

Item #11 – The Bible

Thirty Pieces of Silver/Betrayed with a Kiss

In the Bible, Judas Iscariot was the disciple who agreed to betray Jesus to the authorities in exchange for payment. The thirty pieces of silver were the price of Judas' betrayal. The way Judas identified Jesus for the authorities was to approach Jesus and greet him with a kiss of identification.

“Thirty pieces of silver” refers to *payment received for an act of treachery*. “Betrayed with a kiss” refers to a *supposed friend's treachery*.

Examples

Patrick Henry warned his listeners about the supposed friendliness of the British. He warned, “Suffer not yourselves to be betrayed with a kiss.”

When the city council member abruptly changed his vote to support the wealthy developer's controversial project, some of his colleagues muttered that he undoubtedly would receive his thirty pieces of silver from the developer.

Item #12 – Mythology and Legend

Gordian Knot

According to legend, Gordius was a Greek king. He tied an extremely complex knot, and an oracle prophesied that whoever untied it would rule all of Asia. Alexander the Great “untied” the knot simply by cutting through it with his sword.

A “Gordian knot” is any *extremely complex problem*, and “cutting the Gordian knot” refers to *solving such a problem in a quick, decisive manner*.

Examples

Each year, counselors face the Gordian knot of scheduling classes so that teachers will have reasonable class sizes and students will have the opportunity to take the classes they need.

The councilwoman cut the Gordian knot of which of the two worthy programs would have to be eliminated when she proposed money-saving strategy that would enable both programs to continue.

Item #13 – Language and Idioms

Ivory Tower

A French poet, Alfred deVigny, was said to have shut himself in an ivory tower so that he could compose his poems. Furthermore “ivory towers” are mentioned in various 18th century fairy tales. The term thus refers to a beautiful, unreachable place. It has come to have negative connotations of being out of touch with reality.

A person who is *secluded or protected from the real world* and thus *out of touch with reality* is said to be residing in an “ivory tower.”

Examples

The engineers feared that the leaders of the company, sitting in their ivory tower, did not understand why the people in the field needed increased resources to insure the new bridge truly would be safe.

In his ivory tower, the chancellor was unaware of the growing political protests occurring on the college campus. He still believed fraternity-house pranks were the most serious problem facing the university.

Item #14 – Language and Idioms

ALL that Glitters is not Gold

This is a proverb derived from a Latin translation of Aristotle. The proverb read, “Do not hold as gold all that shines as gold.” In other words, just because something looks like gold, one should not assume that it actually is gold.

The message of the proverb is that something which *appears valuable on the outside*, may in fact be less than valuable. *Appearances can be deceptive*.

Examples

When I expressed envy for the superstar who seemed to have everything, my friend simply said, “Remember all that glitters....”

Pyrite, a yellow metallic substance, is also known as “fool’s gold.” It provides a concrete example that “all that glitters is not gold.” Many people, not remembering this proverb, have been fooled into thinking they have found the real thing.

Item #15 – Literature

Sound and Fury

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, when Macbeth is informed that his wife has died, he speaks of the inevitability of death:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

Thus, the phrase “sound and fury” refers to a *great, tumultuous, and passionate uproar* that actually is *unimportant or meaningless*.

Examples

The “Y2K” hysteria leading up to the turn of the millennium turned out to be just so much sound and fury.

In the 1980's, the media hyped the “great event” of Geraldo Rivera's opening of Al Capone's vault, and the network promoted the live broadcast of the event. When the vault was opened and found to be completely empty, it became obvious that all the build up was no more than sound and fury.

Item #16 – Mythology and Legend

Icarus/Fly too Close to the Sun

In Greek mythology, Icarus and his father, Daedalus, escaped from the island of Crete, by means of wings constructed by Daedalus. The wings were held on by means of wax, and although Daedalus had warned Icarus not to fly too close to the sun, Icarus did not heed the warning; the wax melted, and he fell to his death in the Aegean Sea.

To be “an Icarus” or to “fly too close to the sun” is to *fail or be destroyed* because of *lack of caution or excessive ambition*.

Examples

When I told my roommate I thought I could attend the all-night party and still do well on my final exams the next day, he said, “I have just one word for you – Icarus.”

In Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, the protagonist, Montag, is finally turned in to the authorities for daring to keep books in his house. Beatty, the antagonist, comments: “‘Well,’ said Beatty, ‘now you did it. Old Montag wanted to fly near the sun and now that he's burnt his damn wings, he wonders why.’”

Item # 17 – History, Culture, Ideas

Bread and Circuses

This phrase was used by a writer during the time of the Roman Empire. He deplored the fact that the Imperial government was able to keep the populace content merely by distributing free food and providing entertaining spectacles, such as the fights in the Colosseum between people or between people and animals. The writer declared that it was shameful that people could be so easily kept in line simply by receiving “bread and circuses” from the government.

This term refers to policies designed to *prevent unrest by keeping people happy* and thus *deflecting concern* about troubling issues.

Examples

While many people welcomed the small tax rebate check distributed by the government, others mumbled that the gesture was mere bread and circuses.

The two candidates for student council president had differing approaches. While one tried to address problems such as crowded classrooms and lack of materials, the other distributed candy and proposed a weekly screening of entertaining videos at lunch. The first accused the second of a bread and circuses approach.

Item #18 – Literature

Deus ex Machina

This phrase literally means “god from the machine”. In classical theater, the mechane was a crane with a harness for an actor. The actor could thus be lowered from the ceiling and appear to be flying. In many classical plays, a god would unexpectedly appear, flying to earth to solve a seemingly hopeless problem or save the hero or heroine.

The term refers to any *surprising turn of events* that suddenly *makes things turn out all right*, especially in a literary work. This device is often considered to be an *unsatisfying and overly convenient* way to end a story.

Examples

Many readers feel cheated when writers save their hero or heroine at the last moment with the common *deus ex machina* in which the character awakens and realizes it was all “only a dream.”

In the melodrama, the hero and his family were about to be evicted when a stranger knocked on the door and informed them that a long-lost relative had left them a fortune. The appearance of this stranger was a modern-day *deus ex machine*.

Item #19 – Language and Idioms

Tabula Rasa

This phrase is Latin for “blank slate.” The philosopher John Locke referred to the mind of a young person unaffected by experience as a *tabula rasa*.

The phrase refers to the idea that something or someone is entirely *unmarked and uninfluenced*.

Examples

My coach said that it was actually a good thing that I had never played golf; that way, I was a *tabula rasa* with no bad habits to break.

Ideally, a potential juror for a case should come in as a *tabula rasa*; however, in some high-profile cases, it is very difficult to find such jurors.

Item #20 – Mythology and Legend

Tantalus

In Greek mythology, Tantalus was a king who offended the gods and was condemned to suffer eternal hunger and thirst in Hades. He stood in water up to his chin, but when he bent to drink, the waters receded. Beautiful, ripe fruit hung overhead, but each time he reached for a piece, the wind blew the boughs out of his reach.

To be “tantalized” or to be like Tantalus, is to be *offered something desirable* which is then *withheld*.

Examples

The poor peasants were tantalized by the aromas drifting down the street from the palace banquet.

After being nominated for an Emmy Award numerous times and always seeing the award presented to someone else, the actress began to feel like Tantalus.

Item #21 – Language and Idioms

NIMBY

This is an acronym for “Not in My Back Yard.”

The term refers to the idea that, while people may be *aware of the necessity of some unpleasant realities*, such as prisons, landfills, or chemical plants, they insist that these places be *located away from where they live.*

Examples

The company finally abandoned entirely its plan to build a new superstore in the city because every site they proposed was met with a firm statement of NIMBY from residents who would be affected by the increased traffic the store would bring.

The committee was astonished that while many of the people in the neighborhood contributed generously to causes involving the handicapped, when a group home for handicapped individuals was proposed in the area, the NIMBY attitude took effect immediately.

Item #22 – History, Culture, Ideas

Waterloo

In 1815, the Battle of Waterloo was fought near the village of Waterloo, which is now in Belgium. This was the final battle in the Napoleonic wars, the battle in which Napoleon Bonaparte was finally defeated.

To meet one's Waterloo is to *suffer an ultimate, decisive defeat.*

Examples

My grade in history was on the borderline, and when I looked at the questions on the final exam, I knew I had met my Waterloo and would be repeating the class the following semester.

Although he had a stellar boxing career, when the champion was knocked out by a second-rate fighter in the second round, he knew he had met his Waterloo, and he announced his retirement the next day.

Item #23 – Literature

The Emperor's New Clothes

In Hans Christian Anderson's story, an emperor hires two tailors, who promise to make him a beautiful new set of clothes that are unique in that they are invisible to a person who is stupid or unfit for office. When the two swindlers "show" the emperor the new clothes, he pretends to admire them, fearing he will be revealed to be unfit for office. The emperor "wears" his new clothes in a grand parade for the whole town, and no one will admit they cannot see the "clothes." Finally, a small child shouts out the truth that the emperor is, in fact, naked.

The phrase "Emperor's New Clothes" is often used in the context of someone, like the small child, ***pointing out the falseness or pretentiousness of something***, especially when others are afraid to admit the truth.

Examples

It seemed that everyone was raving about the supposedly "brilliant" film that was nearly impossible to understand until finally one critic declared that all the admiration for such a pretentious, pointless movie was a case of the Emperor's New Clothes.

When we first met Peter, he impressed us with stories of his travels around the world and his acquaintance with several famous people. We later realized that the emperor had no clothes; Peter had never been more than a hundred miles from his hometown and had never met a celebrity in his life.

Item #24 – Language and Idioms

Left-handed Compliment

In language, the left hand is often associated with something negative. In fact, some of the dictionary definitions of "left-handed" include awkward, clumsy, or doubtful sincerity. In heraldry, the left-hand side of a shield is called the sinister side.

A left-handed compliment is one that, *despite being a compliment, is rude or insulting in some way.*

Examples

You throw pretty well for a girl.

I really like your shoes. I remember when those were in style a couple of years ago.

Item #27 – Literature

Svengali

Svengali is the name of a character in *Trilby*, a novel by George du Maurier. Svengali is a singing master who teaches Trilby to sing. He exercises absolute control over her, and when he dies, Trilby is no longer able to sing.

A “Svengali” is a person who *exercises excessive control or influence over another person*.

Examples

Professor Higgins in *My Fair Lady* exercises Svengali-like control over Eliza Doolittle. He controls the way she dresses, the way she speaks, and virtually every other aspect of her life in his campaign to change a Cockney flower girl into an English society lady.

In hopes of seeing their children become star athletes, some parents practically become Svengalis, directing the children’s schedules, diets, and activities down to the last detail.

Item #28 – Language and Idioms

Non Sequitur

In Latin, *non sequitur* means “It does not follow.”

The phrase can refer to a statement that is *unrelated to what has been said* before. In logic a *non sequitur* is a *conclusion that does not logically follow from the premises*.

Examples

In the middle of a lively discussion of the upcoming presidential election , my sister blurted out the fact that we were soon going to be getting a new kitten. This was a complete *non sequitur*, but it was understandable since she is only three years old.

Given the premises that all dogs have tails and that Fluffy has a tail, it would be a *non sequitur* to conclude that Fluffy therefore must be a dog. Fluffy could just as easily be a cat or any other tailed animal.

Item #29 – Language and Idioms

White Elephant

White, or albino, elephants, do occur from time to time in India, Asia, and Africa. Because of their rarity, these elephants are considered special and are not subject to being beasts of burden and toil as other elephants are. According to the old legend, in Siam (now Thailand), these white elephants were considered so valuable that any white elephants that were born automatically became the property of the King of Siam. The king soon realized that feeding such a large animal was very costly, especially since the elephant did not bring in income by working like the other elephants. Thus the king began giving white elephants as gifts to those who displeased him. The burden of feeding the animals without being able to get any work from them quickly brought financial ruin to the recipient of the “gift.”

Today, a “white elephant” is an object that *has no use* to its owner and may even represent a *financial burden or an inconvenience*.

Examples

The house I inherited from my grandparents turned out to be a white elephant. Although it was paid for, the property taxes were astronomical, and the old house was in constant need of maintenance and costly repairs.

We had a garage sale in hopes of getting rid of some of our possessions that had become nothing but white elephants.

Item #30 – History, Culture, and Ideas

Fiddle While Rome Burns

During the reign of Roman emperor Nero, a fire consumed half of Rome. Legend has it that Nero showed complete indifference, playing his violin, or fiddle, during the emergency. Thus, Nero showed his complete disregard for the hardship suffered by the people he governed.

To “fiddle while Rome burns” is to *display indifference in the midst of an emergency or disaster*.

Examples

After the tornado devastated a neighboring community, the town decided to postpone its annual parade. The town leaders did not want it to appear that they were fiddling while Rome burns rather than showing concern for their neighbors.

Unfortunately, it is often easier for those in Congress to fiddle while Rome burns than it is to acknowledge and address serious issues such as budget deficits, growing crime rates, and threats to the environment.

Item #31 – Literature

In Media Res

This is a Latin phrase, which literally means “into the middle of things.” One of the standard epic conventions is that the epic begins in the middle of the action. Events that occurred earlier are described later in the epic.

The phrase can refer to anything that begins abruptly, *in the middle of the action*, or it can be used in its literal sense: *into the middle of things*.

Example

I was unable to understand what my friends were talking about because I walked into the conversation in media res.

Like most epics *The Odyssey* begins *in media res*; Odysseus is almost home when the epic opens, but the reader or listener learns of his earlier adventures as the epic progresses.