these expressions can be used another way. They can also mean that you are going with or against popular opinions or viewpoints.

If you are swimming with the tide or current or swimming downstream, you act the same way as the majority of others. You are going with the flow. That is another common expression –to go with the flow. People who go with the flow are easy-going. They take the popular path without protest.

However, swimming upstream and swimming against the tide or current mean the opposite. You are rejecting a popular idea, behavior, or opinion. You are acting against the way the majority of people are acting.

Swimming against the tide is harder. In a sense, you are an outsider or outcast. You do not have the support of the current or of other people.

Here is an example. If all of your friends are getting married and moving to quiet areas, you may feel the urge to swim with the tide and do the same. Or you could swim against the tide and stay in your small apartment in the center of a busy city with lots of bars and restaurants nearby.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

drown-v. to suffocate in a liquid and especially in water :

choppy-adj. rough with small waves

tide-n. the alternate rising and falling of the surface of the ocean that occurs twice a day and is caused by the gravitational attraction of the sun and moon occurring unequally on different parts of the earth

strong suit-n. something in which one excels

opposite-adj. being the other of a matching or contrasting pair : being in a position to oppose or cancel out

outsider-n. a person who does not belong to a particular group

outcast-n. one that is cast out or refused acceptance (as by society)

Do you have a similar expression in your language? Let us know in the comments. Our comment policy is here. Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

Article 193: Keep Your Nose to the Grindstone

Date: 2024-09-28T22:05:00+00:00 | 737 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Learning a language is difficult. Sometimes it requires a plan and resources. But it also usually requires hard work. People who persist with their language goals often get good results. They keep working even through hard times. They keep their nose to the grindstone.

When you keep your nose to the grindstone, you work very hard for a long time at something. You don't give up.

How do we use this idiom in daily life? How did it come to mean perseverance? And just what is a grindstone? We answer all these questions on today's show.

First, let's talk about a grindstone. A grindstone is a large stone circular stone with a hole in the middle. An axle fits through that hole. When the stone turns quickly on the axle, it can sharpen, shape, or smooth a tool.

And that brings us to the beginnings of this idiom.

On his website Phrase Finder, writer and language researcher Gary Martin suggests two possible beginnings. Both are set in work environments of long ago: a place for milling grain and a place for sharpening tools.

Some online sources claim that keeping your nose to the grindstone comes from milling grain. If the stone got too hot while grinding, it could burn the grain. So, workers would have to keep their noses close to the stone and smell for any sign of burning.

However, word expert Martin says that doesn't seem true. He claims that these mills used millstones. So, if this story were true, we would say keep your nose to the millstone. But we don't.

He also notes that the terms "millstone" and "grindstone" were used interchangeably hundreds of years ago. But then, at some point long ago, that stopped. Grain mills used millstones and not grindstones. And vice versa—tool sharpening workshops used grindstones and not millstones.

So, let's talk about the explanation set in a tool sharpening workshop. Martin talks about old workshops in his area of England. He says these workshops have benches very near to grinding stones. Workers would sit on the benches hunched over and work very hard and very long. He goes on to write the following:

"They had to pay close attention to their work as a moment too long on the wheel could cause the steel to overheat and be ruined."

Martin guesses that this story is the more likely explanation. Imagine being hunched over your work and working hard at it. That describes having your nose to the grindstone.

In some cases, we also say put your nose to the grindstone. We may say it this way if we give someone advice. For example, “You need to put your nose to the grindstone if you’re going to finish this project on time.”

Now let’s hear another example.

A: Have you seen Marisa lately? She hasn’t called or texted in weeks!

B: I was worried about her too. But the other day, I ran into her co-worker. She said Marisa has her nose to the grindstone trying to finish her year-end report.

A: Oh I forgot about that! In that case, let’s take her some dinner. She never eats when she’s busy with work.

B: Good idea! I’ll make my famous pasta and meatballs.

If I had to pick an opposite of this idiom, it would be this one: All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.

Life can’t be all about work. So, if you’ve been keeping your nose to the grindstone, remember to take a break.

And that’s all the time we have this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

persist— v.to continue to do something in spite of opposition, warnings, or pleas

idiom— n.an expression that cannot be understood from the meanings of its separate words but must be learned as a whole

perseverance— n.continued effort to do or achieve something despite difficulties, failure, or opposition

axle— n.a pin, pole, or bar on or with which a wheel revolves

mill— v.Milling transforms grain into flour for food preparation. :— n.A mill is where grain is processed into flour.

vice versa— adv.with the order changed:with the relations reversed

bench— n.a long seat for two or more persons

hunch over phrasal verb to bend one's body into an arch or hump

opposite— adj.as different as possible

dull— adj.mentally slow

Do you have a similar expression in your language? Let us know in the comments. Our comment policy is [here](#). Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

Article 194: Expressions for New Year's Resolution

Date: 2024-12-28T22:05:49+00:00 | 677 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

During a new year, many of us decide to try something new. With a new year's resolution, we resolve to do something we have not done in the past.

Sometimes new things are risk-free – like eating healthier food or getting more exercise.

Sometimes we decide to learn a new skill, like a language or a musical instrument. Again, these things are not risky, nor do they have bad consequences. If you do not learn how to play the guitar, nothing bad will happen — probably.

However, sometimes we need to shake up our lives and do something different that does have consequences. That means there are risks if things do not work out.

Such a change could involve moving to a new city, starting a new job, or ending a relationship. These new things do have a level of risk. Things could go wrong. On the other hand, things could go very right.

So, for these situations, we introduce two expressions that encourage you to take a chance.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained.

The first expression is nothing ventured, nothing gained.

This means that without doing something risky or difficult, a bad situation will not improve. You could also sum it up this way: If you try something risky, you could fail. But if you do not try at all ... you will surely fail.

The word “venture” can be both a noun and a verb. As a verb, it means to proceed in a dangerous or risky plan. As a noun, it means an action that involves chance, risk, or danger.

For example, starting a new restaurant is a risky business venture these days. And venturing into an unknown area could be dangerous.

A friend of mine wanted to learn how to drive a stunt car and then move to Los Angeles to become a stunt car driver. A stunt car is a vehicle used in the movies to perform crashes and wild driving. There are not many women in this profession. So, I told her that her decision involved lots of risk. She said to me: “Well, nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

Fortune favors the bold.

Our second expression is fortune favors the bold.

“Fortune” usually means wealth or fame. But it can also mean being in a good situation. And, if you are bold, you are brave.

So, this expression means that people who are brave and take chances help themselves. Their bold, brave actions put them in a good place.

When using this expression, keep this in mind. The person who finds a fortune has done something to get it. It just doesn't happen to them by chance. So, if someone happens to win a lot of money in a lottery, you wouldn't use the expression fortune favors the bold.

However, let's say you quit your job and moved to a new city. That is a bold decision. But you are sure that it will be good for you. In the new city, you find your dream job. It might even pay more money than your old job. Here, you could definitely say, "Fortune favors the bold!"

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. For the start of 2023, I wish you and yours health and wealth.

Until next time ... I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English.

resolution—n. a promise to yourself to do something you believe you should do

consequence—n. the result of an action usually that is meaningful or serious

encourage—v. to make someone likely to take some action

shake up—v. (phrasal) to make a lot of changes or to make a big change

venture—v. to do something that involves risk and reward

fortune—n. wealth, fame or good conditions (often because of influences beyond direct control of an individual)

favor—v. to approve of or to support

bold—adj. not afraid of danger of difficult situations

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

Article 195: 'Kicking Off' a New Year

Date: 2025-01-04T22:05:00+00:00 | 803 words | Source

No media source currently available

And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

One of the most popular sports in the United States is American football. In the U.S., "football" is a sport that involves a lot of contact. What people around the world call "football," Americans call soccer.

For today's show, we talk about some idioms and expressions that come from American football.

The American sport mainly involves carrying or throwing the ball. But there are times when a player must use their feet to kick the ball. The kicker can kick field goals to get points. In addition to that, the game starts with a kickoff and, after scoring points, a team will kick off to the other side, beginning their turn on offense.

The term kickoff is commonly used to describe the start of an event or project. For example, we could say experts from all over the world attended the kickoff of the new language museum.

You can use it as a phrasal verb, as well. For example, people often like to “kick off” the new year with a resolution, or promise to yourself, to reach a goal or to do something.

Football also has the term “punt.” Punting is another sort of kick a team uses when they cannot score. The punter kicks a ball with the top of his foot. “Punt,” like “kick,” can be both a noun and a verb.

When you punt the ball, you put it in play for the other team. The same can be said for punting in life. When we punt something, we give our task, job, or responsibility to someone else. For example, if I’m not good at a certain task or I just don’t want to do it, I can punt it to someone else.

It can also mean to delay a decision. If I’m not sure about taking a trip, for example, I can punt the decision until later. Another way to say this in American English is to table it. If you are not ready to think about something, it can or must wait until later.

In football, the kicker not only starts the game with a kickoff but also kicks field goals. To do this, the kicker must kick the football between the goalposts at either end of the football field. If he succeeds, his team gets three points.

Kicking a field goal can be difficult if the kicker is far from the goalposts or if the weather in an outdoor stadium is windy, rainy or snowy.

But imagine if the goalposts were moving? That would make kicking the ball between them much more difficult.

To move the goalposts

We can face this problem in everyday life. Imagine if you are given a task at work with specific goals to reach. For example, if you are a social media manager you could be asked to increase followers by 10,000 by the end of the month. But when the end of the month comes, your boss tells you that now you need to add 20,000 followers, not 10,000.

In this case, your boss has moved the goalpost.

Sometimes a person moves the goalposts on purpose. They have a reason for doing so. If the goalposts keep moving, it is difficult or even impossible to reach the goal. So, if you say that someone has “moved the goalposts,” you are accusing them of changing the rules or end goals to make it difficult for you to succeed.

We can also say to move the target to mean the same thing. A moving target is a changing goal or result. A desired goal, end, or objective that changes all the time is difficult or perhaps even impossible to

reach.

Both expressions – to move the goalposts and to move the target – can be used in the same way and in similar situations. However, moving the goalposts is a classic football expression. While moving the target can refer to several sports.

And that's Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

idiom—n. a word or expression that does not mean what the dictionary definition of the word or words would suggest

field goal—n. a three-point score in American football that is made by kicking the ball through goalposts

kickoff—n. the start of something; the beginning kick of an American football game

goalpost—n. one of two upright poles that exist in a goal which is used in several field sports including American football and soccer

stadium—n. a very large structure that surrounds a playing field or court where people can sit and watch a sports competition or a performance

classic—adj. one of the best examples of something

refer—v. to have a connection to or be related to something

We want to hear from you. Do you have similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story. Our comment policy is [here](#). Or send us an email at LearningEnglish@voanews.com.

Article 196: The Story of Jack Frost

Date: 2025-01-11T22:05:00+00:00 | 670 words | [Source](#)

No media source currently available

Now, from VOA Learning English, it's time for Words and Their Stories.

If this is your first time with us, this program explores words and expressions commonly used in American English. We take a look at where they come from and how best to use them.

So, as winter officially comes to half the world, today we celebrate an expression that means winter is coming.

When temperatures drop and a cold snap comes, that means one thing: Jack Frost has arrived!

Jack Frost represents the coming of dark, cold days. He is the personification of winter, a human form of winter weather. So, when we say, "Jack Frost is nipping at your nose," we mean that you feel the cold, icy effects of winter on your face.

When a frost or deep freeze comes, you had better bundle up! You should wear enough clothing to stay warm.

Now, Jack Frost does, indeed, bring the cold of winter. But he can also create beauty in nature. Some traditions claim that Jack Frost is responsible for leaving ice and snow on windows, trees, the ground...anywhere it will stick.

While we know frost is a natural event, it is fun to think that an imaginary creature named Jack Frost (or another name in some other cultures) changed the world into a winter wonderland!

That is what poet Hannah Flagg Gould (1789-1865) must have been thinking when she wrote a poem called The Frost.

Here are parts of that poem.

THE FROST looked forth, one still, clear night,

And he said, "Now I shall be out of sight; ...

Then he went to the mountain, and powdered its crest,

He climbed up the trees, and their boughs he dressed

With diamonds and pearls...

Brrr! It is freezing outside. This cold snap came out of nowhere!

Is that all you're wearing? You need to bundle up or Jack Frost will be nipping at more than your nose!

I'll be fine. I'm wearing my new coat.

That it is NOT a winter coat. I mean, it looks great, but it's much too thin. You will catch a cold. I know. You can wear my new down coat. It keeps you warm up to minus 30 degrees Celsius!

I'm going on a date...not exploring the Arctic Circle! Thanks. But I am not wearing that big, thick black coat. Besides, the taxi will take me from door-to-door.

But what if something goes wrong? What if the car skids on the ice and is involved in an accident? You'll have to walk to the restaurant. You might freeze to death!

No, I won't. I'll just call an Uber to come and get me.

And what if that vehicle runs out of fuel? Then you'll have to walk to get more.

No, the Uber driver will. I'll just call another car.

What if that new Uber driver is a pregnant woman and she goes into labor? You'll have to help. You'll have to wait outside in the cold until help arrives! And the roads are already covered with five centimeters of snow! It could take the ambulance an hour to get to you! If you're wearing that thin coat...you'll catch your death!! The EMTs will find you frozen solid like a block of ice!!

Stop! Stop!! You win! Give me your coat!

Don't forget gloves...a hat...and a scarf! Okay, good bye. Have fun!

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

cold snap— n. a brief period of very cold weather

nip— v. to injure or make numb with cold

shiver— v. to shake slightly (as from cold or fear)

wonderland— n. an imaginary place of delicate beauty or magical charm

powdered— v. to sprinkle or cover with or as if with fine particles of something

bough— n. a branch of a tree

skid— v. to fail to grip the roadway

ambulance— n. a vehicle equipped for transporting the injured or sick

EMT— n. a person who is trained to provide emergency medical services to patients who are being taken to a hospital : short for Emergency Medical Technician

Article 197: Knee Jerk and Gut Reactions: When We Are Not in Control

Date: 2025-01-18T22:05:00+00:00 | 494 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

In life, some of our decisions and actions are well thought out. They involve research, examination, and time for thought. And other decisions and actions are not well thought out. We make them quickly, without thinking, almost like a pure physical reaction.

We can call these decisions, actions or reactions knee-jerk.

This term comes from a medical process. Meriam Webster defines the noun "knee jerk" as "an involuntary forward kick produced by a light blow on the tendon below the kneecap." It is an involuntary action. It's automatic.

The words "involuntary" and "automatic" are important when understanding the term "knee jerk" and when to use it. Knee-jerk reactions seem to happen automatically without a decision-making process.

We often use "knee jerk" as an adjective.

Like hitting your kneecap to move your leg, knee-jerk reactions or statements also seem like an involuntary reflex.

"Knee jerk" also describes predictable behavior. Again, hit the knee, the leg will kick every time. So "knee jerk" describes someone who always reacts quickly and without enough thought.

For example, let's say you are on a team with someone who never faces responsibility for their mistakes in the game. If brought to account, the player always blames the dropped ball on other teammates. You can say that player is having a knee-jerk reaction to criticism. They have a go-to response. It's like a reflex they can't control.

We often use knee-jerk in a criticizing or negative way.

Now, a gut reaction also happens without thinking. But it is a bit different than a knee-jerk response. A gut reaction is a feeling. When we have a gut reaction, our instincts are telling us that something may not be right. Gut reactions are instinctual warnings.

So, we also use this expression a bit differently than "knee jerk." We usually talk about our own gut reactions or impulses, not others.

One day, I was hiking on a mountain in California. I had hiked for about two hours and was near the top. The view, I was told, was truly beautiful. I couldn't wait to see it! Then, suddenly, I had a strange feeling. Something just didn't feel right. I can't explain why, but my gut instinct was to turn around and head back down the mountain. I later found out that a dangerous bear had been sighted in the same area that I had fled. I am so thankful I listened to my gut instinct.

And that's Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

involuntary-adj. not normally under the control of the will

automatic-adj. largely or wholly involuntary : acting or done without conscious thought or intention

reflex-n. an automatic response to a stimulus in which a nerve message passes from a sense organ to the spinal cord and then to a point of action (as a muscle or gland) often without first passing to the brain

negative-adj. not positive or helpful

instinct-n. behavior that is based on automatic actions

Article 198: Sometimes We 'Spread Ourselves Too Thin'

Date: 2025-01-25T22:05:00+00:00 | 411 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Today we talk about our busy lives. Many people have family and work responsibilities. We might have religious or community activities. Taking care of our health is also important. And let's not forget about our personal projects, our interests, and our friendships.

With everything on our plate, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, overextended, and overcommitted.

However, if we try to do too much, we may spread ourselves too thin. This expression means we have taken on too much. We are pushed to the limit.

People who are spread too thin, take on too many jobs, projects, or goals. The heavy load requires more energy or attention than they possess.

If we work on many projects simultaneously, or at the same time, it is possible that none will get done well, if they get done at all. And it is possible such multitasking could stress us out.

Being spread too thin can also be described as biting off more than we can chew. When we bite off more than we can chew, we attempt to do more than is possible.

Here is a VOA Learning English video in a Minute explaining the idiom "to bite off more than you can chew."

Now, let's hear some of these terms and expressions used in a conversation.

A: So, how are your classes going?

B: Not great. Many of my best students are failing my course. They all missed an important deadline for a project.

A: That's strange. What else do they have going on?

B: A lot! They are all performing in the same play. So, they have had rehearsals every night for the past month. And many have part-time jobs as well.

A: Sounds like they've spread themselves too thin. They've got too much going on.

B: I think you're right.

A: So, what are you going to do?

B: Well, first I'll extend the deadline. And then I'm going to warn them about biting off more than they can chew.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

overwhelmed—adj. overcome or overpowered by force, number, thought or feeling

overcommitted—adj. to be obligated to something beyond the ability for fulfillment

multitasking—n. the performance of several tasks at one time

stress—v. to subject to physical or psychological pressure

conversation—n. talking or a talk between two or more people

rehearsal—n.a private performance or practice session in preparation for a public appearance

Article 199: ‘Kitchen-Table’ Is a Type of Politics

Date: 2025-02-01T22:05:00+00:00 | 474 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

On this program we explore words and expressions in the English language. We give examples and notes on usage.

Today we talk about different kinds of politics.

We start with kitchen-table politics. The kitchen is often considered the hub, or center, of the home. It is where we gather to not only share a meal but to talk about the events of the day. We often discuss issues of importance with our family and friends around the dining room table.

So, kitchen-table issues are those that affect individuals and their families daily. A family might discuss these issues at the kitchen table during mealtimes.

Rising gas and food prices are two good examples of kitchen-table politics. These issues affect decisions we make day to day. They are sometimes also called dinner-table politics. Or we could describe them as bread-and-butter issues.

Merriam Webster dictionary defines bread-and-butter issues as “being as basic as the earning of one’s livelihood.” The online Cambridge Dictionary defines a bread-and-butter issue as “a subject or problem that relates directly to most people’s needs and interests.”

For example, affordable food prices and availability of good healthcare are the kinds of bread-and-butter political issues that people vote on.

The noun bread and butter means a way of making a living. For example, for a creative writer, her ideas are her bread and butter.

So, bread-and-butter political issues deal with our ability to provide for the needs of ourselves and our families.

Next, let’s talk about green politics. These political issues deal with caring for the natural environment. Green politics can cover ideas such as environmental sustainability, recycling, and threats to wildlife. The natural world is central to green politics.

Identity politics is more personal. This term means that a person’s political views are formed by their experiences and understanding of themselves. Things like gender, age, social and economic position, and religious belief can inform identity politics.

Finally, we come to gotcha politics. This type of politics is centered on damaging opponents through public accusations of wrongdoing or misbehavior. Gotcha politics often involves investigation into the

private lives, past and present, of politicians in search of negative information.

In gotcha politics, “Gotcha” is short for “I got you,” meaning, “I caught you!”

And that's the end of this Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

dine-v.to eat dinner

dinner-n.the main meal of the day

basic-adj.of, relating to, or forming the base or essence

livelihood-n.means of support

affordable-adj.having a cost that is not too high

sustainability-n.of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged

recycling-n.to process (something, such as liquid body waste, glass, or cans) in order to regain material for human use

gender-n.the behavioral, cultural, or psychological traits typically associated with one sex

negative-adj.not positive or helpful

Article 200: What Does It Take to Be a 'Power Couple'?

Date: 2025-02-08T22:05:00+00:00 | 534 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

In American English, we use many expressions to describe when two people have a lot of similarities or are very close. Here are some examples.

If we say two people are joined at the hip, they are nearly always together. If we describe individuals as thick as thieves, it means they are very close. People considered two peas in a pod have many things in common. And we use the term kindred spirits to describe people who often share the same opinions and interests.

These expressions can represent people who grew closer for different reasons. Maybe they complemented each other well in certain ways. Or maybe their situations brought them together for the purpose of completing something important or meaningful.

But today we are going to discuss a very special kind of relationship – one that involves two people who are romantically involved and very successful.

People in such relationships can be described as power couples.

There are many examples of famous power couples, including successful movie stars, musicians and others in the performing arts. But power couples can exist in many other industries and communities, as well. And, the two people do not have to work in the same industry.

If they do, however, that can make them even more powerful. For example, a well-known architect who builds homes could be partnered with a famous designer who decorates them. Or, one person in a power couple may be a music producer, while the other is a famous singer.

Even though power couples involve highly successful people, one person could describe their partner as their better half. This is a way to compliment their “other half” in the relationship. For example, one might say during a meeting with a friend, “Hello! How are you? And more importantly, how is your better half?”

Now, let’s hear two friends use some of these expressions.

A: Hey, I’m not used to seeing you alone. Where’s your sidekick?

B: Huh? Who are you talking about?

A: Ben. You guys have been joined at the hip for weeks. Looks like you’re thick as thieves.

B: Well, the project is pretty important for the company. So, we’re putting in a lot of hours.

A: Are you becoming kindred spirits from working so much together?

B: No. It’s just keeping us both very busy.

A: Busy trying to become the new power couple in the office?

B: What are you talking about?? We’re not thick as thieves or kindred spirits, and we’re definitely not a power couple. We are just working hard on the same project!

And that’s all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

complement-n. something that fills up, completes, or makes better or perfect :-v. to complete or enhance by providing something additional

romantically-adv. done in a way that relates or is associated with love: romantic-adv. of, relating to, or associated with love

architect-n. a person who designs buildings and advises in their construction

decorate-v. to make more attractive by adding something that is beautiful or becoming

compliment-n. an expression of respect, affection, or admiration :-v. to make an expression of respect, affection, or admiration

sidekick-n. a person closely associated with another as a subordinate or partner

Article 201: Don't Miss a Thing With 'Eagle Eyes'

Date: 2025-02-15T22:00:00+00:00 | 670 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

From above, birds must have a wonderful view of the world below. Flying over everything at such a height gives them a rare ability to see many things.

In English, we use the term “bird’s eye view” to describe a view from above as if seen by a bird in flight. It is also described as an “overall view” or “big picture view.”

For example, when I start a project, I first like to get a bird’s eye view. I ask myself several important questions: What is the overall goal? Who is the main focus? What resources do I have available to me? Answers to these “big picture” questions can help me understand the scope of the project.

Now, let’s talk about noticing the smaller details.

Some birds, called raptors, are known for their extremely sharp vision. Eagles, hawks, and owls can see their prey from very far away.

The Raptor Center is part of the University of Minnesota’s College of Veterinary Medicine. Its website explains why eagles, hawks, and owls see so well: “Raptors have powerful binocular vision, where both their left and right eyes can see and focus on a single object.”

Eagles and hawks also have a special bone structure around their eyes that protects them from bright sunlight. Their ability to focus on faraway details in addition to other factors make them extremely effective hunters.

In English, the keen vision of eagles and hawks describes a certain type of person.

If you have an eagle eye, you have the ability to see or notice distant objects. Also, you observe everything, even very small details which others might miss. On the same note, someone who is hawk-eyed watches and notices everything that happens.

These types of people may even perceive things that are not clear to others. Both eagle-eyed and hawk-eyed people are observant or perceptive.

A person does not have to have this ability all the time. They might use their keen vision and powers of observation only at certain times, especially times when they need to keep a close watch.

For example, during Christmastime, hawk-eyed children might search the sky looking for Santa Claus. These children may not be very observant during the rest of the year, but during Christmastime, they are looking for gifts.

Let’s hear these terms used between two friends.

A: This is a great party. Thanks for inviting me.

B: The more the merrier! This yearly neighborhood party always draws a huge number of people.

A: I'd say so! There must be over a hundred people here! Hey, wait a minute. I think I see our old co-worker. Isn't that Samantha way over there by the food and drinks?

B: I don't know. I can't see that far.

A: It's her. My eagle eyes don't miss a thing. I'm going to go say hi and grab the last hamburger while I'm there. Oh, and you should let the hosts know that they're low on drinks.

B: Wow! You're right. I didn't realize you were so hawk-eyed.

A: Only at parties. I start off with a bird's eye view and then focus in on the food, drinks, and people I want to see more closely. See you in a few...

The term "eagle eye" has been used for hundreds of years. Word experts say it was first used in writing in the mid-1500s. The Oxford English Dictionary website says the "earliest evidence for 'eagle eye' is from 1567, in the writing of Thomas Stapleton, a Roman Catholic theologian."

A theologian is an expert in religious thought.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

view—n. things that can be seen from a certain position or place

focus—n. the thing that takes up most of one's attention :focus—v. to make an image seen by the eyes as sharp as possible

notice—v. to see and pay attention to something

prey—n. an animal that is being hunted

binocular—adj. involving two eyes

factor—n. one thing that is involved in a process aimed at producing a result

perceive—v. to understand

Article 202: The Importance of Being 'Dialed In'

Date: 2025-02-22T22:05:00+00:00 | 507 words | Source

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Technology is always progressing. Today, many modern devices can be controlled by touch or voice. This has led to some traditional electronic controls – such as dials and switches – being replaced with new technologies.

Digital displays have also become increasingly common. For example, digital number readouts have long replaced the hands on many clocks.

Many other devices also now operate purely with digital tools instead of mechanical systems.

But some expressions and idioms used by English speakers still describe older technologies.

First, let's talk about dials. These controls are used for changing settings on a piece of equipment, like a radio or old television. We use the dial to tune into a specific channel.

That's where the expressions *dialed in* and *tuned in* come from. If we are dialed in or tuned in to a radio or television program, we can hear it clearly. There is no noise or static.

The same can be said when using these terms in personal conversations. For example, if you are dialed into a project or problem, you know exactly what needs to be done. You are thinking clearly about it and remain very focused.

And when you are tuned in, you understand clearly what is going on around you.

"Don't touch that dial" and "stay tuned" are two ways to tell someone to keep watching or listening to a program.

Now, let's talk about switches.

These are built to either be off or on. There are no in-between settings like with a dial. So, when we flip the switch, we make something happen quickly and easily. It can also mean that we suddenly change something.

The restaurant's change to all organic food happened slowly over time. It wasn't a matter of flipping a switch.

Now, for our last expression --to move the needle.

Needles on measuring devices like a scale move to show a desired level has been reached. So, when something moves the needle, it causes a noticeable change in something, usually for the good.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Don't forget to tune in again for another story about American English expressions.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

dial— n.a device that may be operated to make electrical connections or to regulate the operation of a machine

switch— n.a device for making, breaking, or changing the connections in an electrical circuit

replace— v.to take the place of, especially as a substitute

digital— adj.of, relating to, or using calculation directly with digits rather than through measurable physical quantities

display— n.an electronic device that gives information in visual form

static— n.noise produced in a radio or television receiver by atmospheric or electrical disturbances

conversation— n.talking or a talk between two or more people

focus— v.to cause to be concentrated

flip— v.to move with a small quick motion

needle— n.a slender pointer on a dial : a slender bar of magnetized steel that is free to turn (as in a compass) to show the direction of a magnetic field

scale— n.a device for weighing

Article 203: How to 'Dish Up' Something Good

Date: 2025-03-01T22:05:00+00:00 | 408 words | [Source](#)

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And now, Words and Their Stories, from VOA Learning English.

Food is a popular subject with many people around the world. It is fun to talk about our favorite dishes. It is even more fun to share a favorite dish with others.

Today we talk about the word “dish.” A dish can be the object on which you serve food. But, a dish can also mean a specially prepared food.

Do you have a signature dish? Our signature is how we sign our names. So, a signature dish is a dish we are known for making well. In a way, it identifies us.

My signature dish is sweet potato rosemary dinner rolls. I am often asked to make them, especially for holiday parties. In my circle of friends, I am known for this dish. When the rolls are on the table, people know that I made them.

A tasty dish is something that makes a table look good and inviting. Sometimes the same can be said about a person. Someone who is good-looking can be called a dish. While this usage might be a bit dated, it is still used.

Now, let’s talk about the verb “dish.”

“To dish” can mean to talk about private or personal information. It might be gossip. But I can also dish about myself. For example, a friend may ask me to dish about my new job.

I could also use a phrasal verb form and say my friend wants me to dish out all the interesting details.

Now, to dish up something means to put food on a dish for someone to eat. However, it can also mean sharing personal details, our own and others.

We can also dish out things, like jokes or even insults.

Some people like to tease or insult. They can dish out jokes and insults all day long. But sometimes these same people do not like it if you do the same to them.

We have a saying for just such people. We say, “They can dish it out, but they can’t take it.” They are able and willing to share harsh thoughts, criticisms, or insults about others, but they do not think they, themselves, deserve such treatment.

And that’s Words and Their Stories.

Until next time, I’m Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

signature— n. the name of a person written with his or her own hand

gossip— n. rumor or report of a personal nature

tease— v. to make fun of

harsh— adj. excessively critical or negative

Article 204: Green Means Spring and Other Things

Date: 2025-03-08T22:05:59+00:00 | 497 words | Source

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Now, the VOA Learning English program Words and Their Stories.

Today we talk about a color found all throughout nature – green!

Green is also very common in American English. Let’s hear Warren Scheer read a story about these colorful expressions!

Green is an important color in nature. It is the color of grass and the leaves on trees. It is also the color of most growing plants.

Sometimes, the word green means young, fresh and growing. Sometimes, it describes something that is not yet ripe or finished.

For example, a greenhorn is someone who has no experience, who is new to a situation. In the fifteenth century, a greenhorn was a young cow or ox whose horns had not yet developed. A century or so later, a greenhorn was a soldier who had not yet had any experience in battle. By the eighteenth century, a greenhorn had the meaning it has today - a person who is new in a job.

About one hundred years ago, greenhorn was a popular expression in the American west. Old-timers used it to describe a man who had just arrived from one of the big cities back east. The greenhorn lacked the skills he would need to live in the hard, rough country.

Someone who has the ability to grow plants well is said to have a green thumb. The expression comes from the early 1900s.

A person with a green thumb seems to have a magic touch that makes plants grow quickly and well. You might say that the woman next door has a green thumb if her garden continues to grow long after your plants have died.

The Green Revolution is the name given some years ago to the development of new kinds of rice and other grains. The new plants produced much larger crops. The Green Revolution was the result of hard work by agricultural scientists who had green thumbs.

Green is also the color used to describe the powerful emotion, jealousy. The green-eyed monster is not a frightening creature from outer space. It is an expression used about four hundred years ago by British writer William Shakespeare in his play "Othello."

It describes the unpleasant feeling a person has when someone has something he wants. A young man may suffer from the green-eyed monster if his girlfriend begins going out with someone else. Or, that green-eyed monster may affect your friend if you get a pay raise and she does not.

In most places in the world, a green light is a sign to move ahead. A green light on a traffic signal means your car can continue on. In everyday speech, a green light means approval to continue with a project. We want you to know we have a green light to continue this series next week.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories.

Don't forget to tune in again for another story about American English expressions.

Marilyn Christiano wrote this program. Warren Scheer and Anna Matteo narrated.

Article 205: 'Watching the Grass Grow' Is Not Fun

Date: 2025-03-15T22:05:00+00:00 | 355 words | Source

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And now Words and Their Stories from VOA Learning English.

Springtime is a time of renewal and growth. Many plants end their long winter sleep and form new buds and shoots. Beautiful flowers will soon be showing their bright colors. And the grass will grow thicker and greener again.

Some flowers bloom in a very noticeable way but that is not the case with grass. Imagine you are sitting in a grassy field. And you have only one job – to watch the grass grow. That does not sound very interesting. In fact, it sounds really boring.

That idea is what gives us the expression “like watching grass grow.” We use this expression to describe an experience that is uninteresting. Another good word to describe it is tedious.

We use this expression in many situations. Let's hear a few examples:

After the politician won his campaign, he gave a two-hour long acceptance speech. Two hours! It was as much fun as watching grass grow.

I really don't like watching long sports games. It's like watching grass grow.

Now, grass grows on the ground all the time. And usually, we don't give it much thought. If you stand in one place for a long time, the grass will continue to grow under your feet.

For people who are always active, always moving, always on-the-go, we can say they don't let grass grow under their feet. We can also say beneath their feet. And sometimes we use this expression as a command.

Let's hear some examples:

Don't let the grass grow beneath your feet. Get back to work.

She certainly doesn't let the grass grow under her feet. She's been traveling non-stop for over a year.

And that's all the time we have for this Words and Their Stories. Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

bud—n. the beginnings of a flower or a leaf on the branch of a plant

shoot—n. new plant growth, especially from seeds or close to the ground as in the case with grass

bloom—v. the opening of a flower

boring—adj. not interesting

tedious—adj. tiresome because it takes a long time and is repetitive

on-the-go—phrase having much high-spirited energy and movement

End of Corpus

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