

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

## Know your English — 1-4-14

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**How is the word 'kerfuffle' pronounced?**

(Prasad Baru, Secunderabad)

The 'er' in the first syllable sounds like the 'a' in 'china', and the following 'fuff' rhymes with 'puff', 'cuff', and 'snuff'. The final 'le' sounds like the 'le' in 'kettle', 'bottle' and 'mettle'. The word is pronounced 'ke-FUFFL' with the stress on the second syllable. It is used in British **English** in informal contexts to refer to a commotion or a disturbance of some kind. An argument between two people over something very trivial can also be called 'kerfuffle'. According to scholars, it comes from the Scottish 'curfuffle'; 'cur' originally meant 'bend' or 'twist' and 'fuffle' meant 'to throw into disorder'.

\*As expected, there was a kerfuffle over who should be the next President.

\*During the kerfuffle, the thief managed to pick several pockets.

**Why is New York referred to as 'the Big Apple'?**

(G Ranjit, Mysore)

There are many theories about why the city of New York is frequently referred to as 'the Big Apple'. Some say that the city got its name from a well-known brothel; others claim that jazz musicians created this term. The only thing that experts agree on is that New York began to be called 'the Big Apple' in the 1920s. According to some people, African American stable boys working in the racetracks of New Orleans were the first to refer to New York as 'the Big Apple'. This was because many of the important horse races were held in New York, and the prizes (frequently referred to as 'apples') awarded at these events were 'big'. The city became the dream destination of most jockeys and boys working in stables. John Fitzgerald, a well-known sports reporter, took a fancy to the term and called his popular column on racing 'Around the Big Apple'. In his introduction to the column on 18 February 1924, he wrote, "The Big Apple. The dream of every lad that ever threw a leg over a thoroughbred, and the goal of all horsemen. There's only one Big Apple. That's New York." Other terms to refer to New York are 'Gotham', 'Empire City' and 'the City That Never Sleeps'.

## What is the meaning and origin of the expression 'fair game'?

(Vineet Mittal, Vellore)

When you say that someone is 'fair game', you are suggesting that it is all right to criticise or attack the individual. Such a person is often the target of fun. For example, as far as the media are concerned, a crooked politician is fair game; newspapers and television channels write/say whatever they wish to about the person. Another expression that has more or less the same meaning is 'open season'.

\*Nowadays, most students think teachers are fair game.

The expression 'fair game' has another meaning as well. Something that you fight for in order to win it can be called 'fair game'.

\*Our Vice President is quitting. The rival companies now see him as fair game.

The expression comes from the world of hunting; people were allowed to hunt certain animals during a specific time or season of the year. During this period, these animals were 'fair game' — in other words, it was legal to hunt and kill them.

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*"I come from New York, where if you fall down, someone will pick you up by your wallet."* — **Al McGuire**

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