

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English: How is the word 'debacle' pronounced?

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How is the word 'debacle' pronounced?

(Venkat Reddy, Vizag)

The 'de' in the first syllable sounds like the word 'day', and the following 'a' is like the 'a' in 'path', 'father' and 'ask'. The final 'cle' is like the 'cle' in 'uncle' and 'buckle'. The word is pronounced 'day-BAA-kl' with the stress on the second syllable.

When the Indian cricket team went to Australia earlier this year, our pundits predicted a series win for Dhoni and his boys. This, however, did not happen; we ended up losing all four test matches. The series turned out to be a disaster; it was a debacle.

The word comes from the French 'debacler' meaning to 'unbar' or 'free'. Originally, it was used to refer to the flooding that sometimes resulted when the river ice cracked and melted during spring. In **English**, debacle is mostly used to mean a fiasco or complete failure. It is not used to refer to any natural calamity.

*After the debacle of his first film, no director showed any interest in Ravi.

What is the difference between 'sympathy' and 'empathy'?

(L. Meenakshi, Chennai)

When Andy Murray cried after losing to Federer in the Wimbledon final, most of us felt sorry for him. Since this was the fourth time he was losing in a Grand Slam final, we sympathised with him. When you feel sympathy for an individual, you feel sorry for the person, but you do not really understand what the person is feeling or what he is going through.

'Empathy', on the other hand, suggests that you are able to put yourself in the other person's shoes, and are able to experience what he/she does. In this case, you 'feel with' and not just 'feel for' the individual. It is easy to empathise with someone when you have had a similar experience. Ivan Lendl, for example, would probably find it easy to empathise with Murray for he too lost the first four Grand Slam finals he played in.

*Rahul had no sympathy for the poor.

*Usha felt empathy for her son as she too had a lot of pimples when she was a teenager.

What is the origin of the term 'dry run'?

(K. Raghavan, Hosur)

A 'dry run' is a rehearsal or practice for a ceremony or procedure. For example, before staging a play, actors have a dry run – they perform the complete play without stopping. In western countries, couples getting married do a dry run of the wedding ceremony. This helps them know what each is supposed to do on the day of the wedding. I understand the expression comes from the world of fire fighting.

In the early 18th century, firemen often demonstrated to the public how they went about putting out fires. If this drill was performed without the use of water, it was called 'dry run'. When water was used, it was called 'wet run'.

Is it okay for a bank to say, 'If you are drawing heavy cash, please bring an accomplice'?

(R. Srinivasan, Srirangam)

No, it isn't. What the note suggests is that if an individual is keen on robbing the bank, he needs to bring another person along. An 'accomplice' is someone who helps a person commit a crime or anything illegal. The word has a negative connotation.

"You know it's time for a second opinion when your neurosurgeon calls your case a 'no brainer'." –

W. Asbury Stembridge Jr.

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