

Keep your English up to date

Dumbing down

Professor David Crystal

Way back in the 1930s, you could dumb something down. For instance, a newspaper making a story more appealing to the masses would say, 'we're dumbing it down', or something like that. It was an American usage, dumb meant stupid. It was transitive, that is the verb governed an object, 'you're dumbing something down'.

Now in the 1990s, we get a different grammatical use - a use of the verb without an object, an intransitive use, 'they're dumbing down'. It has the same meaning; it means become less intellectually challenging.

It now refers to any of the media where the content is being trivialised in the opinion of somebody. 'Television is dumbing down ... Britain as a whole is dumbing down,' because of its fascination with trivia and reality TV and all sorts of undemanding watching. 'Are we dumbing down?' said a newspaper headline recently.

It's got a whole range of grammatical use now, both transitive and intransitive, you get, 'it's been dumbed down', 'it's being dumbed down' ... I've even heard the word as a noun - or the phrase really - 'I don't like the dumbing down of programmes', or for short, probably the commonest use of all now, 'I don't like all this dumbing down'.

No need to worry here, there's no dumbing down on this website!



bbclearningenglish.com

© British Broadcasting Corporation 2005

