

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – Imminent and eminent

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What is the difference between 'imminent' and 'eminent'?

(S. Nandini, Salem)

An 'eminent' person is a well-known person. He is a giant in his field, and towers over everyone else thanks to his outstanding achievements. Someone who is eminent is both respected and admired.

*The eminent historian took ill and was unable to take part in the workshop.

'Imminent', unlike 'eminent', is not used with people. It is used to talk about situations. When you say that something is 'imminent', you are suggesting something bad is likely to happen very soon. The word has a negative connotation. 'Imminent' comes from the Latin 'imminere' meaning 'to overhang'.

*Despite the best efforts of the public, the closure of the museum seems imminent.

How is the word 'desultory' pronounced?

(Subhash, Kolkata)

There are several ways of pronouncing this word. One simple way is to pronounce the first syllable like the 'de' in 'desk' and 'den', and the following 'u' like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'o' remains silent and the final 'y' sounds like the 'i' in 'bit' and 'hit'.

The word can be pronounced DE-sel-tri with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the Latin 'desultorius', and it originally referred to an acrobat in a circus who jumped from one horse to another while the animals were in full gallop.

A 'desultory conversation' is an aimless conversation; one in which the participants display a lack of interest. They merely keep jumping from one topic to another. The word can also be used to mean 'without a clear plan or purpose'.

*Govind's desultory presentation put the audience to sleep.

What is the meaning and origin of 'up to snuff'?

(B. Ganeshan, Chennai)

The expression has been around for several hundred years, and nowadays it is mostly used in informal contexts to mean 'satisfactory'. Anything that is 'up to snuff' meets the required standard. The idiom is also frequently used in British **English** to mean 'alert'.

*Ramesh was excellent, but the rest of the candidates weren't up to snuff.

In the 14th century, the word 'snuff' was used to refer to the burnt wick of a candle. Later, the word began to be used as a verb to mean to 'extinguish' or put out the flame of a candle. In the mid 17th century, snuff began to refer to the tobacco powder that men frequently inhaled through their nostrils. This process of inhaling something through the nose began to be called 'snuffed'. For several centuries in Europe, taking snuff was a common practice among men of certain social standing. Snuff was expensive, and only the rich could afford it. The common man smoked his tobacco, while the wealthy 'snuffed' theirs. Since the well to do were more interested in quality rather than quantity, the expression 'up to snuff' began to mean 'up to the required standard'.

Is it okay to say, 'The hotel is opposite to the railway station'?

(Abhishek, Bangalore)

No, it isn't. Something is always opposite something else, not 'opposite to' something else. The word 'to' is unnecessary.

*There's a very good restaurant right opposite the station.

"A synonym is the word you use when you can't spell the right one and therefore can't find it in the dictionary." – **Laurence J Peter**

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