

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

# Know your English - Satchel

**S. UPENDRAN**

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**Is it okay to say 'real fact'?**

(K.R. Natarajan, Coimbatore)

We often hear Indians say, 'It is a real fact' and 'It is a true fact.' It is not uncommon for native speakers of English to come up with such sentences as well. Careful users of the language, however, would frown on them. They would argue that 'real' and 'true' are redundant in these sentences. When you say that something is a 'fact', you are implying that the piece of information is true, there is proof that it is real. It is therefore unnecessary to use 'true' or 'real' with 'fact'.

**How is the word 'satchel' pronounced?**

(S. P. Ravi, Sattur)

The 'satch' rhymes with the words 'hatch', 'catch', and 'patch'; the following 'e' sounds like the 'a' in 'china'. The word is pronounced 'SATCh-el' with the stress on the first syllable. Before the introduction of 'backpacks', children used to carry their books to school in a satchel. It was a rectangular bag, usually made of thick cloth, with a long strap to go around the shoulder.

\*Somebody should tell Madhavi to discard her old satchel.

**What is the meaning and origin of 'three ring circus'?**

(N. Mythili, Bangalore)

When you refer to a situation as being a three-ring circus, you are implying that it is rather confusing. There are so many activities taking place at the same time that they leave you confused or annoyed.

\*I can't study at home. My visiting relatives have turned it into a three-ring circus.

\*It was a three-ring circus with my wife screaming, her cell phone ringing, and the TV blaring.

The expression, as expected, comes from the world of entertainment – the circus. The area where the artists perform their acts for the audience is called the 'ring'. In the past, some of the circuses were so big and so grand that they had three acts taking place simultaneously

in three different 'rings'. It was left to the individual to decide which 'ring' he wanted to focus on. The different acts taking place at the same time were often spectacular, and left the spectator wondering where to look.

### **What is the origin of 'left wing'?**

(E. Subbarayan, Gingee)

Nowadays, Communist parties everywhere are referred to as 'the Left'. The expression 'left wing' came into being during the time of the French Revolution. I understand that when the French National Assembly met in 1789, the nobles, who didn't want any changes in the way things were run, sat in the right side of the room in which the meeting took place. The First Estate, or the revolutionaries who wanted radical changes to be brought about, sat in the left wing. This seating arrangement resulted in the conservatives being called 'right wing' and the liberals 'left wing'. This practice of the Left sitting to the left of the presiding officer continues in many countries even today.

### **What is the opposite of 'flammable'?**

(J.V. Yogesh, Hyderabad)

Something that can easily catch fire can be labelled 'flammable' or 'inflammable'. The two words mean the same thing. The 'in' in 'inflammable' does not mean 'unable to' but 'able to'. The opposites of these two words are 'non-flammable' and 'non-inflammable'.

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"Politicians are like the bones of a horse's fore-shoulder – not a straight one in it." –

Wendell Phillips

upendrankye@gmail.com

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