

EDUCATION PLUS

Know Your English: December 14

S. Upendran

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What is the meaning and origin of 'cool one's heels'? (J. Maitabi, Bangalore)

The idiom is frequently used in informal contexts to mean to make someone wait. When you make someone 'cool his heels', you delay meeting the person; sometimes, deliberately. The person may get irritated or angry and you wait for him to cool down.

The train was late, so we spent the time cooling our heels in the waiting room.

If you don't behave, you'll find yourself cooling your heels in your room.

The 'heels' in the expression refers to those of horses. When a horse runs fast or for a long time, the hooves heat up; the feet begin to cool when the animal is rested. With the passage of time, the expression began to be used with people who are in a hurry, but are made to wait for someone or something.

Is it okay to say 'We plan to fill up all vacancies'? (K.S. Ramani, Vellore)

Government officials in India sometimes talk about the need to 'fill up vacancies' that exist in their department. In this context, 'vacancy' refers to an unoccupied position. It is possible to 'fill up a bottle' and 'fill up a suitcase' with something - one does not, however, fill up a vacancy. Native speakers of English talk about the need to 'fill' a vacancy and not 'fill up' one.

The vacancies in the Physics Department have been filled.

What is the difference between 'run out of time' and 'race against time'? (R. Vinod, Indore)

The two expressions have slightly different meanings. When you say that you have 'run out of time', you are suggesting that you have no time left; you have used up all the time that was given to you. For example, during exams, we sometimes fail to answer all questions because we have simply run out of time. When you 'race against time', you do things very quickly because you have to do many things in a short period of time. In other words, you rush in order to complete something before the given deadline. Answering all questions in an exam is often a race against time.

It was a race against time, but we managed to catch the early morning flight.

We couldn't see half the things we wanted to because we ran out of time.

Is there a word for someone who loves to be photographed? (T. Ravi, Secunderabad)

There are lots of people who love to have their pictures taken; they readily volunteer to stand in front of the camera while someone clicks away. Thanks to the advances in technology, this individual can now take plenty of pictures of himself - selfies. In everyday conversation, a person who loves standing in front of the camera is sometimes referred to as 'camera hog' or 'lens hog'. In informal contexts, the word 'hog' is used to refer to a greedy individual. In the case of a camera hog, he is greedy to be in front of the camera. A person who doesn't like being photographed is said to be 'camera shy'.

"Photography is a tough life: you can be taken, framed, exposed, shot, captured and hung all in the same day" – Unknown

Email: upendrankye@gmail.com

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