

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English: June 13

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What is the meaning of 'when push comes to shove'? (Sashi Kumar, Vellore)

This is an informal expression and it has more or less the same meaning as 'if the worst comes to the worst'. Sometimes, we delay taking action of any kind; we wait till the last minute to actually do so. The situation becomes so bad that we are compelled to do what we should have done a long time ago. This action becomes our last resort to save the situation. It is also possible to say, 'if push comes to shove'. According to some scholars, the expression comes from the world of rugby.

If push comes to a shove, we can always postpone the wedding.

When push came to shove, Mr. Mehta compromised and took a pay cut.

Which is correct: If I was/were? (Jaswant Singh, Phagwara)

Actually, both are correct. People who love their grammar would argue that since the sentence begins with an 'if clause', the verb that follows should be in the plural: If I were the Mayor, I would ask people not to cut down trees. But there is a tendency, even among native speakers of English, to use the singular verb in informal contexts. If I was the Mayor, I would request people to pay their taxes. The use of the singular verb should be avoided in formal contexts.

If I were to take the job, my wife would be terribly unhappy.

If I was to eat all this, I would put on a lot of weight.

How is the word 'erudite' pronounced? (Sandeep Kumar, Kurnool)

There are different ways of pronouncing the word. The simplest way is to pronounce the first 'e' like the 'e' in 'set', 'bet' and 'jet', and the following 'u' like the 'u' in 'pull' and 'full'. The final 'dite' rhymes with 'kite' and 'bite'. The word is pronounced 'E-ru-dite' with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the Latin 'eruditus' meaning 'well informed'. An 'erudite' is someone who is very learned; he is highly educated and knows a lot about things. He is a

scholar. It is interesting to note that it is related to the word 'rude', which in turn comes from the Latin 'rudis' meaning 'rough' or 'unlearned'.

The students found it difficult to follow the erudite lecture.

The erudite members of the faculty decided not to join the strike.

What is the difference between 'won't' and 'wont'? (Hari Rao, Pune)

In terms of pronunciation, there is no difference between the two; the two words rhyme with 'don't'. 'Won't' is the contraction of 'will not', and is mostly used in speech and in informal styles of writing. 'Will not' is preferred in formal styles of writing. 'Wont', on the other hand, is considered formal. It is normally used to talk about someone's habit or way of doing things. For example, if you say, 'The Minister, as was his wont, shouted at the organisers', what you are suggesting is that the Minister has the habit of shouting at people. It is customary for him to do so.

The teacher, as was her wont, cracked a lot of jokes in class.

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Erudition: dust shaken out of a book into an empty skull. – Ambrose Bierce

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