

Things You Pretend to Know

(and hope no one will catch)

TWENTIETH century civilisation has split into countless areas of specialisation. It would take a genius to stay abreast of the latest buzzwords, scientific breakthroughs and cultural references.

For example, do you know the difference between a gourmet and a gourmand? Do you know where no man's land is, or why a pig is in a poke? None of these terms is obscure; in fact, you've probably used them yourself without knowing what you were talking about.

Well, you can relax. Here are the facts you need to know to hold your own in a dinner-party conversation, comprehend the evening news, and explain a thing or two to your 12-year-old nephew - or at least understand him when he explains things to you.

► Why are liberals to the left and conservatives to the right?

In 1789 the first French National Assembly convened after the Revolution. It was packed with 1,177 representatives.

As it happened, the liberal or radical members were seated to the left of the speaker, and the conservative members to the right. This practice spread, and the terms *left wing* and *right wing* are still used around the world to denote the two political beliefs, liberalism and conservatism.

► What's the difference between a gourmet and a gourmand?

Discretion. Pickiness. Taste. Knowledge. Put simply, a gourmet is a connoisseur of fine food and wine; a gourmand is one stop short of a glutton. Webster's dictionary defines a gourmand as "one who is excessively fond of eating and drinking". Think Henry VIII or Marlon Brando.

► What makes a measure draconian?

If it's harsh, brutal or too severe for the circumstances, an act is considered draconian. The original Draco was a lawmaker in Athens in the seventh century BC. He published the first written laws in Greece, and is usually held responsible for the harshness of these laws, although Draco didn't create them—they were customs that Greeks had lived by for many years.

Once their rules were in writing, many Greeks were appalled by how unreasonable the system was. Small thefts were punishable by death, and if a man couldn't pay his debts, he became a debt slave. Eventually the Greeks threw out Draco and "his" laws, cancelled all debts, freed the debt slaves and created a new, more lenient set of civil rules.

► Did the Three Musketeers actually exist?

Only in the mind of Alexandre Dumas the Elder. He wrote *The Three Musketeers* in 1844. The setting is seventeenth-century France, and the musketeers — Athos, Porthos and Aramis — are King Louis XIII's swordsmen. Together they defeat Cardinal Richelieu in his plot to embarrass the royal family. The confusion about whether the musketeers were real arises because Louis XIII and Richelieu did indeed exist. But like many authors, Dumas used historical figures as foils for his fictional characters.

► Where is no man's land?

In the Middle Ages, no man's land was located outside the north wall of the city of London, where the corpses of criminals were displayed. As even minor crimes were punishable by death, there were plenty of bodies — hanged, beheaded, impaled — to serve as a warning for others.

Finally a gallows was built inside the city. All around London land was settled and fields were cultivated — except for the old execution grounds, which no man claimed. The area was described as *no man's land*, and only later, around 1900, was the phrase picked up in military parlance.

► What is angst?

You're 14, and you've just realised you have bought the wrong kind of trainers. Or you're 24, and you don't know what you're doing with your life. Or you're 44, and you don't know what you're doing with your life. *Angst* is German for "anguish" and signifies psychological suffering.

The word is sometimes prefaced by "existential" giving it a deeper, more troubled tone. If you're suffering from existential angst, you don't need the trainers to turn you into an anguished puddle. The mere fact of existing in this world is torment enough.

► What are flotsam and jetsam?

Flotsam and jetsam is a fancy way to refer to junk, waste or unimportant loose ends. The term refers to cargo from a ship that ends up in the sea.

Flotsam is goods lost in a wreck that float on the water. Jetsam is goods tossed overboard (jettisoned) to stabilise a ship. Jetsam sinks. According to maritime law, flotsam and jetsam belong to the original owner, but if someone else finds the stuff, he or she is entitled to a reward.

► What is a pig in a poke?

A pig in a poke is an item or an idea that seems to be one thing but might well contain something completely different. In medieval England, small pigs were sold at market in pokes, or little bags. At times, however, some crafty farmers took to putting a cat in the bag instead and trying to dupe someone into buying the pig without looking inside the poke.

If they looked, the farmer would warn, the pig might run away. Those sceptics who did look invariably "let the cat out of the bag".