

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English: The other meaning of the word 'unreadable'

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“Why are you squinting at the paper in your hand? Something wrong with your eyes?”

“No, my eyes are fine. I’m looking at a prescription. Just trying to figure out what the doctor has written.”

“It's a waste of time. Everyone knows that a doctor’s handwriting is usually illegible.”

“Illegible? You mean unreadable, don’t you?”

“Both ‘unreadable’ and ‘illegible’ can be used to refer to handwriting which is difficult or impossible to read. But the word ‘unreadable’ has an additional meaning.”

“And what is that?”

“Unreadable can be used to talk about the content of something. For example, if you say that a story was unreadable, you are suggesting it was very badly written.”

“So, a rather complicated or boring novel can be said to be unreadable!”

“That’s right!”

“Many of my friends find the novels of James Joyce unreadable.”

“That’s a good example. Most youngsters find books on philosophy unreadable.”

“Tell me, what are the other ways of saying that someone’s handwriting is illegible?”

“People usually talk about someone’s ‘poor penmanship’. For example, Atul’s poor penmanship cost him nearly 20 marks in the final exam.”

“Poor penmanship sounds formal. Anything less formal?”

“Yes. Some people use the word ‘crabbed’ to refer to handwriting that is difficult to read.”

“I am not going to waste my time trying to make sense of his crabbed handwriting.”

“Americans sometimes use the expression ‘chicken scratch’. Whose chicken scratch is this?”

“Don’t look at me! You know my penmanship is rather good.”

“That’s true. Tell me, are you ill or something?”

“No, why do you ask? Do I look ill?”

“Not really. Why are you walking around with a prescription in your hand?”

“Oh that! The prescription is an old one. Remember the time I had an earache?”

“Earache? Oh, yes! That was some two weeks ago, right?”

“Exactly. But tell me, is it ‘I have an earache’ or ‘I have earache’? Which one is right?”

“Both are acceptable. The British may or may not use ‘an’ before earache, but the Americans usually do.”

“I see. Right now, I have headache.”

“Sorry, you can’t say ‘I have headache’. It’s always ‘a headache’. Nalini says she has a headache.”

“And what about you? Do you have a headache?”

“Yes, I do! I just can’t figure out which pre-loved car to buy.”

“Pre-loved car? What is a pre-loved car?”

“Anything that is bought second hand can be called ‘pre-loved.’”

“Really? I thought it was ‘pre-owned’. People are always talking about pre-owned cars.”

“That’s right! When you buy a pre-loved or a pre-owned car, you are buying a used car. But the word pre-loved suggests that the previous owner took really good care of it.”

“I suppose he looked after the car very well because he loved it very much!”

“Exactly! A ‘pre-owned car’, on the other hand, may or may not have been loved by the owner. This probably explains why people talk about pre-loved homes and pre-loved toys.”

“If the headache would only precede the intoxication, alcoholism would be a virtue.” – **Samuel Butler**

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