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Item #1—Language and Idioms

Stealing Someone's Thunder

In the seventeenth century, playwright John Dennis invented the sound effect of rattling a sheet of tin to mimic thunder. He used this effect in one of his own plays, and the play was denounced by other playwrights and critics. However, his sound effect was widely copied. Frustrated, Dennis proclaimed that his rivals would not accept his play but were happy to “steal my thunder.”

To “steal someone's thunder” is either to *take credit for the idea of another* or to *lessen the effect of another's idea by suggesting the same idea first*.

Examples

After Jeffrey proposed his money-saving idea to his boss, he was astonished that the boss stole his thunder and presented the idea to the board as if the boss had thought of it himself.

The principal was anxious to see the gleeful reaction when she announced the pay raise to the teachers the next day, but her thunder was stolen when news of the raise appeared in the morning paper.

Item #2—History, Culture, and Ideas

Witch Hunt

In 1692, in Salem, Massachusetts, hysteria about supposed witches led to the arrest of many people, and the execution of twenty. Often, the accused were simply social outcasts and were convicted on flimsy evidence that could neither be proved nor disproved.

A “witch hunt” refers to a *campaign against a particular group of people*, often those holding *unorthodox opinions* or behaving in an *unconventional manner*.

Examples

The McCarthy hearings during the 1950s are often described as a witch hunt because a national hysteria arose about people’s supposed connections to the Communist Party, and much of the evidence accepted as truth was mere hearsay.

Despite denials by athletes and repeated testing for banned substances, some sports writers continue the witch hunt. The writers assume that any athlete who excels dramatically must be cheating in some manner, even when all evidence indicates that there has been no wrongdoing.

Item #3—Language and Idioms

Throw Down the Gauntlet

In the days of knighthood and chivalry, if a knight wanted to challenge another knight to a duel, he would throw down his heavy glove, or “gauntlet.” If the challenged knight picked up the gauntlet, this indicated that he had accepted the challenge.

“Throwing down the gauntlet” refers to *issuing a challenge*, especially issuing that challenge in a *dramatic manner*.

Examples

Karen and Amy, both sprinters, argued continuously about who would do better at longer distances. Finally, Amy threw down the gauntlet and challenged Karen to a two-mile race.

Our parents threw down the gauntlet, offering fifty dollars to any of us who could go an entire week without watching television or playing video games.

Item #4—Mythology and Legend

The Muses

In Greek mythology, the Muses were nine goddesses who presided over the arts. They gave inspiration to mortals. Typically, an epic begins with an invocation to the Muse, in which the poet asks the Muses to inspire him as he writes or sings his story.

Today, a “Muse” is someone’s *source of inspiration*, especially in *artistic, creative endeavors*.

Examples

It is common for fashion designers to select a particular woman as a Muse, keeping her in mind as he or she designs a new line of clothing.

I really felt I needed to work on the song I am writing this weekend, but it seemed the Muse had abandoned me. I couldn’t seem to make any progress at all.

Item #5—Literature

Kafkaesque

Franz Kafka (1883-1924) was a Czech, German-speaking writer, whose works often dealt with surreal, anxiety producing situations. For example, in *The Metamorphosis*, the main character awakens to discover that he has been transformed into a giant cockroach.

The adjective “Kafkaesque,” refers to a situation or experience that is *bizarre, surreal, or anxiety-producing*.

Examples

At the amusement park, we walked across a platform that was completely stationary, but the circular walls were rotating around the platform. This produced a Kafkaesque feeling that I was falling, and I had to close my eyes in order to walk steadily across the platform.

When we traveled to Greece last summer, it was Kafkaesque not being able to read any of the signs on the road or even to recognize the alphabet in which they were written.

Item #6—The Bible

Tower of Babel

According to the Book of Genesis, Noah's descendants decided to build a tower that would reach Heaven itself. Concerned that mankind was becoming too powerful, God decided to introduce different languages so that the people could not understand each other and thus could not complete the tower.

“Tower of Babel” or simply “Babel” can refer to any *noisy confusion*. This confusion may or may not be caused by the presence of different languages.

Examples

It was like Babel on the first day of summer camp, with friends who hadn't seen each other for a year reuniting and seemingly all talking at once.

When the delegates from all the different nations arrived for the conference, the lobby sounded like the original Tower of Babel.

Item #7—Literature

Pollyanna

Pollyanna is a character in children's stories written by Eleanor H. Porter. She is a little girl who teaches everyone she meets to play the "glad game," a game in which a person tries to find something to be glad about in any situation, no matter how bad the situation is.

A "Pollyanna" has come to refer to someone who is *unusually optimistic* and *always looking at the bright side*. The term often has connotations of being *excessively cheerful* and *naïve*.

Examples

I hate to sound like a Pollyanna, but I think maybe it's a good thing you lost your job. I believe now you will have the opportunity to find a position that will be more fulfilling for you.

The mayor must be living in some Pollyanna dream world if he thinks the city is getting better and better under his leadership. Almost every problem the city faces has worsened since he took office.

Item #8—History, Culture, and Ideas

Pavlov's Dogs/Pavlovian

Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936) was a Russian scientist best known for his research on conditioned response. In his experiments, Pavlov rang a bell while presenting food to dogs. Seeing the food caused the dogs to salivate. Eventually, even without the food, when Pavlov rang the bell, the dogs would automatically begin to salivate because they had been conditioned to associate the bell with food.

“Pavlov’s dogs” is a phrase that refers to someone who *automatically or instinctively responds to or obeys a signal*. The adjective “Pavlovian” refers to such an *automatic, unthinking response*.

Examples

When the bell rang, the students, like Pavlov’s dogs, began packing up their books as if the class was over even though the class had only been in progress for ten minutes.

Many people, in a Pavlovian response, head to the refrigerator the minute a television commercial comes on.

Item #9—Language and Idioms

Bedlam

“Bedlam” was the popular nickname for London’s Hospital of St. Mary of Bethlehem, a mental hospital founded in the fourteenth century. Because the patients were simply housed there with little treatment, they tended to wander the halls talking to themselves or screaming and fighting with each other.

“Bedlam” has come to mean *wildly chaotic* or *extremely raucous and noisy*.

Examples

It is bedlam in the halls after the final bell rings on the last day of school before summer vacation.

My parents came home expecting to find bedlam after they left us alone for the weekend, but they were surprised to find the house even neater and cleaner than it was before they left town.

Item #10—The Bible

The Handwriting on the Wall

According to the Book of Daniel, Belshazzar, the King of Babylon, gave a great banquet, at which the guests praised the gods of silver, gold, bronze, wood, iron, and stone. Suddenly, a human hand appeared and wrote mysterious words on the wall. Daniel translated the writing, saying it prophesied that Belshazzar's reign was over. That night, the king was killed.

The phrase “handwriting on the wall” refers to an *indication that doom or misfortune is coming*.

Examples

I took my boss's suggestion that I might want to start updating my resumé to be the handwriting on the wall; I knew it wouldn't be long until my job, like many others in our company, would be cut.

I was completely shocked when my boyfriend broke up with me, but my friends said I should have seen the handwriting on the wall when he kept “forgetting” to call me and began to spend all his free time with his buddies.

Item #11—Literature

Albatross Around One's Neck

In “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” a poem by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, a sailor shoots an albatross, a bird considered to be a good omen. As punishment, the sailor is forced to wear the carcass of the albatross around his neck.

An “albatross around a person’s neck” is a *burdensome, ongoing problem.*

Examples

Although we have an outstanding basketball team, our biggest rival continues to be the albatross around our necks. We haven’t won a game against them in over three years.

Although credit cards are convenient, the temptation to overspend can be great, and before you know it, you have an albatross around your neck with debt that is seemingly impossible to pay off.

Item #12—Mythology and Legend

Prometheus/Promethean

In Greek mythology, Prometheus was a demigod known for his cunning. Having been tricked by Prometheus, Zeus withheld fire from mankind. In response, Prometheus went to Mount Olympus and stole some fire, which he gave to man. Zeus punished him by chaining him to a rock; each day an eagle came and ate out his liver, which grew back each night. He was eventually rescued by Hercules.

Prometheus represents *valiant resistance to authority or rebellion against the established order of the universe*. The adjective “Promethean” refers to an act of such resistance.

Examples

In one of his novels, Thomas Hardy calls lighting a fire in winter a Promethean act, in which man tries to rebel against the approaching cold.

The subtitle of *Frankenstein* is “The Modern Prometheus” because Victor Frankenstein dares to overstep the bounds of nature and create life.

Item #13—History, Culture, and Ideas

Juggernaut

“Juggernaut” is the name of a Hindu deity. His image is carried in an annual procession on a large cart. According to legend, devotees threw themselves in front of the cart and were crushed, believing this guaranteed immediate entry to Paradise.

A “juggernaut” is any force, *especially a destructive force*, that *defies opposition*.

Examples

Some people see technology as a juggernaut that has taken over our lives; we are so much at its mercy that when computers go down, we are practically helpless.

The candidate raised so much money, in addition to the personal wealth he already possessed, that his campaign became a juggernaut, and no one had a chance of defeating him.

Item #14—Language and Idioms

Red Herring

There are several explanations for the origin of this phrase. A herring is a fish, and when it is “cured,” or smoked and salted, it turns red and has a very strong, pungent smell. One explanation is that British fugitives in the 1800s would drag a red herring across their trail, thus confusing the hounds and diverting them from following the convicts’ scents. Another explanation is that red herrings were dragged across the ground to train hunting dogs to follow a scent, and later were used to throw the dogs off the trail and thus prolong a foxhunt. A variation of this explanation is that poachers used the herrings to divert hunting dogs so that they could get the game for themselves.

In any case, the phrase “red herring” refers to *diverting someone onto a false trail* or *distracting a person from the true issue*.

Examples

Asked about her stance on raising taxes, the candidate began to speak about her opponent’s record on childcare issues. Obviously, this was a red herring, and the reporter did not let her get away with it.

The detectives were hopeful when they found fingerprints on the windowsill, but this turned out to be a red herring; the prints belonged to the window washer.

Item #15—The Bible

Pharisees/Pharisaical

The Pharisees were a Jewish sect that insisted on strict adherence to written law. Jesus rebuked the Pharisees often for being outwardly pious but inwardly corrupt, only observing the law to impress others, but having no true mercy or love for others.

A “Pharisee” is a *hypocrite* who *upholds the letter of the law, but not its spirit*. The adjective “Pharisaical” refers to a *hypocritical act*.

Examples

It seemed the actor’s commitment to charitable causes was somewhat Pharisaical because he would not attend an event unless he was assured the media would be there.

Only a Pharisee would want to prosecute the woman for stealing food that was intended for the trash bin when her children were in danger of starving.

Item #16—Literature

Sour Grapes

In “The Fox and the Grapes,” a fable by Aesop, a fox tries over and over again to reach some grapes dangling from a vine above him. He finally gives up and mutters that the grapes were probably sour anyway, so they would not be worth having.

“Sour grapes” refers to the *attitude* of a person who has been *disappointed or thwarted.* The person *bitterly rationalizes* that what he or she had wanted was probably *not so great after all.*

Examples

After losing the race for class president, Robert said he was glad he didn’t win because the job would have taken up too much of his time, but I think that was just sour grapes.

Karen displayed a major case of sour grapes when she was grounded and thus could not go on our long-awaited camping trip. She kept telling us that all we had to look forward to was insects and miserable weather and that she was relieved not to be going.

Item #17—Language and Idioms

Sold Down the River

In nineteenth-century America, during the days of slavery, sometimes wealthy homeowners would sell their house servants to plantation owners in the South. Thus, the servants were “sold down the (Mississippi) river.” The life of a house servant was far more pleasant than the life of a slave on a plantation, so the sold servants would naturally feel betrayed. In *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, the reason Jim runs away from Miss Watson is that he overhears her discussing selling him down the river.

To be “sold down the river” is to be *betrayed or misled*, especially *by someone trusted*.

Examples

The owner of the pro football team promised the local fans that he would never move the team to a different city; however, one morning the fans opened the paper only to discover they had been sold down the river: the team was moving.

I felt my friend sold me down the river when she decided to audition for the part she knew I was dying to have.

Item #18—Mythology and Legend

Nemesis

Nemesis was the Greek goddess of vengeance and retribution. She punished people for wrongdoing, especially for excessive pride.

A person's "nemesis" is that which *causes his or her downfall*, or the term can refer to the downfall itself.

Examples

The cyclist considered that particular stretch of mountain to be his nemesis, costing him a racing victory year after year.

When the new student stood up to the school bully who had everyone else terrified, the word spread quickly that the bully had finally met his nemesis.

Item #19—History, Culture, and Ideas

Pyrrhic Victory

Pyrrhus was a general in ancient Greece. After defeating the Romans in a battle in which he suffered great losses, Pyrrhus told those who wanted to congratulate him on his victory, “Such another victory and we are ruined.”

A “Pyrrhic victory” is one in which the *winner’s victory comes at such a great expense that it is scarcely better than losing.*

Examples

Yes, he finally made it to the top of the company, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. His total focus on his job over the past years had led to the end his marriage, alienated many of his friends, and caused several stress-related health problems.

The homecoming win was a Pyrrhic victory because several key players were injured and will probably be out for the rest of the season.

Item #20—Language and Idioms

Flash in the Pan

Flintlock rifles had an ignition pan containing gunpowder. If the powder in the pan lit but the propelling charge was not lit, there was a flash in the pan, but the gun did not fire.

A “flash in the pan” is something or someone that *initially shows great promise* but soon *fails to meet expectations*.

Examples

The first episode of the new television series was praised by critics, and viewers reacted with great enthusiasm. However, the show turned out to be a flash in the pan; subsequent episodes were completely disappointing.

Commentators speculated that the rookie’s incredible performance in the first game of the season was merely a flash in the pan, but he proved them wrong by being a top scorer throughout the season.

Item #21—The Bible

Scapegoat

According to the Book of Leviticus, each year on the Day of Atonement, a priest would symbolically place the sins of the Israelites on a goat and then send it out into the wilderness, taking the sins of the people with it.

A scapegoat is a *person who is blamed or punished for someone else's misdeeds*. At times an entire group or race can become a scapegoat, such as the Jews during the Holocaust.

Examples

In *Fahrenheit 451*, when the police fail to capture Montag, they turn their attention to the pursuit of an innocent man, making him the scapegoat for Montag's illegal possession of books.

The assistant coach became the scapegoat for the team's poor performance, losing his position even though he really had very little to do with the team's losing record.

Item #22—Literature

Don Quixote/Quixotic/Tilting at Windmills

Don Quixote is a romance written in the 1600s by Miguel de Cervantes. The hero, Don Quixote, loses his wits from reading too many romances, and he sets off on his own knightly adventures, accompanied by his sidekick, Sancho Panza. The two have various comic adventures. In one of the most famous, Don Quixote attacks a group of windmills, believing them to be giants. (This is referred to as tilting at windmills).

To be a “Don Quixote,” or to be “quixotic” is to be *foolishly or impractically idealistic*. “Tilting at windmills” refers to *a naïve attempt to be heroic*.

Examples

Fresh out of law school, I believed I could single-handedly right all the wrongs in our criminal justice system. I finally realized I was being quixotic.

In our two-party democratic system, independent candidates are often considered to be tilting at windmills when they try to challenge the solidly entrenched Republicans and Democrats.

Item #23—History, Culture, and Ideas

Benedict Arnold

A military leader during the American Revolution, Benedict Arnold served with distinction, but later became traitorous. Needing money and resenting the promotions of others, Arnold agreed to surrender a key fort to the British in exchange for a British military commission and a monetary payment. When an envoy carrying messages between Arnold and the British was captured, Arnold's plot was revealed. He escaped to the British, and lived the rest of his life in Britain.

A “Benedict Arnold” is a *traitor*.

Examples

My sisters called me Benedict Arnold when I decided to attend college at the biggest rival of the college they and my parents had attended.

Some people seem unable to see the difference between honestly questioning an action taken by the government and being a virtual Benedict Arnold.

Item #24—Mythology and Legend

Delphic Oracle

In ancient Greece, Delphi was the location of the Temple of Apollo. People came to this temple, the site of Greece's most famous oracle, with all kinds of questions, and Apollo's priestess would go into a trance and deliver the answers. These answers were difficult to interpret and riddle-like.

A "Delphic" prediction or message is one that is *ambiguous and difficult to interpret*.

Examples

The economist's warnings were so Delphic that his listeners left the meeting knowing that hard times were ahead but not really understanding the nature of the economy's problems or what steps should be taken to address those problems.

Lorraine had a flair for the dramatic; she liked to announce puzzling but shocking predictions as if she were the Oracle at Delphi.

Item #25—Language and Idioms

Over a Barrel

In the past, when someone was rescued from drowning, he or she would be held over a barrel so that the water could drain from the lungs. The person rescued was totally dependent on the rescuers.

Someone is said to be “over a barrel” when he or she is *unable to act independently* and *must do the bidding* of someone else.

Examples

I had to do my brother’s chores for him because he had me over a barrel. I knew if I refused, there was no way he would let me use his car on Saturday.

Because I had applied for a promotion, my boss knew she had me over a barrel when she asked me to organize the company picnic.

Item #26—The Bible

Shibboleth

This is a Hebrew word for an ear of corn. In the Old Testament, the Israelites used this as a password to prevent their enemies, who mispronounced the word “shibboleth,” from infiltrating their camp.

A “shibboleth” has come to mean a *slogan or catchword used by, or associated with, a particular party, group, or sect.*

Examples

The shibboleth of that political party seems to be “No new taxes for any reason.”

The students’ use of several slang terms confused the teacher; clearly, they had their own shibboleths that excluded anyone over the age of eighteen.

Item #27—Literature

Doublespeak

In his novel 1984, George Orwell used the term “doublespeak” to refer to a type of propaganda practiced by the state in which language is used ambiguously. For instance, the Defense Department was called the “Ministry of Peace.”

“Doublespeak” refers to the *deliberate use of evasive or ambiguous language*.

Examples

In the 1980s, many people considered the use of the term “peacekeepers” in referring to nuclear weapons to be an example of doublespeak.

In classic doublespeak, the candidate said the fact that his opponent had no scandals in his background was proof that his opponent was excellent at hiding scandals and thus was not to be trusted.

Item #28—History, Culture, and Ideas

Murphy's Law

This saying, originating in the 1940s, is as follows: “If anything can go wrong, it will.”

People often cite “Murphy's Law” when *something goes wrong* and there is a *sense of inevitability* about it.

Examples

After five beautiful, sunny days in a row, of course Murphy's Law kicked in the day of the picnic, and we were forced to cancel it because of thunderstorms.

When I said I wanted everything to be perfect for our surprise anniversary party for our parents, my sister, the pessimist, replied, “Remember Murphy's Law.”

Item #29—Mythology and Legend

Medusa

The most famous of the gorgons, three sisters in Greek mythology who had snakes for hair and who turned anyone who looked at them to stone.

“Medusa” refers to a *repulsive or terrifying woman*. The term is also applied to *extraordinarily wild, unruly hair*.

Examples

I kept my nose in my book throughout the three-hour detention, knowing the Medusa at the desk in the front of the room would turn me to stone if I so much as looked up.

After being caught in the rainstorm, I looked in the mirror and was horrified to see Medusa staring back at me.

Item #30—Language and Idioms

Hoist with one's own petard

A petard was a weapon used in medieval warfare. It was a bell-shaped object that was filled with gunpowder and then hoisted, or lifted, onto gates or walls to blow them up. If the petard exploded prematurely the person using it would be blown up, or “hoist with his own petard.”

This phrase refers to being *caught in one's own trap* or *beaten at one's own game*.

Examples

In the “Roadrunner” cartoons, Wile E. Coyote was often hoisted with his own petard when the traps he had set for the roadrunner backfired and worked on himself instead.

When the swindler opened the case to find useless papers and a note from the con man who had handed over the “money” to him, he realized he had been hoisted with his own petard.

Item #31—The Bible

Philistines/Philistinism

In the Old Testament, the Philistines were enemies of the Israelites. In a famous biblical story, David successfully fought the giant Philistine warrior, Goliath.

In modern usage, “philistine” refers to a person with *no appreciation for culture* and whose *tastes are commonplace*. Such an attitude is referred to as “philistinism.”

Examples

Sandra was pleasantly surprised when her boyfriend surprised her with tickets to the opera; she often teased him about being a philistine whose idea of culture was an evening of watching wrestling on television.

The artist was appalled at the philistinism of those attending his gallery show; rather than appreciating his work, many of them seemed most concerned about whether a particular painting would match their sofa.

Faust/Faustian Bargain

Faust is the subject of plays by Christopher Marlowe, (*Dr. Faustus*) and Goethe, (*Faust*). In both dramas, Faust strikes a bargain with Mephistopheles, or the devil. In Marlowe's play, Faust sells his soul in exchange for twenty-four years in which he can have everything he desires. In Goethe's version, Faust becomes the servant of Mephistopheles, again in exchange for having all his desires fulfilled. In both cases, Faust spends much of his time in despair.

A Faustian bargain refers to *sacrificing one's self or one's values in exchange for getting what one desires, often material wealth.*

Examples

In the famous Chicago Black Sox scandal of 1919, some of the baseball players struck a Faustian bargain with gamblers, agreeing to lose the World Series intentionally in exchange for a monetary payoff.

The film director felt like Faust when the studio told him they would not release his film unless he changed the ending to a happy one that audiences would prefer. He had to decide whether to sacrifice his artistic integrity for the sake of the fortune he knew the movie would bring him.

Item #33—Language and Idioms

Coals to Newcastle

Newcastle is a coal-mining city in northern England. Thus, “carrying coals to Newcastle” would be completely superfluous.

This phrase refers to *giving a superfluous gift* or making a contribution that is *gratuitous and unnecessary*.

Examples

Although putting one more pair of shoes in her closet was like carrying coals to Newcastle, Veronica could not resist the sale, and she ended up buying three new pairs.

When I saw her kitchen shelf overflowing with seemingly every cookbook ever written, I realized that the hostess gift I had brought her was a case of coals to Newcastle.

Item #34—History, Culture, and Ideas

Freudian Slip

Sigmund Freud was an Austrian physician and psychotherapist whose work centered around the role of the subconscious mind in human behavior. The term “Freudian slip” comes from Freud.

A “Freudian slip” is an *unintentional or accidental error*, either in *speech or action* that apparently *reveals one’s subconscious thoughts or desires*.

Examples

In an old cartoon in *The New Yorker* magazine, a king sits on his throne and, when the queen enters the room, says, “Good morning beheaded, er . . . beloved!” Of course, the reader recognizes this as a Freudian slip.

The teacher realized that forgetting to bring home the stack of papers to grade was probably a Freudian slip resulting from her desire to have a weekend to devote solely to relaxation.

Item #35—Mythology and Legend

Sisyphus/Sisyphean

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was a king who offended Zeus. His punishment was to spend eternity in Hades, rolling a giant boulder up a hill. Each time the boulder neared the top, it would roll back down to the bottom, and Sisyphus had to start his task over.

A seemingly endless, perhaps futile task can be referred to as a “labor of Sisyphus” or as “Sisyphean.”

Examples

Painting the Golden Gate bridge is a Sisyphean task. Once the bridge is completely painted, it is time to begin painting it again at the beginning, so the painting never ends.

My mother did not buy my argument that making my bed each morning was basically a labor of Sisyphus since the bed was only going to be unmade again each evening—and that therefore I should not be expected to do it.

Item #36—The Bible

Methuselah

Methuselah is the oldest of the patriarchs in the Bible. He lived to be 969 years old.

The term “Methuselah” has come to be used proverbially to refer to an *extremely old person*.

Examples

From the teenagers’ point of view, it was ridiculous that only thirty-five-year-old Methuselaha could afford the sports cars they would love to be driving.

If I live to be as old as Methuselah, I will never understand how that horrible film was nominated for an Academy Award.

Item #37—Mythology and Legend

Scylla and Charybdis

In Greek mythology, Scylla was a many-headed sea monster, living in a cave on one side of a narrow strait. Charybdis was a whirlpool on the opposite side of the strait. Sailors, including Odysseus and Jason, had to steer their ships very carefully between the two in order to avoid being a victim of one or the other.

“Between Scylla and Charybdis” means to be caught *between two equal dangers in which avoiding one means getting closer to the other*. The phrase has the same meaning as “between a rock and a hard place.”

Examples

Caught between the Scylla of raising taxes and angering voters and the Charybdis of cutting vital city services, the council knew their decision was not going to be an easy one to make.

In her first attempt at baking bread from scratch, Joanna felt she must steer carefully between the Scylla and Charybdis of kneading the dough too much, resulting in overly tough bread, and kneading it too little, making the bread too goeey.

Item #38—Literature

Holy Grail

In Medieval legend, the Holy Grail was an object of quest. It was supposedly the cup from which Jesus drank at the Last Supper. The grail became associated with the legends of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. For the knights, the Holy Grail represented perfection and was constantly sought after.

A “Holy Grail” is an object that is *extremely desirable or valuable* and which is attainable only after a *long and difficult quest*.

Examples

For teams in the National Hockey League, the Stanley Cup is the equivalent of the Holy Grail.

In *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy Buchanan is the Holy Grail for Jay Gatsby, which is ironic because Daisy is actually rather childish and shallow, hardly the perfect creature Gatsby considers her to be.

Item #39—History, Culture, and Ideas

Luddites

Luddites were British laborers in the early 1800s. They opposed industrialization, fearing that the introduction of labor-saving machinery would threaten their jobs. Their leader, for whom they were named, was a laborer named Ned Ludd. With his encouragement, the workers smashed textile machinery in protest of industrialization.

A “Luddite” is someone who *opposes change, especially industrial or technological advances*. The word “Luddite” can also be used as an adjective (for example, “a Luddite point of view”).

Examples

I’m not a Luddite or anything, but I miss the days of receiving handwritten letters in the mail. Now it seems that all correspondence is conducted via e-mail.

The boss’s Luddite resistance to updating the company’s ancient telephone system was a constant source of frustration to his employees.

Item #40—Language and Idioms

Pass the Buck

In poker, a “buck” was a marker that was passed to the person whose turn it was to deal. President Harry Truman kept a sign on his desk which read “The Buck Stops Here.”

To “pass the buck” is to *shift responsibility (and often blame) to another person*. Thus, President Truman’s sign meant that he was willing to accept the ultimate responsibility for matters of concern to the country and would not try to pass that responsibility to others or to blame others for problems in the country.

Examples

Rather than face the angry crowd herself, the mayor passed the buck to a spokesperson, who then had to try to appease the citizens and respond to their questions and complaints.

I tried to pass the buck for not completing my homework assignment by telling my teacher that my best friend really needed to talk to me on the phone until late last night, but my teacher didn’t consider that to be a legitimate excuse.

Item #41—The Bible

Babylon

Babylon was the capital of the ancient Babylonian Empire. The city was known for its luxury and corruption. The Jews were exiled there from 597 to 538 B.C., and the prophet Daniel became counselor to the King of Babylon, for whom he interpreted the “handwriting on the wall.” Eventually, the Jews were allowed to return to Israel.

“Babylon” refers to a *place of decadence and corruption*.

Examples

Coming from a small Midwestern farming community, Jeff felt as if he had arrived in Babylon when he encountered the sights and sounds of nightlife in New York City.

I tried to reassure my parents that I was only going off to a university, not to Babylon, but they seemed to think the two were synonymous.

Item #42—Mythology and Legend

Phoenix/Rising from the Ashes

The phoenix was a mythological bird that was one of a kind. The bird lived for five or six hundred years, after which it would burn itself to death and then rise from its own ashes as a youthful bird ready to live another life span.

The phoenix has come to *symbolize rebirth or resurrection* and “rising from one’s own ashes” can describe *surmounting great obstacles*.

Examples

After successfully battling cancer, Lance Armstrong came back, phoenix-like, to win the Tour de France five consecutive times.

Despite several box office failures, the actress was able to rise from the ashes, and she is now one of Hollywood’s top paid performers.

Item #43—Literature

Xanadu

Xanadu was an ancient city in Mongolia where the Mongol emperor of China, Kublai Khan had a magnificent residence. Xanadu was made famous by the poem “Kubla Khan” (1816) by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The first lines of Coleridge’s poem are: “In Xanadu did Kubla Khan/A stately pleasure-dome decree.”

“Xanadu” refers to any *magnificent, beautiful, almost magical place*.

Examples

Newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst created his own version of Xanadu in San Simeon, California—an estate that included a zoo, an airport, a theater, numerous guesthouses, and countless works of art.

Broadway is Xanadu to all the struggling actors who make ends meet by waiting tables or driving taxis while they wait for their big break in theater.

Item #44—History, Culture, and Ideas

Muckrakers

President Theodore Roosevelt criticized reform-minded journalists of his time, saying they constantly focused on the “muck” and spent all their time raking it up. While he meant this as an insult, the journalists adopted the term muckraker as a badge of honor referring to those who exposed corruption or promoted needed reforms. Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* is a prime example of muckraking journalism.

“Muckraker” is a term applied to *authors or journalists* who *expose corruption* in government, business, or other arenas.

Examples

In the early 1970s, two muckraking journalists exposed the Watergate scandal and brought an end to a presidency.

Fancying themselves modern-day muckrakers, the staff of the school newspaper decided to investigate conditions in the school cafeteria’s kitchen.

Item #45—Language and Idioms

Sine qua non

In Latin, this phrase means “without which, nothing.”

Sine qua non refers to the *essential ingredient without which an endeavor or a situation would be impossible.*

Examples

The older voters' support of the bond issue is the *sine qua non*. Since they are in the majority, their votes will decide whether or not the bond passes.

Zara's optimistic attitude is the *sine qua non* of our team's success; she keeps the rest of us inspired even when we feel like giving up.