

Unbasic English

Using a phrase where a word would do

Let us begin with a test of your knowledge of modern English. Read the following ten sentences, each of which ends with the word 'one'. In each case, that word refers to the same noun. That thing is a – what? Ready? Then begin.

- God was thought to be running the world on one.
- The Romans once nailed up body parts on one.
- A fitness fanatic jogs by someone's window on one.
- Someone doesn't mind getting soaked on one.
- Teachers are verbally abused on one.
- A teacher hands out punishment notes on one.
- Pupil assessment is conducted on one.
- People are being caught on one.
- Weapons are being used on one.
- There are deaths taking place on one.

That is the end of the test. Have you guessed what the noun is? No? Then read the ten extracts in the box below from authentic modern English texts in order to find out.

... you don't mind getting soaked on a regular daily basis. *The Guardian*

... people being caught on a nightly basis. People's body parts were nailed up in the Forum on a regular basis. *BBC Radio*

... God was running the world on a day-to-day basis. *BBC Radio*

... she is handing out punishment notes on a daily basis. *Guardian Education*

... a fitness fanatic who jogs by her window on a daily basis. *The Guardian*

... most teachers ... were verbally abused on a weekly basis. *The Guardian*

The great mass of pupil assessment is conducted on a daily basis ... *Guardian Education*

Weapons ... which are being used on an ongoing basis. *BBCTV News*

There are deaths taking place on a regular daily basis. *BBC Radio*

Now that you have identified the noun in question, imagine that you work in a newspaper office. The editor has asked you to ensure that news items are as concise as possible in order to save time, effort and printing costs. Shorten

the ten extracts above by using *every day/night/week, regularly, day by day* or *still*. Simple, hm?

So why do people love *basis* so much? I think it's because *on a daily (etc) basis* sounds and looks much more important than *every day (etc)*. Strictly speaking, a basis is a determining principle upon which something is constructed or maintained. Business can be conducted on a friendly basis, for example, as a matter of principle; but rain doesn't fall on a daily basis, however long a spell of wet weather lasts. Nevertheless, the phrase *on a ... basis* is so popular that I think many unarranged and unpredictable things are going to be said to happen on some sort of basis from now on. Indeed, the phrase has even been extended into the past by the well-known novelist Joanna Trollope. Her novel *The City of Gems* (London, Hutchinson, 1981) is at first set in the England of 1879. She has a servant ask anachronistically:

'When shall we see you here on a daily basis, sir?' (p.29)

A little later, an Italian addressing an Englishman in Mandalay remarks:

'Not enough rain, though on a daily basis it seemed hard to understand how that could be.' (p. 138)

I suppose there is no great harm in such phrases. But having been trained by a good teacher long ago to avoid wordiness, I shall continue to use unbasic English.

Gerry Abbott

Gerry Abbott started teaching EFL in 1958. After teaching English, training teachers and administering ELT in Thailand and Jordan, he was appointed Lecturer in the Teaching of English Overseas, University of Manchester. From this base he took up further posts in Uganda, Yemen, Pakistan, Malaysia and Burma, and carried out short assignments in many other countries. He has published widely, and is now an Honorary Fellow of the University of Manchester.

"The greatest enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one's real and ones declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink."

George Orwell, 1950

From "Modern English Teacher"

Surprising science

Here are the answers supposedly given by children in science exams.

- Q: Name the four seasons.
A: Salt, pepper, mustard and vinegar.
- Q: Explain one of the processes by which water can be made safe to drink.
A: Flirtation makes water safe to drink because it removes large pollutants like grit, sand, dead sheep and canoeists.
- Q: How is dew formed?
A: The sun shines down on the leaves and makes them perspire.
- Q: How can you delay milk turning sour?
A: Keep it in the cow.
- Q: What causes the tides in the oceans?
A: The tides are a fight between the earth and the moon. All water tends to flow towards the moon, because there is no water on the moon, and nature hates a vacuum. I forget where the sun joins in this fight.
- Q: What are steroids?
A: Things for keeping carpets still on the stairs.
- Q: What happens to your body as you age?
A: When you get old, so do your bowels and you get intercontinental.
- Q: What happens to a boy when he reaches puberty?
A: He says goodbye to his boyhood and looks forward to his adultery.
- Q: Name a major disease associated with cigarettes.
A: Premature death.
- Q: How are the main parts of the body categorised?
A: The body is consisted into three parts – the brainium, the borax and the abdominal cavity. The brainium contains the brain; the borax contains the heart and lungs, and the abdominal cavity contains the five bowels, A, E, I, O and U.
- Q: What is the fibula?
A: A small lie.
- Q: What does 'varicose' mean?
A: Nearby.
- Q: Give the meaning of the term 'Caesarean Section'.
A: The Caesarean Section is a district in Rome.
- Q: What does the word 'benign' mean?
A: Benign is what you will be after you be eight.

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