



WORDS AND THEIR STORIES

First Dibs

January 28, 2023

And now, *Words and Their Stories*, from VOA Learning English.

See if you can **guess** the meaning of first dibs from the following exchange:

A: *“Hi, I was calling about the house for **rent**, and I was wondering if it’s still available.”*

B: *“Yes, well, it is empty, at the moment—but I can’t rent it out yet. My **nephew** is interested, and he’s got first dibs on it, so I’m waiting to hear from him.”*

A: *“Oh, OK—do you know how long it’ll be until he decides?”*

B: *“Um, you know, it could be a month. I’m not really sure.”*

Here, the owner is giving his nephew a chance to rent the house before anyone else can. Having first dibs on something means having the right to get something before anyone else.

We can have first dibs on one thing or on one or more things from a collection of objects. For example, you can say: “She has first dibs on the World Cup **tickets**.”

In both examples, note that we use the preposition *on* before a noun.

American dictionary publisher Merriam-Webster says the expression first dibs likely comes from a children’s game called *dibstones* played in 17th-century Britain. Children would try to catch small objects like **pebbles** on the backs of their hands. The objects were called *dibstones* or *dibs*.

By the early 1900s, get first dibs was in common use in American English.

Here are the verbs we often use with the expression:

You can have first dibs. You can get first dibs. Someone can give you first dibs, or you can give first dibs to others. And when you call first dibs, that means you claim possession even if nobody said you could choose first.

If you call first dibs, you should only do so if you think other people probably do not want, or care about, the thing you are claiming. Otherwise, people might view you as **selfish** or not respectful of the rights of others, and that could create conflict.

Can you think of something you'd like to have first dibs on? You can let us know in the comments section.

Until next time, I'm Andrew Smith.

Andrew Smith wrote this lesson for VOA Learning English. Hai Do was the editor.

Words in This Story

guess -*v.* to try to answer a question correctly but without having the necessary knowledge to know if the answer is correct

rent -*v.* to pay a fee for the temporary use of something, such as a car, apartment, or piece of equipment

nephew -*n.* the son of one's brother or sister

ticket -*n.* a small card, piece of paper, or other document which allows entry to an event such as a concert, athletic contest, and the like

pebble -*n.* a small stone about one to two centimeters in diameter

selfish -*adj.* characterized by not sharing with others and being concerned only for oneself

We want to hear from you. Do you have a similar expressions in your language? In the Comments section, you can also practice using any of the expressions from the story.

We have a new comment system. Here is how it works:

- *Write your comment in the box.*
- *Under the box, you can see four images for social media accounts. They are for Disqus, Facebook, Twitter and Google. Click on one image and a box appears.*
- *Enter the login for your social media account. Or you may create one on the Disqus system. It is the blue circle with “D” on it. It is free.*

Each time you return to comment on the Learning English site, you can use your account and see your comments and replies to them. Our comment policy is [here](#).
