

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English - How is the word 'lief' pronounced?

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Sometimes the hair at the back of the head refuses to lie flat. It stands up. Is there a word for this?

(M.Shashikanth, Hyderabad)

You are thinking of the main character in Hank Ketcham's cartoon strip Dennis the Menace, aren't you? The tuft of hair at the back of Dennis' head always seems to be going in different directions. To answer your question, yes, there is a word to describe this kind of growth. It is 'cowlick'!

*In the afternoon, Prabha's cowlick was more pronounced than ever.

I understand the saliva of a cow is viscous; and if the animal were to lick your head, the hair would stand erect. According to Norse mythology, when the divine cow Audumbla started licking a salty iceberg, a man's hair appeared. As she continued to lick, the head and then later the body of the man emerged!

What is the meaning and origin of 'a dime a dozen'?

(S. Bindu, Chennai)

Americans refer to a ten-cent coin as 'dime'. The five-cent coin is called a 'nickel' and the one-cent coin, 'penny'. The expression 'dime a dozen' is of recent origin; according to some scholars, it came into being only in the mid-20th century. It is mainly used in everyday conversation to mean 'cheap and plentiful'. If you can get a dozen things for ten cents (dime), the thing you are buying is very cheap indeed. Over a period of time, the expression has acquired a figurative meaning as well. Nowadays, it is used to mean 'common'.

*People who can make good presentations are not a dime a dozen.

*Political scandals in our country are a dime a dozen.

The dime made its appearance in the United States in the late 18th century. The coin was very small in size because it was mostly made of silver – the government didn't want the cost of making the coin to exceed its worth. In 1965, the American Government changed the composition of the coin – it became 90 per cent copper and 10 per cent nickel. Since the coin did not contain any silver, it became cheaper for the government to make the dime. This resulted in the market being flooded with dimes!

How is the word 'lief' pronounced?

(Debashish, Jorhat)

It is pronounced like the word 'leaf'. Not many people use this word nowadays as it is considered old fashioned. It can be used to mean 'gladly' or 'willingly'. When used as an adjective, it means 'dear' or 'beloved'. 'Lief' comes from the Old **English** 'leof' meaning 'dear' or 'valued'.

*I would as lief partner Ramesh as Sameer.

What is the difference between 'blokeish' and 'blokish'?

(T.V. Ramadas, Vizag)

In terms of meaning and pronunciation, there is no difference. The word 'bloke', which rhymes with the words 'poke', 'oak' and 'soak', is normally used in British English in informal contexts to refer to a man. He is someone who is very ordinary. For example, one can say, Vijay is a funny bloke. 'Blokeish/blokish' is used to describe someone who behaves like the stereotypical male when he is in the company of others – talking about sports, cracking dirty jokes, etc. In British English, the word is used to show disapproval; Americans do not use it all.

*Tapan was too blokeish for Nandini – all he could talk about was cricket.

"He is as good as his word – and his word is no good." – **Seumas MacManus**

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