

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English

S. Upendran

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What is the opposite of 'hibernate'? (TV Prasad, Nalgonda)

An animal that sleeps through the winter months is said to 'hibernate'. In everyday contexts, the word is frequently used to mean 'inactive'. For example, if after a hectic week at the office, you plan to spend the weekend relaxing or 'chilling' at home, you can tell your friends you are going to hibernate during the weekend. The opposite of 'hibernate' is 'estivate' – also spelt 'aestivate'. The 'es' is pronounced like the 'es' in 'yes' and 'mess', and the following 'i' is like the 'a' in 'china'. The final syllable rhymes with 'gate', 'late' and 'date'. One way of pronouncing the word is 'ES-ti-vate' with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the Latin 'aestus' meaning 'heat'. Many animals that live in the desert 'estivate' during the summer months – they remain asleep or inactive during the hottest months of the year.

What is the meaning and origin of 'tip of the ice berg'? (Siva Priya, Guntur)

This is an expression that has been around for several hundred years. We know from the science lessons we did in school that only a very small portion of the iceberg actually remains above water. The bulk of it remains under water; what we actually see floating is only a very small part of the iceberg. Therefore, when you say that a problem or a situation is just the 'tip of the iceberg', what you are suggesting is that just like the iceberg, there is more to the problem/situation than meets the eye. What people are able to see or understand is only a very small part of a big/serious problem.

The gradual downsizing that we see happening in the software industry is only the tip of the iceberg. I think many big companies will fold up within a year.

If you ask me, the reported cases of missing girls is only the tip of the iceberg.

How is the word 'plait' pronounced? (Geetha, Hyderabad)

There are two ways of pronouncing this word. Some people make it rhyme with the word 'flat'; others pronounce it like the word 'plate'. The word comes from the French 'pleit' meaning 'fold'. A 'plait' refers to the way a woman/girl wears her hair. In the past, it was

common to see young girls wearing two plaits and a married woman with a single plait. Another term for plait is 'braid' – rhymes with 'made', 'fade' and 'jade'. Americans prefer 'braid', while the British seem partial to 'plait'.

Make sure her hair is tightly plaited/braided.

Which is correct? 'Sorry about/for breaking your beautiful vase'? (J Indumathi, Mysore)

Both 'about' and 'for' are possible. When you feel bad about something that you have done, you can apologise by saying 'sorry for' or 'sorry about'. In both cases, you are sorry for/about 'doing something'.

I'm truly sorry for/about calling you all sorts of names.

I'm very sorry about/for breaking your beautiful vase.

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If you want to succeed in politics, you must keep your conscience well under control. – David Lloyd George

Email: upendrankye@gmail.com

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