

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

## Know your English

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**What is the meaning and origin of 'down and out'?***(Saketh Mohan, Bangalore)*

The expression has been part of the language for well over 200 years. When you say that someone is 'down and out', you are suggesting that the person is in very bad shape – he doesn't have money or a job, and may not even have a home to live in. When you are down and out, you are staring defeat in the face.

*\*My friend is writing a novel about a down and out hitman in Kolkata.*

*\*Our team was down and out at half time, but we rallied.*

The expression comes from the world of boxing. A boxer who is 'down' is lying flat on his back on the canvas. His opponent has probably knocked him down. The 'out' in the expression suggests that the referee has declared that the boxer is 'out for the count'; in other words, the referee has counted to 10, and the dazed or unconscious fighter on the canvas has been unable to get up in that time. A boxer who is 'down and out' has been knocked out of the competition; he has been defeated.

**Which is correct: 'heart of heart' or 'heart of hearts'?***(Syed Aziz, Hyderabad)*

Native speakers of **English** would say 'heart of hearts', instead of 'heart of heart'. The expression is frequently used in speech to mean 'deep down'. Something that is in your heart of hearts is what you truly believe. For example, if in your heart of hearts you think your best friend is a crook, you are quite certain that he is up to no good. You may not be willing to admit this openly to anyone – you will keep this feeling to yourself.

*\*Even before the game began, Jai knew in his heart of hearts that India would lose the final.*

*\*In her heart of hearts, Mythreye knew what she was doing was wrong.*

The expression was first used by Shakespeare in Hamlet: *Give me a man that is not a passion's slave, and I'll wear him in my heart's core, in my heart of heart.* So when we say 'heart of heart' – as many Indians do – we are actually speaking the language of Shakespeare!

**Is it okay to say, 'The Prime Minister's speech was just an eyewash'?**

*(Rahul Gupta, Pune)*

No, it is not. In informal contexts, native speakers of English use the word 'eyewash' to mean nonsense or insincere talk.

Some dictionaries list this use of the word as being old fashioned. Indians frequently use the word 'eyewash', but they treat it as a countable noun. For native speakers of English, 'eyewash' is an uncountable noun, and is therefore not preceded by the indefinite article – they would not say 'an eyewash'.

*\*Rahul says he will quit cricket if he is found guilty. We know that such statements are just eyewash.*

*\*Don't believe a word that Umesh said. It was eyewash.*

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### Quotable quote

*"I was not lying. I said things that later on seemed untrue."* – **Richard M. Nixon**

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