

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – What is the meaning and origin of the expression ‘draw a line in the sand’?

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(T. Indira, Trichy)

This is an expression that Micky Arthur, the Australian cricket coach, used after axing four of his players for indiscipline. It has the same meaning as our Indian expression ‘Lakshman reka’ – the line that Lakshman drew on the ground and asked Sita not to cross. When you ‘draw a line in the sand’, you create an imaginary boundary of sorts; it is a warning to a person that he should not cross it. Any attempt to do so will result in trouble – you will retaliate immediately.

*The teacher has drawn a line in the sand – assignments submitted late will not be accepted.

The story goes that King Antiochus of Macedonia decided to invade Egypt, which at that time was under the protection of the powerful Roman Empire. When he and his army neared the border, a diplomat sent by the Roman Senate met them. His name was Popilius Laenas. The diplomat asked Antiochus to return to his kingdom in Syria, but when he saw the invader hesitate, Laenas drew a circle around the king and asked him to order his army to withdraw before he even considered crossing the circle. The story goes that King Antiochus was so impressed by the diplomat’s bravery that he ordered his troops to withdraw.

Is it all right to say ‘commentate’?

(CN Ramamoorthy, Mumbai)

The word is derived from ‘commentator’ and is frequently used in the world of broadcast journalism to mean ‘to provide commentary for’ or ‘comment on’. When you ‘commentate’, you report on an event as it occurs. Though there are still people who do not approve of this word, ‘commentate’ has been listed in most standard dictionaries.

*Surya will be commentating on next week’s match.

How is ‘cul-de-sac’ pronounced?

(Maria Joe, Hindupur)

The 'cul' rhymes with 'dull', 'null' and 'gull'. The 'e' in 'de' is like the 'a' in 'china', and the final 'sac' is pronounced like the word 'sack'. One way of pronouncing this French expression is 'KUL-di-sack' with the stress on the first word. It literally means 'bottom of the sack'. It was first used as a term in anatomy to refer to any tube that was open at only one end. With the passage of time, the expression began to be used with streets and alleys that had only a single entrance. Since the 19th century, cul-de-sac has been mostly used to refer to a dead end street – where one goes in and comes out the same way. Figuratively, the expression is frequently employed to refer to a situation that leads nowhere.

*In the evenings, the children play cricket in the cul-de-sac.

Is it okay to say 'crowdy'?

(Ramesh, Kurnool)

I have heard college students use this word to mean extremely crowded. It's not uncommon to hear a student say, 'The canteen is a very crowdy place'. Native speakers of **English** do use this word, but not in the sense that we Indians do. Standard dictionaries that list the word claim that 'crowdy' is a variant of 'crowdie'. It is defined as 'porridge, gruel' and 'soft cheese made from curds'. So 'crowdy' is something that people eat!

"Conscience is a mother in law whose visit never ends." – **Henry Louis Mencken**

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