

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

## Know Your English - April 4, 2016

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### **What is the meaning and origin of 'firing on all cylinders'? (Vineet Reddy, Hyderabad)**

When you say that someone is firing on all cylinders what you are suggesting is that the individual is working in the most efficient way possible. He is like a well-oiled machine in which all the powerful cylinders are working together to generate the maximum power possible. The individual, like the engine, puts a lot of energy into what he is doing.

*We lost in the semi-final because our team didn't fire on all cylinders.*

*I'm not going to sell my father's old car. It's still firing on all cylinders.*

### **What is the difference between 'thankful' and 'grateful'? (J Kanchana, Madurai)**

There is a tendency to use the two words interchangeably in many contexts; careful users of the language, however, maintain a distinction between the two. According to books on usage, 'grateful' is the word that is normally used when someone has done you a favour or has been extremely kind to you. It is used to express your feeling of gratitude. When you say that you are 'thankful' that something did not happen, it means that you are relieved or pleased that it didn't happen.

*I'll forever be grateful for all the help you provided.*

*I'm thankful that the children were not injured in the accident.*

### **How is the word 'amateur' pronounced? (Sirajuddin, Bangalore)**

There are two different ways of pronouncing this word. One way is to pronounce the first 'a' like the 'a' in 'pan', 'fan' and 'van'. The vowels in the second and final syllables are pronounced like the 'a' in 'china'. The 't' can be pronounced like the 't' in 'tin', 'tap' and 'time'. The word can be pronounced 'AM-e-te' with the stress on the first syllable. Some people pronounce the 't' like the 'ch' in 'chips', 'child' and 'choose'. In such cases, the word is pronounced 'AM-e-cher'. It comes from the French 'amateur' meaning 'lover of'; an amateur is someone who loves to dabble in things. He participates in events because he enjoys doing so; he doesn't participate for the sake of money. He is the opposite of a professional. The word can also be used to show disapproval; when you refer to someone as being 'an amateur', you are suggesting that the person does not have the required skill to do the job. Whatever he does is shoddy.

*During weekends Ravi becomes an amateur photographer.*

*The company did such an amateur job that they didn't get any more assignments.*

### **Is it okay to say, 'The terrorist was shot to death'? (R Venkatesh, Chennai)**

Although we occasionally come across this expression in our newspapers, native speakers of English do not use it. People are not 'shot to death', they are merely 'shot dead'. You can, however, use 'to death' with the verbs 'beat' and 'stab'. One can talk about someone being 'beaten to death' and 'stabbed to death'.

*The terrorists were shot dead by the police.*

*The puppy was beaten to death by the boy.*

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*Never be afraid to try something new. Remember, amateurs built the Ark, professionals built the Titanic. – Unknown*

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