

Words from Numbers

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To those of us who have no head for figures, numbers can be such a bore to work with. They are too regular and abstract, too exact in their behaviour, having no sensuous appeal. In this they stand at the farthest extreme from all things human. And yet, we can't get on without numbers. We need them to calculate, to enumerate, to identify things. No doubt, there are number-crunchers who get a kick out of working with them.

Even for the likes of us, these enigmatic figures can be livened up by a metaphoric transference of meaning. That is to say, when figures become figures of speech. Numbers can be fleshed out with a human reality. The

abstract figure then serves as a point of entry into a rich context of meaning and feeling. 'Eleventh hour' would not, then, call up the image of a spare metal pointer pointing to two upstanding strokes on the clock dial but a sense of desperate urgency, tumbled chairs and papers, strained nerves and taut muscles of last minute efforts.

It would be interesting to look at some of the figurative numbers, both ordinals and cardinals, that have gained currency because of their suggestiveness or complications of meaning. Apart from formal expressions, both British and American, slang, colloquial, humorous, informal and rude usages too, are included.



First footer	: the first person to enter a house in the New Year
First lady	: wife of the President of the US or the Chief Executive of a state
First night	: the first night of a performance
First-string player	: the most skilled player
First water	: the highest quality, purest lustre, of diamonds and pearls
Oner	: an expert, a unique person or thing
One-horse town	: a small, old fashioned and boring town
One-liner	: a short joke, a funny remark
One-night stand	: an occasion / person that you have sex with only once
Look after number one	: to look after oneself and not worry about others.
Second banana	: a person in a subservient position
Play second fiddle	: to be of secondary importance, one that plays a supporting role
Second sight	: a gift of prophetic vision, intuition
Second-string	: a substitute player, used when somebody else is not available
Second wind	: recovery of breath or renewal of energy in prolonged exertion

Two-faced	: double-dealing, false
To two-time	: to deceive somebody, to have a secret relationship with someone who is not your regular partner.
Two-way street	: A situation which depends on the co-operation of two people
Third degree	: the use of exhaustive questioning by the police to extort a confession or information from a criminal or a witness
Thirdsman	: a mediator
Third World	: the poor, undeveloped countries of Africa and Asia
Three- ring circus	: a confused situation or place due to too much activity
Three-line whip	: a short, written order to MPs and MLAs about when and how to vote
Fourth dimension	: time
Fourth Estate	: the press, others being the Clergy, the Lords, and the Commons
Four-eyes	: one who wears glasses
Four-flusher	: someone who cheats others
Four-letter word	: a rude and offensive word
Fifth column	: a group of people who work secretly for the enemy
Fifth wheel	: one who is superfluous, unnecessary or burdensome
High five	: the action of hitting the inside of somebody's open hand with your own above your heads to celebrate a victory or as a greeting
To take five	: to stop working for a few minutes
Sixth sense	: intuition, the ability to know things without using the five senses
At sixes and sevens	: in utter confusion or disorder
In seventh heaven	: to be supremely happy
Seven year itch	: the desire for extra marital sex, which some people have, as they feel less satisfied with their spouses.
Behind the <i>eight</i> ball	: in a highly disadvantageous or dangerous position
On cloud nine	: to be extremely happy
Nine day's wonder	: something that causes a great sensation only for a few days
Dressed (up) to the nines	: wearing the best or most formal clothes
Ten to one chance	: very probably
Be ten a penny	: a dime a dozen, to be very common, not unusual
Ten- strike	: a stroke of great success, a very profitable bargain.
Eleventh hour	: at the last possible moment, just in time
Talk nineteen to the dozen	: to talk very quickly and without stopping
Thirty something	: someone in his 30s who is educated, rich and well placed
Forty winks	: a short sleep, esp. after dinner
Go fifty-fifty	: share the cost of something equally
Wife in a thousand	: a perfect wife

Sixty-four-thousand-dollar question	: a hard question to answer, the supreme or crucial question
Look like a million dollars	: to look very attractive
Last-ditch effort	: a final, desperate attempt
On somebody's last legs	: to be very ill, likely to die soon
Last straw that breaks the camel's back	: extreme limit of endurance
Last word, the	: the best, the most modern of its kind

Foreign Words and Phrases

a la carte: each dish priced separately.

a la mode: according to custom or fashion.

a priori: from cause to effect.

ab initio: from the beginning.

ad hoc: for the particular end or purpose at hand.

ad infinitum: endless.

ad libitum: at pleasure.

ad nauseam: to a sick ending degree.

al fresco: in the open air.

Alma Mater: applied to former school, university, or college.

ante bellum: before the war.

apropos: to the point, appropriate.

au pair: home-help from a foreign country.

au revoir: till we meet again.

avant-garde: progressive or radical artists and thinkers.

baksheesh: gratuity or tip.

bate noire: a thing or person viewed with particular dislike.

batik: cloth dyeing method using wax, the cloth itself.

bete noire: a bugbear, pet aversion.

blitzkrieg: intense military attack

bon appetit: good appetite.

bona fide: with good faith.

bonhomie: good-nature.

bourgeois: middle-class person.

carte blanche: full discretionary power.

cause celebre: a notorious incident.

caveat emptor: let the buyer beware.

c'est la vie: that's life.

ceteris paribus: other things being equal.

chutzpah: amazing nerve bordering on arrogance.

corrigenda: things to be corrected.

coup de grace: the final blow.

coup d'etat: forceful over-throw of a government.

creme de la creme: the best of the best.

cum laude/magna cum laude/summa cum laude: with praise or honor; with great praise or honor; with the highest praise or honor.

curriculum vitae: course of life, resume.

dacha: Russian country villa.

de facto: in fact.

de jure: determined by law, as opposed to de facto.

de rigueur: necessary according to convention.

deja vu: the sensation that something happening has happened before.

detente: an easing or relaxation of strained relations.

e pluribus unum: one out of many

emeritus: honourably retired.

eminence grise: one who wields power behind the scenes.

en masse: in a large body.

enfant terrible: one whose unconventional