

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English - meaning of "printer's devil"

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What is the meaning and origin of 'sing for one's supper'?

(G. Ashwini, Faridabad)

This expression was apparently popularised by the well-known nursery rhyme, 'Little Tommy Tucker'. According to the rhyme, the poor lad had to 'sing for his supper'. The expression is mostly used nowadays to mean to work for one's pay. When you sing for your supper, you usually do something for someone in order to get something you need or desire.

In the old days, a minstrel or travelling musician used to go from one town to another in order to perform. Very often, he would be invited by the owner of a tavern (pub) to entertain the evening crowd. In exchange for the songs he sang and the poems he recited, the wandering minstrel used to be paid in kind and not in cash – the tavern owner provided him with a hot meal. The minstrel literally sang for his supper.

Why do we say 'to learn by heart'?

(N. Jayaprakash, Kochi)

We Indians are very good at this; we are past masters in the art of memorising things. We may not understand what it is that we have 'learnt by heart', but we have no problem in reproducing it during an exam. The question that arises is, why 'by heart'? Surely, the brain is the organ we use to remember things, and not the heart. This seems very obvious to us today, but it wasn't so obvious to the ancient Greeks. They, in fact, believed that emotion, memory and intelligence were situated in the heart, and not in the head. They were of the opinion that in order to learn or remember something, you had to make use of your heart and not your head. This belief was passed on from one generation to another all across Europe. In England, it resulted in the expression 'learn by heart'. Other common expressions used today that have more or less the same meaning are 'mug up', 'swot', and 'cram'.

What is the meaning of 'printer's devil'?

(N. Ramachandran, Chennai)

It is not uncommon for people to refer to the errors that one finds in a printed manuscript or a book as 'printer's devils'. A quick glance at the Internet shows that people across the globe, not just in India, use this expression to mean 'printer's errors'. Funnily enough, standard dictionaries do not list this as one of the possible meanings of the term. They all define 'printer's devil' as a 'printer's apprentice'; this individual, usually a very young boy, worked in a printer's office and performed several tasks. In addition to being an errand boy, he was also in charge of sweeping the office, and washing the black ink off the ink rollers. This often resulted in his clothes and some parts of the body becoming black. Since the devil was associated with all things black, the poor apprentice began to be called 'printer's devil'. Some well-known printer's devils were Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin and Walt Whitman.

According to another theory, Titivillus, a demon who worked for the devil, haunted every printing press. When a page had been typeset, this mischievous spirit created havoc by rearranging letters in words and sometimes removing an entire line. The errors that showed up in the final product were often blamed on the poor apprentice!

"How many times have you committed suicide?" – **Actual question asked by a lawyer.**

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