

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - Meaning and origin of 'play it by ear'

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What is the meaning and origin of 'play it by ear'?

(B. Suresh Kumar, Coimbatore)

There are occasions when we do not plan too far ahead; in such cases, our response to a situation depends on how the event unfolds. Usually, we improvise. Our responses are not thought out before hand; we do whatever we think is the right thing to do in that particular situation. This manner of dealing with something is called 'playing it by ear'.

*I have no clue how Nalini's parents are going to react. I'll have to play it by ear.

*Mukund, I know you are a control freak, but this time you'll have to play it by ear.

This expression, which is mostly used in informal contexts, comes from the world of music. When a musician 'plays it by ear', he attempts to play or reproduce a piece of music without looking at the music sheet. He plays the piece from memory, and uses his ears to determine if what he is playing is correct or not.

How is the word 'conduit' pronounced?

(R. Shukla, Jaipur)

The first syllable is pronounced like the word 'con' and the following 'du' like the word 'dew'. The final syllable sounds like the word 'it'. One simple way of pronouncing the word is 'KON-dew-it' with the stress on the first syllable. It is normally used to refer to the pipe or passage which allows wires or water to pass through. The word can also be used to refer to a channel which carries something from one place to another or from one person to another – it could be information, money, etc.

*Villages near the border have always been a conduit for the sale of illegal drugs.

What is the meaning of 'give me a break'?

(S.V. Uday, Raipur)

This is an expression frequently used in American **English** in informal contexts. When somebody says something, and you respond by saying 'give me a break', it suggests that you don't believe what the person has just told you. It's another way of telling the person that he was being 'preposterous' or plain ridiculous.

*Rukmani has been made a Professor! Give me a break.

*Your are keen on helping the poor! Give me a break.

What is the difference between 'change' and 'alter'?

(M. Prasad, Warangal)

The difference is one of degree. When you 'alter' something, you usually make minor changes to it. For example, when you alter your trousers, you make the required small changes so that they fit you better. Similarly, when you make alterations to your house, you merely redecorate it. The overall structure of the house remains the same; whatever changes you make are around this existing structure. 'Change', on the other hand, can be significant or slight. It is considered to be the less formal of the two words, and is used in a wide range of contexts. When a person changes his clothes, he replaces what he was wearing with something different.

What is the origin of 'thesaurus'?

(V. Jayakrishnan, Kochi)

The word comes from the Greek 'thesauros' meaning 'treasure chest' or 'storehouse'. It was only when Roget published his thesaurus in 1852 did the word acquire the meaning that it has today: "a collection of words arranged according to sense".

"Be who you are and say what you feel because those who mind don't matter, and those who matter, don't mind." – **Dr. Seuss**

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