



ASK A TEACHER

What is a Wild Card?

September 30, 2022

Hello! This week on *Ask a Teacher*, we will answer a question from Katerina in Spain. She writes,

Question:

Dear VOA,

I have a question about something my American friend usually says. It is the... expression “a wild card.” What does it mean? Thank you very much for your answer!

Take care!

Katarina

Answer:

Dear Katerina,

Thank you for writing to us. This expression is like many that come to American English from card games, especially the game of poker.

Each set of playing cards has two extra cards. These can take the place of lost or damaged cards. These cards are called “Jokers.” They often have a picture of a clown-like person sometimes called a jester.

In some card games, the “Joker” card is dealt to the players along with the usual kinds of cards. It serves as a “wild card” in the game. That means, if you have it in your hand, you can use it as any other card. Here is an example of how a player might talk about their use of a wild card in a game.

I have three kings and one joker. I’ll use the wild card as a king, so now I have four kings.

But card games are not the only places you will hear the term “wild card.” In sports, we use the expression for a team that is invited to compete for a championship. For example, in American football, the best teams play each other at the end of the season – in a series of games called “playoffs.” A few teams that might not have the best records are invited to play against the top teams. It is possible, if the wildcard team is good enough, that it can win the championship.

Here is an example showing how a wild card team won the championship of American football, the Super Bowl.

In 2007, the New York Giants entered the playoffs as a wild card team, but they went on to beat the New England Patriots and win the Super Bowl.

And, as you can probably guess, we use “wild card” to describe people as well. If a person is unpredictable, you cannot be sure of how they will act. Then you might say:

My brother is a wild card when it comes to holidays – we never know if he is coming to our family dinners.

Finally, in the world of computers, the term “wild card” describes a symbol that programmers use. It looks like a little star and is called an **asterisk**. It means anything can appear in that place. For example, if you want a computer to find all the words in a document that start with the prefix dis- so you can write a command: “Find dis*.” The result will be a set of words like these: discover, discuss, dismiss, and the like.

I hope this will help you to understand and even use the expression “wild card” yourself, Katerina. What question do *you* have about American English? Send us an email at learningenglish@voanews.com

And that’s *Ask a Teacher*.

I'm Jill Robbins.

Jill Robbins wrote this lesson for Learning English.

Words in This Story

asterisk – *n.* a small star-shaped symbol

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