

Ask the Teacher: Happen, Occur, and Other Similar Words

Hello, students! The question for today's "Ask the Teacher" video lesson has a pretty simple answer, so I'm going to use it as a starting point to teach you a number of other expressions.

The student asks, "Is there a difference between the words '**happen**' and '**occur**'?"

These words are extremely similar, and there are some cases where you can use either one.



Occur is more formal than **happen**, so if you were talking to a friend, you might say, "The accident **happened** on Main Street", but if it was being reported in the news, they might say, "The accident **occurred** on Main Street."

Simple, right? In everyday spoken English we usually use **happen**, and in more formal spoken and written English, we can use **occur**.

Now, there are two other ways to use the verbs **happen** and **occur** with different meanings.

happen to + verb

The expression "**happen to**" plus a verb means that something is a coincidence. It is by chance.

For example, "**Yesterday I happened to see Bob at the mall.**" This means I wasn't planning to see Bob, I didn't know that Bob was going to be at the mall, but I happened to see him. It was a coincidence; it happened by chance.

Another example is, let's say you're planning to attend New York University. You discover that your best friend's mother is actually a professor at that university. You could then say, "**My friend's mom happens to teach at NYU.**" You're remarking on the fact that it's a coincidence.

occur to + person

The other expression I'd like to teach you is "**occur to**" plus a person. This means that the person suddenly understands or realizes something. If something "occurs to you," it means the idea suddenly came into your mind.

For example, let's say you come home after a long day at work, and you're quite tired. You try to unlock the front door of your house, but your key doesn't work. You try a couple of times, but no luck. The door doesn't open. Then, **it occurs to you that you've been trying to use your car key** to unlock the door of your house. "It occurs to you" means the idea suddenly pops into your head.

You can also use this expression in the negative, "**It didn't occur to me**" or "**It never occurred to me**" to talk about something you had never considered. For example, let's say you had a happy and peaceful childhood, and your family seemed perfect. Only many years later did you find out that your parents actually had a number of financial problems. You could say, "**It never occurred to me that my parents had financial problems when I was growing up.**" The idea never came into your mind. That's what it means to say, "It never occurred to me."

bother someone / not bother to do something

Now, another verb that has different meanings when used alone or with the word "to" is the word "**bother**." If someone or something bothers you, it means it makes you annoyed or angry.

For example, "**I live in a city, and the noise from the street bothers me when I'm trying to sleep.**" The noise is annoying to me – it irritates me, it bothers me.

Or, for example, a mother who has five small children might say, "**I can't just sit and read a book for an hour without one of my kids bothering me.**" In this case, "bother" is being used to mean "annoyed," something is annoying or irritating you.

We also have the expression, "**not bother to do something.**" This has nothing to do with being annoyed. If you don't bother to do something, it means you don't make the effort or you don't invest the energy or time to do it.

For example, "**When I went to the store, I didn't bother to use the coupon I had for 25 cents.**" That's a pretty small amount, so I didn't make the effort to use this coupon. I didn't bother to use the coupon.

clever / smart / wise

I've also got some other questions from students about words which seem the same, but there are a few small, subtle differences. One student asks about the words **clever**, **smart**, and **wise**. Are they the same thing? Not exactly.

All of these words have to do with a type of intelligence. "**Smart**" simply means intelligent. Someone who is smart knows a lot and is usually a fast learner. Being smart is a good thing.

The word "**clever**" also means intelligent, but "clever" means you are intelligent in a creative way or in a tricky way that might deceive other people. Depending on how it's said, being clever might be a good thing if you've discovered a "**clever solution**" to a problem, meaning a creative and intelligent solution. Or being clever can be a bad thing. For example, if a criminal discovers a "**clever way to break into a house**," it's intelligent and it's creative, but it's also tricky and used for bad purposes, or for deceptive purposes.

Then we have the word "**wise**," which is also like intelligent, but it's deeper. Someone who is wise has good judgement. They have the ability to distinguish between right and wrong and to know what is best in a situation.

The words **smart**, **clever**, and **wise** all have to do with intelligence, but there are some small differences in their connotations.

hiking / trekking / backpacking

Another student has asked about whether **hiking**, **trekking**, and **backpacking** are the same activity. Well, they're similar, but there are also a couple difference between these words.

"**Hiking**" usually refers to a **short trip**. A hike can be 30 minutes, or 2 hours, or even up to 8 hours, but on a hike, you usually go and come back in the same day. On a hike you might take a backpack full of water bottles, snacks, maybe a map, but you don't need that much equipment.

Now, "**trekking**" and "**backpacking**" usually refer to longer, multi-day trips. When you go trekking or backpacking, you will take a backpack with a lot of equipment like a tent, cooking equipment, etc. because you're going to be walking for various days.

The word "**backpacking**" can also refer to traveling by transport (not just by walking) from city to city or place to place, bringing only a backpack and not any suitcases, for example.

rare / scarce

Our last question of the day is the difference between the words "**rare**" and "**scarce**." Both of them refer to things that are uncommon or hard to find, but there are two differences.

The word "**rare**" can be used for events, but the word "**scarce**" cannot be used for events. For example, astronomers and scientists might say, "**It's rare for a comet to pass this close to the Earth.**" It's an event that doesn't happen frequently.

Both **rare** and **scarce** can be used for things or resources, but **rare** means *not commonly* or *not frequently found*. **Scarce** has the connotation of *insufficient* or *difficult to find*.

For example, a person might **have a rare disease**. This disease is not common; only a few people in the general population have it. But **water is scarce in the desert**. It's difficult to find, and there's not enough of it. In a country with high unemployment, **job opportunities are scarce**. They are insufficient. There are not enough opportunities, and they're difficult to find.

The opposite of **rare** is common or frequent, and the opposite of **scarce** is abundant, to have a lot of something.

Let's review what we learned in today's lesson:

- **Occur** is the more formal way to say **happen**, and, in many cases, you can use either one with the same meaning.
- You can say something **happens to be the case** if it is a coincidence.
- Another expression is to say that something **occurred to you** if it suddenly came into your mind.
- If something **doesn't bother you**, it means it doesn't annoy you.
- But if you **don't bother to do something**, it means you don't make the effort or invest the time or energy to do it.



- Finally, we reviewed the different nuances in the words **clever**, **smart**, and **wise**; **hiking**, **trekking**, and **backpacking**; and **rare** and **scarce**.

If you've got a question about two or more words, and you're not sure whether they're the same, or there are some small differences, please send them to me, and I'll be happy to give you an explanation with some examples.

Thank you for joining me today, and I'll see you in the next lesson!