

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – Is it okay to say ‘bestest’?

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Why is the ‘surgery room’ in hospitals referred to as ‘operation theatre’?

(R. Savithri, Mysore)

When we hear the word ‘theatre’, we immediately think of a building in which we watch a film or a play. The word comes from the Greek ‘theatron’ meaning ‘a place for viewing’. So why is the sterile room which no outsider is allowed to enter called a ‘theatre’? Several centuries ago, a surgery was a spectacle that many people went to see. Surgeons carried out their task in the open, in a non-sterile environment – usually in an amphitheatre. Sitting a few feet from the operating table would be medical students and interested participants watching the surgery in progress. Even today, in teaching hospitals, it is standard practice for students watch surgeries from galleries situated at a higher level than the ‘operation theatre’.

Is it okay to say ‘bestest’?

(P.K. Basham, Hyderabad)

It is, provided the context in which the word is used is informal. Dictionaries that list the word claim that it is ‘non standard’, and ‘childish’. ‘Bestest’ is mostly used by children, to mean ‘best of the best’ or ‘better than best’. Adults use it in order to sound humorous.

*I’m told that Rupa is Sharanya’s bestest friend.

What is the difference between ‘amble’ and ‘stroll’?

(V. Abhishek, Coimbatore)

When you ‘amble’ from one place to another, you walk in a leisurely, unhurried fashion. There is a rhythm in your walk; you sway and your movements are smooth. Someone who ambles walks at an uninterrupted pace – he maintains the same speed. A ‘stroll’, on the other hand, suggests that the individual is walking in a very slow and aimless manner. The pace and movements in this case are not smooth or uninterrupted. A stroll in the park would suggest frequently stopping to drink in the beauty of the flowers. Not everyone maintains this distinction between the two words.

*I see Rama ambling along the beach every morning.

*We went for a stroll in the market.

How is the word 'nuance' pronounced?

(G. Kesava Rao, Kakinada)

There seem to be different ways of pronouncing the word. One way is to pronounce the first syllable like the word 'new', and make the second syllable rhyme with 'dance', 'chance' and 'glance'. The word can be pronounced 'NEW-ans' with the stress on the first syllable. It comes from the Latin 'nubes' meaning 'cloud' or 'mist'. In **English**, the word is mostly used to refer to the subtle or very small distinctions in meaning, colour or appearance. The word can be used as a noun and an adjective.

*I am looking for someone who is familiar with the nuances of the local dialect.

*The critic called it a 'complex and nuanced novel'.

What is the meaning of 'I'm afraid' in 'I'm afraid the meeting has been cancelled'?

(J Siddharth, Pune)

The use of 'afraid' in such sentences does not mean that you are 'scared of' something or that you 'fear' something. 'I'm afraid that' is mostly used at the beginning of sentences to mean 'I am sorry to inform you that'. The expression is normally used when you wish to give someone bad news.

I'm afraid that you have failed the test.

I'm afraid your flight has been delayed by two hours.

"Classic formula for a novel: A beginning, a muddle, and an end." — **Philip Larkin**

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