



WORDS AND THEIR STORIES

Let's 'Zero in' on Number Expressions

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

Language is not only made-up of words. Numbers are also important to communicating our thoughts. So, today, we talk about some common English expressions that use numbers.

Let's start with zero and the expression to zero in.

Zeroing in means directing all of your attention on something or someone. We often say what that something is. For example, the defense lawyers were able to zero in on the testimony of an important witness and find problems with it. Here is another example, I know a woman who can zero in on any relationship problem and find a solution.

This expression can also mean to take aim directly at something. For example, when taking a picture, a photographer might zero in on a subject. And it is the job of a quarterback in an American football game to zero in on a receiver – the player catching the ball.

Other words that help to explain the expression to zero in are **to focus** and **concentrate on**. As verbs, these words both mean to direct your attention on something or someone.

Now, let's move to the numbers six and seven. If something is at sixes and sevens, it is in a state of confusion or disorder. In other words, it is all messed up!

At sixes and sevens may also mean a state of disagreement between two or more people. For example, when the manager left without a word the workplace was at sixes and sevens. Nobody knew which way was up! (If you don't know which way is up – you are very confused.)

Word experts say this expression may have started in the 1300s. At that time, it meant taking a careless risk. Around the middle of the 1600s, the meaning changed to mean a state of confusion.

Being at sixes and sevens is the opposite of being a ten.

If something is a ten, it is really great. It is perfect or nearly perfect. This usage comes from the highest rank on a **scale** of one to ten. For example, on a scale of one to 10 my recent trip to Bangladesh was a ten. I loved every minute!

Now, let's talk about our last expression: to 86 something. If you 86 something, you get rid of it. You throw it out, or you don't use it. If I **pitch** an idea to a group and they 86 it, they do not want it and do not plan to use it.

Experts at Merriam-Webster's online dictionary explain that this expression may have come from 1930s business **slang** meaning that an **item** was sold out. Maybe. Other experts think the only reason to 86 something means to get rid of it is because 86 **rhymes** with nix. "Nix" means to cancel or get rid of something.

And that's the end of this *Words and Their Stories*. Have fun using these number expressions in your next English conversation.

Until next time, I'm Anna Matteo.

Anna Matteo wrote this story for VOA Learning English.

Words in This Story

focus -v. to direct attention on something so that it becomes clearer

concentrate on -v. (phrasal) the direct thoughts to something

scale -n. a series of numbers meant to rate or show the strength or quality of something

pitch -v. to talk about something in favorable ways to get people to accept it

slang -*n.* special language used by a particular group : an informal nonstandard vocabulary composed of invented words, changed words, and exaggerated or humorous figures of speech

item -*n.* an individual thing that is separate from others

rhyme -*v.* to have two or more words that end in the same sound

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

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