

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English - "Quintessential"

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What is the meaning and origin of 'sit below the salt'?

(Dheeraj Kumar, Kanpur)

This rather old-fashioned expression is used to refer to a person of very low status. An individual who 'sits below the salt' has little or no social standing; others generally look down upon him.

*As several prominent cricket players turned up for the function, the hockey players sat below the salt.

*At the dinner party, Ganpat sat below the salt with the likes of me.

This is an expression that has been around for over four hundred years. In the past, when guests were invited to dinner, a relatively large salt shaker was placed in the middle of the long dining table. The most important people among the guests were always seated next to the host. These individuals who were seated at the host's end of the table were considered to be 'above the salt' – in other words, they were people of very high social standing. Guests who were of a lower rank, sat at the lower end of the table; they sat 'below the salt'.

What is the difference between 'genius' and 'prodigy'?

(M. Indumathi, Coimbatore)

The word 'prodigy' is mostly used with relatively young people who have a natural ability to excel at one or two things – music, mathematics, sport, etc. These individuals are born with these remarkable abilities or qualities; they are not learnt. Tiger Woods, the well-known golfer, and India's Sachin Tendulkar are examples of prodigies. Even as teenagers, their exceptional talent won them the admiration of all those who saw them in action. A prodigy need not necessarily be very intelligent; his IQ may or may not be very high. A genius, on the other hand, generally has a rather high IQ. He may or may not be street smart, but he has exceptional intellectual power or natural ability. Now that Tendulkar is no longer young, he is referred to as a 'genius'. He is a prodigy who has gone on to become a genius. Not every prodigy becomes a genius. It is also possible to be a genius without having been a prodigy.

How is the word 'quintessential' pronounced?

(R. Dharani, Madurai)

'Quint' rhymes with the word 'squint' and the syllables that follow are pronounced like the word 'essential'. The word is pronounced 'kwin-ti-SEN-shell' with the stress on the third syllable. When you say that an individual is a quintessential of something, you are implying that he is a perfect example of it.

*According to my wife, John is the quintessential American.

Is it okay to say, 'It is a walkable distance'?

(S. Madhusudhan, Hyderabad)

Yes, it is. Many people, however, prefer to say, 'It is within walking distance.' Dictionaries that include 'walkable', define it as 'short enough or close enough to be accessible by walking'. Therefore, any place that is 'walkable' is so close that you can walk there.

*Take the car. The library is definitely not a walkable distance from here.

The word is now also being used to mean 'suitable for walking'. For example, when you say London is a very walkable city, you mean that it is a city that provides the facilities that make it easy for people to walk from one place to another.

"The secret of teaching is to appear to have known all your life what you just learned this morning." – **Unknown**

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