

Vocabulary Improvement: Learn Stories Behind Words II

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1. Ostracize

In times of political crisis or conflict, the Athenians of ancient Greece would send someone likely to cause trouble out of the city for a period of years. To make their selection, Athenians would write a name on a shell fragment called an ostrakon. The person receiving the most votes would have to leave the city. Today when we say that we ostracize someone, we mean that we are excluding or banning that person from our group. (No vote is necessary to ostracize someone.)

Sample sentence: They ostracized him because of his political views.

2. Utopian and utopia

Utopia was an imaginary island that served as the subject and title of a book. The island was the perfect place to live because the people of the island used reason to guide their lives. Today when we talk about a utopia, we are talking about a condition, situation, or place that is socially and politically perfect. When we say that an idea is utopian, we mean that it is excellent but too impractical to survive.

Sample sentence: When will he stop trying to put those utopian schemes into practice?

3. Jingoist

In the eighteenth century, there was a music hall song sung by those who were ready to go to war. The song contained the words “by jingo.” Today when we say that someone is a jingoist, we are talking about a person who is eager for, even enthusiastic, about war.

Sample sentence: Never having seen any active combat, he tended to be a jingoist about making war to achieve political ends.

4. Mesmerize

In the eighteenth century, a man named Franz Anton Mesmer used hypnosis to put people into a strange, sleep-like state. People were fascinated by his skills and gathered to watch him. Today we still use the word “mesmerize” to indicate that someone is being put under hypnosis. However, we also use it to say that we are fascinated by what we see.

Sample sentence: As the magician sawed into the box containing his assistant, the audience seemed mesmerized.

5. Laconic

The Laconians were a Greek tribe known for their simple ways and brevity of speech. According to legend, an enemy claimed that if his army came to Laconia, the country would be reduced to ashes. A Laconian general is said to have answered with only one word, “if.” Today when we say that someone is laconic, we mean that he or she doesn’t use many words to make a point.

Sample sentence: The heroes of old Westerns were nothing if not laconic; they hardly ever said more than “yep” or “nope.”