

This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. Welcome to 6 Minute English, I'm Neil.

Rob

And I'm Rob.

Neil

We're going to be looking at a letter from the English alphabet. It's a letter which has a particular meaning when used at the end of a piece of informal writing such as letters, emails, texts and messages.

Rob

I'm very EXcited.

Neil

Ha ha, very good, very good Rob!

Rob

My EXpectations are really high.

Neil

Yep, that's another good one.

Rob

Is it an EXtraordinary letter?

Neil

OK, thank you Rob, that's enough of your jokes. I'm getting EXasperated! Oh, now you've got me at it! Well, no prizes for guessing what letter we're focussing on today?

Rob

Why?

Neil

No, it's not Y.

Rob

No, no. I didn't mean the letter 'y', I meant the word 'why', as in - why are there no prizes?

Neil

Because of all the not so subtle clues you've been giving. The letter is X.

Rob

Yes. Exactly.

Neil

Alright, I think we get the idea! Before we go much further, let's have a question. English has 26 letters. Which language has 74 letters?

- a) Khmer (Cambodian)
- b) Hindi or
- c) Armenian?

Any ideas Rob?

Rob

An excellent question but quite obscure, I'm going to say b) Hindi.

Neil

Well, I'll have the answer later on. Now, Rob, what does the letter X all by itself at the end of a message mean?

Rob

Well, it means a kiss. The more kisses, the more affection you are showing.

Neil

Where does this concept of putting an X to mean a kiss come from? Dr Laura Wright is from the Faculty of English at Cambridge University and she appeared on the BBC Radio 4 programme Word of Mouth. When does she say this practice started and where does it come from?

Dr Laura Wright, Faculty of English, University of Cambridge

Well, we've been adding Xs for kisses at the bottom of letters since at least 1763. The very first one we know of had seven Xs. I have to say I haven't gone to seven ever. We get X from the Roman alphabet which got it from the Greek alphabet, pronounced /ks/ and the Romans...

Presenter: That's nearly a kiss, isn't it?

Yes it is, isn't it? I think **a penny's just dropped** there.

Presenter: It has, **clunk**.

Neil

What do we learn about the origins of the X for kisses?

Rob

Well, it's been used since at least 1763 and it comes from the Roman alphabet and they got it from the Greeks.

Neil

And why did this come to mean a kiss?

Rob

Well, Dr Wright suggests it's because of the original pronunciation - /ks/.

Neil

And at the point the presenter made the connection, didn't he?

Rob

Yes, he did. And Dr Wright used a phrase for when someone suddenly understands something, particularly something that is obvious to others. She said **the penny has just dropped**.

Neil

And this has got nothing to do with a **penny**, which is small coin, actually dropping anywhere. But the presenter makes a joke by using a word we use for the noise of something falling, **clunk**.

Rob

Although, to be honest, a **penny** would never really **clunk**. That's more like the noise two heavy, metal objects would make - the **clunk** of a car door, for example.

Neil

Let's listen to that exchange again.

Dr Laura Wright, Faculty of English, University of Cambridge

Well we've been adding Xs for kisses at the bottom of letters since at least 1763. The very first one we know of had seven Xs. I have to say I haven't gone to seven ever. We get X from the Roman alphabet which got it from the Greek alphabet, pronounced /ks/ and the Romans...

Presenter: That's nearly a kiss, isn't it?

Yes it is, isn't it? I think **a penny's just dropped** there.

Presenter: It has, **clunk**.

Neil

One thing to note about putting an X at the end of a communication is that it is not something you do for everyone. It's usually only to friends and family members, people you might kiss in real life. Professor Nils Langer from the University of Bristol told a story about a colleague of his who wasn't too familiar with this convention. What was her mistake?

Professor Nils Langer, University of Bristol

A colleague of mine from Bristol, who when she came over from Germany thought that X was just the normal way of closing a letter in England and so she would finish any letter with Xs, even a letter to the **Inland Revenue**. We never really heard how the **Inland Revenue** responded to these letters with these Xs.

Presenter: They **docked** her another 20 **quid**, I think!

Neil

What was her mistake, Rob?

Rob

She didn't realise that you don't put an X on every communication. So she even put it on business letter including one to the **Inland Revenue**, which is the government department in the UK that deals with tax.

Neil

We don't know how the tax people felt about the letter with kisses. But the presenter joked about what their response would have been.

Rob

Yes, he joked that they probably **docked** her another 20 **quid**. To **dock** money is to cut the amount of money you are expecting to receive and a **quid** is a slang word for a British pound.

Neil

Time now for the answer to our question. English has 26 letters. Which language has 74 letters? Is it...

- a) Khmer (Cambodian)
- b) Hindi or
- c) Armenian?

Rob

I guessed b) Hindi.

Neil

Well, I suppose it was a one in three chance, but not correct this time. The answer is a) Khmer. Very well done if you knew that. Now on to the vocabulary we looked at in this programme.

Rob

We started with **penny**. A **penny** is an English coin. A hundred pennies makes one pound sterling.

Neil

The phrase, **the penny has dropped**, means that someone has suddenly understood something

Rob

A **clunk** is the noise of two heavy objects hitting each other.

Neil

The **Inland Revenue** is the UK's tax authority.

Rob

If you **dock** money from someone, you reduce the amount of money you pay them. For example, as an employee in the UK your tax is automatically **docked** from your salary.

Neil

And finally, **a quid**, which is a slang term for one pound sterling. Right, before they start **docking** our pay for being late, it's time to say goodbye. Find us on Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube our App and of course the website bbclearningenglish.com. See you soon, goodbye.

Rob

Bye bye!

VOCABULARY

a penny

a coin (100 pennies = 1.00 GBP)

the penny has dropped

someone suddenly realises or understands something

clunk

the noise of two heavy objects coming together

Inland Revenue

the government department in the UK which deals with taxes

to dock

to reduce the amount of money someone receives in their salary or wages, for example as a tax payment

a quid

slang term for 1.00 GBP