

Ask about English

Behind/beyond

English language learner Oksana wants to know how to correctly use the words 'beyond' and 'behind'.

Sian Harris answers:

Hi, thanks for your question, there are quite a few different definitions we need to look at here but the meanings of 'behind' and 'beyond' are actually quite different.

One of the principal meanings of 'behind' is as a preposition of place. If you are behind a thing or a person you are facing the back of that thing or person. For example: 'There were two boys sitting behind me.' In these terms it means the opposite of 'in front of.'

But 'behind' also has adverb uses:

If you stay behind, you remain in a place after others have gone. For example: 'John stayed behind after school to take the test.' Equally, if you leave something behind, you do not take it with you when you go: 'They'd been forced to leave behind their businesses and possessions.'

As a time expression, behind appears when someone or something is behind, they are delayed or are making less progress than other people think they should: 'The bus was behind schedule.'

There are also some more abstract uses of behind that you should be aware of. If an experience is behind you, it is finished. So, for example, 'Now that the divorce is behind us, we can move on.'

Also the people, reasons or events behind a situation are the causes of it or are responsible for it as in the sentence: '...the man behind the modernisation of the organisation.'

Finally, if you are behind someone, you support them. 'The country was behind the president.'

If we turn now to think about 'beyond' - 'beyond' can also function as a preposition of place. If something is 'beyond' a place, it is on the other side of it, as in the case of '...a house beyond the village.'

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But there's a more abstract meaning to 'beyond' as well - it can mean to extend, continue or progress beyond a particular thing or means to extend or continue further than that thing or point. For example: 'Few children remain in school beyond the age of 16.'

'Beyond' also has some quite interesting idiomatic usages. If someone or something is beyond belief, understanding or control, it has become impossible to believe, understand or control it. 'The situation has changed beyond recognition.'

If you say that something is beyond you, you mean that you cannot understand it. 'How he managed to find us is beyond me.'

So, quite a few different meanings there to contend with, but I hope this helps you to identify which word you might use.

Audio available online at:

www.bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer

Sian Harris is the Manager of English Language Training & Development at the BBC World Service, and runs specialist courses in London and overseas for BBC staff. Before joining the BBC, she spent 10 years as an English language teacher, examiner and academic manager in schools and colleges in London.