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An ensemble of party poopers

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What is the meaning and origin of ‘skeleton at the feast’? (T. Sailaja, Vishakapatnam)

If you were celebrating an occasion, how would your friends react if they saw a skeleton seated in a chair next to yours? Would it help to lighten or dampen the mood? When you refer to someone as being a ‘skeleton at the feast’, what you are suggesting is that he is a wet blanket – in other words, someone who is likely to dampen the mood of all those around him. He is someone who intentionally or unintentionally prevents others from having a good time – a real ‘party pooper’!

Don't invite Chandini. She has the reputation of being a skeleton at the feast.

I want someone who will be the life of the party – not a skeleton at the feast.

According to Plutarch, the ancient Egyptians had the custom of placing a skeleton or a mummy at their banquet table. This was one way of reminding the guests of their own mortality – that life was short and therefore it was to be enjoyed while it lasted. When this expression became part of the English language hundreds of years later, it took on a very negative meaning.

What is the difference between ‘immerse’ and ‘dip’? (A. Mehta, Delhi)

In both cases, you are taking an object and putting it into a liquid. When you ‘immerse’ an object into water, you are pushing it all the way down – in other words, the object is completely covered by water. The object may be pushed under water very quickly or very slowly. When you ‘dip’ an object into a liquid, you usually lower a part of it into the liquid and that too for a very short period of time. For example, some people ‘dip’ a biscuit into their morning tea before eating it. In this case, it is not the entire biscuit, but only a small portion that is lowered into the cup. When you have a ‘dip’ in the river, you get your entire body wet, but spend only a very little time in the water. These are just some of the differences between the two words.

The doctor immersed the instruments in boiling water for twenty minutes.

Mohan dipped his finger into the bowl to check how hot the soup was.

How is the word ‘ensemble’ pronounced? (K.V. Ganesh, Kottayam)

The 'e' in the first and second syllable is pronounced like the 'o' in 'on', 'don' and 'con'. The final syllable sounds like the 'ble' in 'tremble', 'trouble' and 'double'. The word is pronounced 'on-SOM-bel' with the stress on the second syllable. It comes from the Latin 'insimul' meaning 'at the same time'. Nowadays, the word is normally used to refer a group of people – usually musicians, dancers or actors – who always play or perform together. It can also be used to refer to a set of something – clothes, upholstery, etc. – that go together.

Prithi was only interested in the earrings, but the salesman was trying to get her into buying the whole ensemble – shoes, dress, bracelets, etc.

You'll enjoy the show. We have an ensemble of very fine actors.

* * * * *

Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil – and you'll never get a job working for a tabloid. – Phil Pastoret

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