

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - Homeric laughter

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What is the meaning of 'Homeric laughter'?

(K. Vaithinathasamy, Kumbakonam)

The 'Homer' referred to in this expression is the Greek poet who is believed to have written the Iliad and the Odyssey, and not the leading character in the well-known television show, 'The Simpsons'. People laugh differently. Some laugh silently, while others tend to guffaw. 'Homeric laughter' refers to laughter of the latter kind. The individual laughs loudly and at times uncontrollably; it is usually prolonged, and the entire body shakes during the process. Such belly shaking laughter is called Homeric laughter because this is how the gods laughed in Homer's classics. When you think about it, this is how the crazy Homer Simpson laughs as well!

What is the difference between 'artist' and 'artiste'?

(G. Vedarajan, Thanjavur)

First, let's deal with the pronunciation of 'artiste'. The 'iste' in the second syllable sounds like the word 'east'. The word is pronounced 'ar-TEAST' with the stress on the second syllable. An artiste is someone who practices some form of performing arts; he is usually a professional entertainer. He displays his talent in front of a live audience. Singers, dancers, and acrobats can be called 'artistes'.

The word 'artist', on the other hand, is a general term used to refer to someone who excels at something – he may or may not perform in front of an audience. He is someone who makes an art of his profession.

The well-known painters M.F. Husain and Michealangelo were great artists. A thief who excels in cracking open safes can also be called an artist. So can someone who excels at cooking. Singers and dancers who are good at what they do can be called artists as well. Nowadays, there is a tendency to use 'artist' in most contexts.

How is the word 'captious' pronounced?

(S. Sneha, Pune)

The first syllable is pronounced like the word 'cap', and the 't' that follows sounds like the 'sh' in 'ship', 'sheet', and 'shoe'. The final 'iou' sounds like the 'a' in 'china'. The word is

pronounced 'CAP-shes' with the stress on the first syllable. This is a rather formal word and it is mostly used to mean to find fault with trivial things. A captious critic is someone who takes pleasure in criticising people or things; no matter how trivial the fault may be, he finds great delight in highlighting them.

*The captious critic wasted our time objecting to the font size and colour.

What's the difference between 'lastly' and 'last, but not least'?

(B. Sanjay, Hyderabad)

Both these are used when you mean 'finally'. When you are providing a number of reasons why people should not smoke or drink, you can conclude by saying, 'lastly' or 'last but not least'. The word 'lastly' signals that you have come to the end of your list. You have no more points to make. You are not saying how good your last point is. The use of the expression 'last but not least' suggests that although you are including this as your final point, it is not in any way inferior that to those that preceded it. You are claiming that it is as strong a point as those that went before it. This is not implied by 'lastly'; it can suggest that the point you are making is an afterthought.

“Never believe anything until it has been officially denied.” – Claud Cockburn

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