

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – meaning and origin of 'cherry-picking'

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What is the meaning and origin of 'cherry-picking'?

(Sana Jacob, Hyderabad)

When you 'cherry-pick', you look at the various things that are on display and select the best or the most valuable from among them.

*A brilliant student like Anil can cherry-pick the university he wants to go to.

People who are hired to pluck cherries from trees are told to select the fruit carefully. They are instructed to pick only those that are ripe; the unripe ones are not to be touched.

What do you call someone who studies insects?

(S. Vijay, Chennai)

My favourite character, Gil Grissom, from the crime drama 'CSI' loved to study insects. While he was on the show, he was affectionately labelled 'the bug man'! Someone who likes to study insects is called an 'entomologist'. The first syllable 'ent' rhymes with 'sent' and 'bent', and the following 'o' is like the 'a' in 'china'. The second 'o' is like the 'o' in 'pot' and 'got'. The word is pronounced 'ent-e-MO-le-jist' with the stress on the third syllable. Entomology comes from the Greek 'entomon' meaning 'insect', and 'logia' meaning 'study of'. There are different kinds of entomologists; Grissom was a 'forensic' entomologist.

Is it okay to say 'He received his wife at the station'?

(L. Aruna, Madurai)

In India, people usually go to stations and airports to 'receive' their friends and family members. There is nothing wrong with such a sentence in terms of grammar. But careful users of the language would argue that the word 'receive' should be used with people of some stature. The Head of State is usually received at the airport. Ordinary mortals like you and me are usually 'met' or 'picked up' at the station!

What is the meaning and origin of 'follow suit'?

(Prakash Rao, Bangalore)

There are times when we do something, someone we know will do exactly the same thing. For example, when we were kids, we sometimes did whatever we saw our parents or older siblings doing. We imitated them; we followed suit.

Once I tendered my resignation, I thought the others would follow suit. But they didn't.

Karthik took his family to Singapore, and his brother followed suit.

The 'suit' in the expression does not have anything to do with what people wear on formal occasions. The saying 'follow suit' comes from the game of cards. I understand that the different types of cards in a deck—hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades — are called 'suits'. In certain card games like bridge, if the first player drops a spade, then the others must follow suit. In other words, if the other players are holding a spade, they must play a spade as well.

"A conference is just an admission that you want somebody to join you in your troubles." — **Will Rogers**

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