

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - Fear of darkness

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What is the fear of darkness or night called?

(R. Jayanthi, Chennai)

The word that you have in mind is 'nyctophobia'. The 'y' sounds like the 'i' in 'bit', 'hit' and 'sit', and the following 'c' is like the 'k' in 'kit', 'kiss', and 'kill'. The first 'o' is pronounced like the 'a' in 'china'. One way of pronouncing this word is 'nik-te-FOE-bia' with the stress on the third syllable. In Greek, 'nykto' means 'night'. A person who is extremely scared of the night or of darkness is said to be 'nyctophobic'.

What is the meaning of 'powerpuff presentation'?

(L. Shashidhar, Chennai)

Nowadays, whenever someone gives a lecture or a talk, the person usually makes sure that there is a PowerPoint presentation to go along with it. In many organisations, it has become mandatory. The object of showing slides is to ensure that they complement what the speaker is saying. Sometimes, instead of worrying about the content of the presentation, the presenter begins to focus all his attention on the slides he is going to use. He spends a lot of time ensuring that they are visually pleasing. He spices up the presentation using all kinds of gimmicks – flashy animation, incredible sound effects, etc. By keeping the members of the audience entertained through pleasing visuals, the speaker is hoping that they will fail to realise that there is very little substance in the talk. A 'powerpuff presentation' is one which has little or no substance, but which scores very highly on visuals.

*You can't expect anything more than a powerpuff presentation from Mohan.

How is the word 'asthma' pronounced?

(D. Kannan, Bangalore)

The 'as' in the first syllable is pronounced like the word 'ass', while the 'a' in the final syllable sounds like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'th' remains silent. The word is pronounced 'ASS-me' with the stress on the first syllable. The Americans tend to pronounce the 's' like the 'z' in 'zip' and 'zoo'. The word comes from the Greek 'asthma' meaning 'short breath, a panting'.

What is the meaning and origin of 'bury the hatchet'?

(M. Mohamed Imdadullah, Melvisharam)

A 'hatchet' is a small axe with a very short handle, and Native Americans excelled in using it as a weapon in their fights against their enemies. When the chiefs of two warring tribes wanted peace, they would meet, smoke a 'peace pipe' and then proceed to bury two hatchets. This act symbolised that there would be no more fighting between the two tribes. In 1680, the Native Americans performed a similar ritual with the white men who had settled in the colony of New England. Samuel Sewell wrote, "Meeting with the Sachem (Indian chiefs), they came to an agreement and buried two axes in the ground, which ceremony to them is more significant and binding than all the Articles of Peace, the hatchet being the principal weapon." Unfortunately for the Native Americans, the white man didn't think that this symbolic act was binding; for years later, he proceeded to slaughter the so called 'savages' by the thousands. Nowadays, the expression 'bury the hatchet' is mostly used to mean to put an end to your quarrel with someone; you sort out your differences, and make peace with him/her.

*The two families have been at each other for 20 years. I don't think they'll ever bury the hatchet.

"Never accept a drink from a urologist." – Erma Bombeck

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