

Ask about English

Time expressions



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Muhammad from Syria asks:

Why do we put the indefinite article "a" before quarter, but not before half, when asked about the time?

Prof Michael Swan answers:

It's an interesting question, and I'm not sure I've got a very good answer; it's just one of those irregularities – languages are full of them. There's often no real explanation: it's just that languages are tidy in one part, and untidy in others, perhaps because of the way they've been passed down from person to person over the centuries – so it's not surprising if changes creep in, and things get a bit messy! Perhaps we dropped the article before 'half' because it's such a common word.

In fact, we can actually say "quarter", instead of "a quarter", when we're talking about the time. If you asked me the time at 6.15, I might well say "quarter past six", instead of "a quarter past six" – but that's pretty conversational, and "a quarter" is more normal if we're speaking carefully, or writing.

And certainly, as you say, we never say "a half" when we're talking about time; say, "half past six", or even "half six", but not "a half past six".

Interestingly, we also use "half" without "a" in other situations, and not just when we're giving the time. For example, if I eat half an orange – that's how I say it! But, I would say "a quarter of an orange", not "quarter of an orange".

So that's it: we say "a quarter past four", not "a half past four" – just one of those irregular things.

Minutes

Talking about time in English is actually quite complicated. Ahmed from Egypt asks about this. In ordinary conversation, what most people say is "five past", "twenty past", "twenty-five to", "a quarter to" and so on....Interestingly, we usually don't say "four past", or "six past" – we put in minutes there. We say "four minutes past", "six minutes past" and we drop minutes with the fives: "five past", "twenty past".

In older English, when people were counting, they often said "one and twenty" or "two and twenty", instead of "twenty-one" or "twenty-two" and so on – and I remember that my mother, when she was talking about the time, she would say "five and twenty-to-three" – so it was still alive, say, fifty years ago.

"After" and "till" in American English

As you probably know, American English has some ways of talking about the time that aren't used in British English: they might say "after" instead of "past" for example. An American might say "ten after six", where I would say "ten past six" – and where British people say "ten to six", some Americans might use "of" or "till" or "before".

So that's conversational time-giving: "five past", "twenty past", "twenty-five to".

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In a more formal style (for instance if we're giving the times of events), we're more likely to put it differently and to say "three ten", "six fifteen", "seven forty-five"....and when we're talking about timetables we often use the 24-hour clock. So, we might say that a train arrives at "eighteen twenty-two". But if you ask me what time it is, just as the train arrives, or just as it's supposed to arrive, I'll look at my watch, and I won't say "it's eighteen twenty-two", I'll tell you "it's twenty-two minutes past six".

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