

Ask about English

'either' and 'neither'



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A question from Cristiane in Brazil:

Hi, my name is Cristiane and I'm a Brazilian student. Please, can you give me some explanation about the correct use of the words "either" and "neither".
Thank you

Callum Robertson answers:

Now to answer this question, I want you to imagine that you are going shopping with your mother, she wants to buy a new blouse. You go to the shop and she sees two blouses that she likes. She holds them up and shows you and asks you which one you prefer, which one should she buy?

You look at them and think for a while and you decide that both blouses are good, it doesn't matter which one she buys, both are OK. In this case you could say to your mother – 'Either', 'either one is OK'.

So 'either' here means in a choice between two things both choices are ok.

Now, let's go back to the clothes shop – your mother decides that actually she doesn't like those blouses and chooses two more. These, you think, are both completely wrong. They're not her colour, not her style, she would look terrible – so in this case, you want to tell her that. Remember that either means that both choices would be good – you want the opposite this time – you want a word that means 'not either' – and that word is 'neither', with an 'n', 'neither'. So if both blouses are terrible for your mum, you would say, 'Neither! Neither one is good'

So 'neither' here means that in a choice between two things, both choices are bad. Not one and not the other one.

You could also say here, I don't like either. Here we use the word 'either', because the negative meaning is given when we say 'don't', 'I don't like either'. We wouldn't say 'I don't like neither', that would be a double negative and we wouldn't usually say 'I like neither' it's much more natural to say 'I don't like either'

So in this context, trying to choose two things, either and neither are opposites. What is interesting is that although both of these words are talking about a choice between two things, when we use them they are used with a singular verb.

So if we look at our examples again: Remember there are two blouses – which one is good?

Well, either 'is' OK. Or neither 'is' OK. It might sound strange to be talking about two things with a singular, but that's really because that 'either' means 'either one' and 'neither' means 'neither one', and 'one', of course is singular.

Let's take a look at some of the other ways that these words are used.

Either can be paired with the word 'or'. Going back to the shop and the good blouses, let's imagine that one is red and one is blue – you like both of them so you could say.

"You could buy either the red one or the blue one."

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Neither can be paired with nor in a similar way but to join two negative ideas. For example, 'I went to visit my brother but neither he nor his wife was at home'. I'll repeat that – 'I went to visit my brother but neither he nor his wife was at home'.

Another example, this time about television watching, 'I neither watch soaps, nor reality TV, but I love dramas'. 'I neither watch soaps, nor reality TV, but I love dramas'. But this does sound a little formal and perhaps it would be more common to say I don't like soaps or reality shows, but I love dramas

Finally, one of the other questions that's often asked about these words is about the pronunciation. Is it either (ai) or either (i:) – and the answer to that – either or either – both pronunciations are used, though in American English either (i:) is perhaps the most usual.

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