
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

The English We Speak

Take to the cleaners



NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

(Helen bumps into Rob in her local laundrette.)

Helen

Hello Rob. I didn't know I would find you here. I love this laundrette. The washing machines are very efficient.

Rob

I hope so. I bought a very expensive washing machine for my house but when I put my clothes in, they ended up dirtier!

Helen

What do you mean?

Rob

Well, apparently there's some oil leaking in the motor and it stained all the washing! So I'm trying to wash them again here in this laundrette!

Helen

Oh, I can see all the yellowish stains ... This white shirt ... it's an expensive, designer one ...

Rob

Yes, it is. That was my best shirt. It's probably ruined now! If this stain doesn't come out, I'll sue the washing machine manufacturers! I'll take them to the cleaners!

Helen

Calm down, Rob! It's the shirt that has to be taken to the cleaners!

Rob

Not exactly, Helen. In English, when we say we're going to 'take someone to the cleaners', we mean we're going to take a lot of money from them.

Helen

So you want to ask the company to give you a lot of money – maybe all they've got – to compensate you for the loss of your very expensive shirt.

Rob

Yes! I'm very angry with them. Anyway, you can use the phrase in a sports context, too, when one team defeats another one by a large number of points. 'Take to the cleaners' is today's expression in *The English We Speak*. It used to mean getting money from someone else in a dishonest way but now it can just mean getting a lot of money from someone else.

Helen

Shall we listen to some examples of how this phrase is used?

Rob

Yes.

Examples

My husband cheated on me with my best friend! I'm going to get the best divorce lawyer in town and take him to the cleaners!

My team has the best players and we'll take you to the cleaners in this Sunday's match!

Helen

No need to sue the company, Rob. Call your washing machine manufacturer and ask them to replace it.

Rob

But I'm angry!

Helen

Don't be. I can take you to the cleaners, but not in the sense of this idiom. I can take you to the cleaners next door – the people who remove stains from clothes. They're very good.

Rob

Okay. Well, do you think they might be able to remove this stain?

Helen

Of course they can. Come on, Rob.

Rob

Okay. Come on, take me to the cleaners! Thanks, Helen.

Helen

You're welcome. Bye.

Rob

Bye.