

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English - Meaning of 'coffee table book'

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How is the word 'cognoscente' pronounced?

(J. Rajesh Kumar, Melmaruvathur)

The first syllable rhymes with the words 'fog' and 'dog', while the second 'o' sounds like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'sc' is pronounced like the 'sh' in 'sheep' and 'ship'. The syllable itself rhymes with 'bent' and 'sent', and the final 'e' sounds like the 'i' in 'bit' and 'hit'. The word is pronounced 'cog-ne-SHEN-ti with the stress on the third syllable.

This is one way of pronouncing this word of Italian origin. 'Cognoscente' is used in formal contexts to refer to people who are well informed about a particular subject; these individuals usually have a great understanding of the fine arts. The singular form of this word is spelt 'cognoscenti'.

*Prahlad, the music cognoscenti, explained the subtler points of the raga.

What is the meaning of 'coffee table book'?

(K. P. Andavan, Gobichettipalayam)

A coffee table book is normally hardbound, relatively large in size and contains a lot of illustrations/photographs. It is rather expensive and is designed to be pleasing on the eye; it usually does not contain too much text. These books mostly deal with the arts, and are generally found lying on coffee tables where the visitor to a house can see and admire them.

It is because of the lack of textual content that the term is sometimes used pejoratively to refer to books which deal with subjects in a superficial manner; books that give importance to style rather than substance.

When one refers to a song as being 'coffee table music', you mean that it is ear candy. David R Brower is credited with the idea of designing such books.

What is the difference between 'obtain' and 'attain'?

(G. R. Jai Ganesh, Bangalore)

'Obtain' means 'to get'; when you obtain something, you are in possession of it. You gain a physical object. The use of this word does not necessarily imply that you have put in a lot of

hard work to get what you want. For example, it has now become possible for people to buy a PhD degree. They don't really earn it by doing the necessary work; they get it by merely paying for it. It is also possible to 'attain' a degree. When you do this, you are implying that you worked very hard to get the degree. The word 'attain' is normally used to mean 'to accomplish' or 'reach a stage of'. Unlike 'obtain', 'attain' can also be used with abstract things. For example, people who have been meditating for a number of years 'attain' peace of mind. The use of this word suggests that the individual has put in a lot of work to reach this stage.

What is the meaning of 'to cold finger' someone?

(C. Nambiar, Kochi)

This rather new expression has more or less the same meaning as 'give someone the cold shoulder'. When you give someone the cold shoulder, you usually look through the person. You ignore him/her and do everything possible to make the individual feel unwelcome. When you 'cold finger' someone, you give him the cold shoulder while you are online! Sometimes, people send us an SMS or message us on Facebook/Orkut. By choosing to ignore it, and not to respond to it, we are giving the person the 'cold finger'! Why finger? Because it's the fingers that we use to type the message!

"Advice is like castor oil; easy to give, but dreadful to take." – **Josh Billings**

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