

Keep your English up to date

Wysiwyg

Professor David Crystal

Wysiwyg. But it's not spelt as it sounds. Wysiwyg. It's an acronym meaning 'what you see is what you get'. It came in in the early 1980s in computing. It meant that what you see on the screen is what you get in the output. For example, you type something on the screen and when you print it out, it looks just like it's on the screen. Wysiwyg. It was especially found in desktop publishing.

So it's a technical term then? Well, yes, but the phrase actually isn't. And that's the thing I want to draw your attention to – the phrase was never technical.

It actually started in the United States, in a television show, in the early 1970s; it was called 'Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In'. An actor there called Flip Wilson appeared as a cross-dressing character called Geraldine and as he came on, he would say, 'what you see is what you get!'

And I've heard it used since in all sorts of circumstances. I've heard it used in restaurants referring to the food – 'what you see is what you get'. And in a tourist brochure referring to beautiful scenery – 'come to this country and what you see is what you get' – that is, the tourist guide will give you everything you expect. And it got its accolade, I think, this phrase, when Britney Spears had a song which included it – 'because I can promise U baby what you see is what U get' – the word 'you' was spelt with just a capital letter 'U'.



bbclearningenglish.com

© British Broadcasting Corporation 2005