

Talking About School: Insults

I've discovered that there's nothing my students like quite so much as learning **insults** and **profanity** in English. I just hope that they don't use the words that I teach them! Talking about schools, though, is a good time to talk about insults. I remember using—and hearing—a lot of insults when I was in school.

We called more than one teacher a “**slave driver**” **behind his back**. Besides that, though, most of our insults weren't aimed at teachers, they were aimed at other students. (I imagine it's the same today.) The word “idiot” is the same in English and German—maybe in other languages, too—for someone who is pretty **stupid**. Other words for the same thing are “knucklehead,” “dimwit,” and “retard.” And there were words for people who were *too* smart: “nerd” and “geek” are the two most common.

A lot of insults are aimed at the way people looked. Someone who is too skinny is a “beanpole” or “toothpick.” Someone who's too fat is a “tubalard” or a “whale.”

I know that insults can be fun to learn—I like finding new ones in German, too—but *don't* use them. At least, never use them without the other person knowing that you're joking, and *never* use them behind someone's back.

How many of these insults did you know? Do you have any other English insults to add to the list? Make sure you include what the insult means! Are there any insults in your language that can be translated into English?

Vocabulary

Insult: There are a lot of unkind things to say about people. In this text, I listed a few of the ones that came to mind for me. When you say something mean or hurtful to someone, you insult them. Insults can be words, like they are here, or an insult can be an entire sentence like: “Johnny will never understand English!” A lot of the insults I hear in TV and movies now include **profanity**, but they don't have to. As long as something you say hurts another person, it's an insult.

Profanity: I think every language has “bad words” that you shouldn't use. In English, the most common are 'shit' and 'fuck.' These words are considered profanity, or sometimes called 'curse words.' If you watch American TV and movies, you might think that Americans always use profanity, but I seldom used profanity in English in the U.S., and my friends didn't either. Too much profanity makes a person sound uneducated in English.

Slave driver: 'Slaves' were people who were the property of other people. The Pyramids in Egypt

were built by slaves, and in early America, slaves worked on plantations, among other things. Fortunately, there are no more slaves in modern culture, but some people work so hard that they say they “work like slaves.” And some bosses make their workers work like slaves, too. We say that these bosses are slave drivers. And, a teacher who makes students work hard—with a lot of studying and homework—is called a slave driver, too. I remember one of my math teachers being a slave driver. I hated his class!

Behind someone's back: Insulting someone is bad enough. But nobody likes to find out that someone has **insulted** him when he wasn't there to defend himself! When you talk about someone when he isn't there, you're talking about him behind his back. In my opinion, **insulting** someone behind his back is worse than a regular insult, because you don't even give him the chance to say anything in return.

Stupid: People who learn quickly we call 'smart' or 'intelligent.' People who learn very slowly, on the other hand, we call stupid. It's an **insult**, because normally it's the teacher's fault that they aren't learning! In school, we called someone stupid who got bad grades, or was always the last one to understand what the teacher was saying. Besides people, ideas can be stupid, too. I think that there are few truly stupid people in the world, and that they all seem to find careers in politics!