

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - meaning and origin of 'break a leg'

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What is the meaning and origin of 'break a leg'?

(R. Nandini, Pune)

This is an expression used mostly in the world of theatre to mean 'good luck'. Actors and musicians are never wished 'good luck'; before they walk on to the stage, they are usually told 'break a leg'. This form of wishing people is beginning to be used in other contexts as well.

*I heard you are trying out for the band. Break a leg.

*When Roshni auditioned for the lead in Sakunthala, I told her to break a leg.

There are many theories to account for this rather strange expression. One that finds favour with most scholars is the following. People who worked in theatre were a superstitious lot; they believed the evil spirits that haunted every theatre took delight in ruining every play that was staged. So when you wished an actor 'good luck', the spirits ensured that bad luck fell on him. In order to outwit the spirits, theatre professionals began to wish actors ill luck – like breaking a leg – rather than good luck.

What is the difference between 'substitute' and 'replacement'?

(Rakesh Kumar, Delhi)

Though there is a difference in meaning between the two words, people tend to use them interchangeably in most contexts. A 'substitute' is usually temporary. When a substitute fielder is called on to the field, he is usually there for a short period of time; he returns to the pavilion the moment the main player steps onto the field. A substitute may or may not be as good as the original. A substitute teacher, for example, may or may not be as good as the permanent teacher. If he is not as good, he is adequate enough to do the job at hand for a short period of time. The word 'replacement', on the other hand suggests permanence. The replacement is usually better or of the same quality as the thing replaced. It is never inferior to what is being replaced.

*Till the product becomes available again, you can use this as a substitute.

What is the meaning of 'no free lunch'?

(S. Gopalarathnam, Chennai)

The expression is used in informal contexts to mean that nothing in life is free; one has to pay for the services or goods provided. The standard expression 'there ain't no such thing as a free lunch' was often reduced to an acronym – 'TANSTAAFL'

*Majid gets a fat salary, but seldom finds time to relax. There is no such thing as a free lunch, I guess.

In the old days in America, people who bought drinks were given free food. To ensure that people consumed a lot of liquor, bar owners added extra salt to the food items. In order to quench their thirst, customers drank more beer.

How is the word 'scourge' pronounced?

(M.S. Nalini, Bangalore)

The 'sc' sounds like the 'sk' in 'skill', 'skit' and 'skin' and the following 'ourge' is pronounced like the word 'urge'. The word is pronounced 'skurge'. It comes from the Old French 'escorge' meaning 'to whip'. A 'scourge' is someone or something that causes lot of suffering, trouble or destruction. It can be used as a noun and a verb.

*AIDS continues to be a scourge in India and other developing countries.

*The dictator had killed many people. But he wasn't scourged by guilt.

"Generation Gap: the one war in which everyone changes sides." – **Cyril Connolly**

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