

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - spouse and wife

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What is the difference between 'spouse' and wife?

(M.Md Imaduallah, Melvisharam)

The word 'spouse' can be used to refer to the husband or the wife. A wife can refer to the husband as her spouse, and the husband can refer to the wife as his spouse. The word comes from the Latin 'sponsus' meaning to pledge or promise. 'Wife', on the other hand, is used to refer to the female partner in a marriage. It comes from the Old English 'wif' meaning 'woman'. 'Wife' meaning 'woman' still survives in words like 'midwife' and 'fishwife', and in the expression 'old wives' tale'.

Is it okay to say 'bested'?

(C.A. Antony, Thrissur)

Yes, it is. Most of us use 'best' as an adjective (Ramu is the best student in class), adverb (Which do you like best?) and a noun (The best deserves to be rewarded). It is also possible, however, to use 'best' as a verb. When used in this manner, the word means to defeat or overcome someone.

*The champion was bested in straight sets by a younger and fitter opponent.

What is the meaning of 'guesstimate'?

(B. Suresh Kumar, Coimbatore)

This word which began to be used by statisticians in the 1930s is a combination of two words: 'guess' and 'estimate'. When you 'guesstimate', you make an educated guess; a rough estimate. When you estimate something, you arrive at some sort of conclusion based on facts or data. In the case of 'guesstimate', you are making a prediction without adequate information. Some dictionaries define the word as 'an estimate using a mixture of guesswork and calculation'. Like the word 'estimate', 'guesstimate' can be used as a noun and a verb.

*Vittal's guesstimate is that the share prices will go up by another Rs. 50.

*Bhanu's task is to guesstimate how many will buy the product.

Why do we say 'brand new'?

(T. Sneha, Hyderabad)

When you say that the jeans that you are wearing are 'brand new,' you mean they are absolutely new. You have bought them recently and are perhaps wearing them for the first time. The word 'brand' comes from the Old English 'baernan' meaning 'burn.' When animals are 'branded,' people usually burn a mark on their skin. The expression 'brand new' has been around since the Middle Ages, and it was mostly used to refer to new pottery and any form of metal work. A pot that was 'brand new' was one that had just been removed from the furnace it had been placed in for hardening. It was also common practice to refer to these articles which had been just removed from the furnace/fire as 'fire new.' Shakespeare used this expression in Richard III: "Your fire-new stamp of Honour is scarce current."

How is the word 'quinquennial' pronounced?

(Bhavna, Nagpur)

The first syllable 'quin' rhymes with the word 'swing,' and the 'e' in the second syllable sounds like the 'e' in 'set,' 'pet,' and 'get.' The 'i' is like the 'i' in 'bit' and 'fit' and the final 'a' sounds like the 'a' in 'china.' One way of pronouncing the word is 'kwing-KWE-ni-el,' with the stress on the second syllable. The fifth anniversary of any event can be called 'quinquennial.' The word can also be used to refer to an event that happens every five years or to something that lasts for five years.

"Evening news is where they begin with 'Good evening,' and then proceed to tell you why it isn't." – Unknown

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