

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English - What is the meaning of 'tinderbox situation'?

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What is the meaning of 'tinderbox situation'?

(M. Naushad Ismail, Madurai)

The word 'tinder' is normally used to refer to any material, like dry grass, wood, straw, etc. that can be used to start a fire quickly. In the old days, every home had a tinderbox. It was a small metal box that contained tinder and all the other things required to light a fire. When you describe someone's house as being a 'tinderbox,' you are suggesting that if it were to catch fire, it would burn down very quickly. With the passage of time, the word acquired a figurative meaning; it began to be applied to situations. When you refer to a situation as being a 'tinderbox,' you are implying that it is rather explosive; one that can turn violent very quickly.

*The tension on campus makes it a tinderbox where riots could break out at any moment.

How is the word 'noir' pronounced?

(Prawal Srivastava, Meerut)

The French word 'noir' is pronounced 'NWAAR,' and it comes from the Latin 'niger' meaning 'black.' It is from 'niger' that we get the word 'negro.' The expression 'film noir' literally means 'black film.' I understand the term was first used to refer to the type of detective films made in Hollywood between 1944 and 1954. Everything about these films was dark – the violent characters, the sleazy settings, and the ominous background score.

What is the difference between 'flat' and 'apartment'?

(G. Syed Shanawaz, Pondicherry)

In terms of meaning, there is no difference between the two words. Both refer to a self-contained housing unit that is part of a building. The term 'flat' is mostly used in British **English**, while the Americans prefer to use 'apartment.' According to some people, the word 'apartment' is sometimes used in British English to refer to an expensive flat located in an upscale neighbourhood. There is nothing in any of the standard dictionaries to support this.

Does one 'give' or 'take' a test?

(Sushil Kumar, Aurangabad)

It depends on whether you are an examiner or an examinee. In native varieties of English, the teacher or the examiner 'gives' a test, and the student or the examinee, 'takes a test'. In India, the two verbs are used interchangeably. In our country, when a student says she is going to be taking/giving a test tomorrow, she means she is going to be writing the test the following day. She is the examinee.

What is the meaning of April?

(J. Deepak, Mysore)

April marks the arrival of spring; it is not surprising therefore that according to some scholars, the word is derived from the Latin 'aperire' meaning 'to open'. The month was given this name because after a cold and dreary winter, Mother Nature comes to life in April. She literally 'opens' up in front of our eyes – the leaves on plants and trees open, the flower buds open, etc. Others believe that 'April' comes from the Latin 'Aprilis' meaning 'month of Venus'. They are of the opinion that the month was named in honour of the Goddess of Love, Venus or Aphrodite. This makes sense, for during spring, it's not just flowers that bloom, but love begins to blossom as well! The Old English word for April was 'Eastermonad'. It meant 'Easter month'.

"To an adolescent, there is nothing in the world more embarrassing than a parent." – **Dave Barry**

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