



# Under the Big Top

**H**ave you ever heard the phrase *Come rain or shine*? How about the word *jumbo* or *big top*? All of these phrases have become part of the English language because of one man and his one very big idea.

Phineas Taylor Barnum is the man behind these familiar phrases. He created “The Greatest Show on Earth,” The Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. As the original circus traveled around the country in the late 1800s, Americans heard these words and phrases and began to use them. Soon everyone forgot that they ever had a connection with the circus.

One time during a circus performance, a man who wanted to run for an elective office stood up and threw his hat into the circus ring just to get everyone’s attention. The whole show stopped while he announced his name and said that he wanted to be elected. Even today when someone decides to run for an elective office, we say that they will “throw their hat into the ring.”

The traveling circus would come to a town and stay for a few days or a week and perform several shows. When it was time to load up all of the tents, animals, performers and equipment, the circus people would say it was time to “get the show on the road” and head for the next town. We still use this phrase as a way to indicate that it is time to get started on something.

If you have ever been to an arena or stadium, it is obvious to you that some seats are more expensive than others because they give you a better view of the show. These expensive seats were originally called the “grand stands,” and people wanted to sit there to show off that they were important. We still say that people who are showing off are “grandstanding.”

The largest circus tents were called the “big top.” The one tent would cover about three acres. That’s probably bigger than your school playground! We still talk about things “under the big top” when we mean something really large. And speaking of large, Mr. Barnum introduced the word *jumbo* to mean something really huge. This time it was a white elephant that he named Jumbo. Today a “white elephant” is something that no one really wants in their home and “jumbo” still means oversized.

One hundred years ago, shows would be canceled because of bad weather, but the Barnum circus went on “come rain or shine.” P. T. Barnum’s was the first business to use this as an advertising phrase—and we still use it today.

Now you know the origin of some of our most common phrases. But the one that P. T. Barnum is most famous for is, “There’s a sucker born every minute.” See if you can figure out what this phrase means; if not, ask an adult.

Adapted from “Prince of Humbugs” from *Explore* magazine by Mary Rose



# Dear Parents

American English is a rich language, full of colorful words and phrases. This article describes P. T. Barnum's circus—an American tradition—and discusses some of the language from the circus that we still use today. Enjoy!

## TIP OF THE WEEK

Figurative language can be hard for children to understand because it goes beyond the literal meaning of the words. Help your child understand the words below by reminding him or her of their origins, as described in the article. Using the figurative language in his or her own original sentence will ensure your child understands the words and phrases.

## The Questions

Write an original sentence (with a grown-up's help!) in which you can use each of the following phrases:

1. Come rain or come shine: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Under the big top: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Grandstanding: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Jumbo: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Get the show on the road: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

We have completed this assignment together.

Child's Signature

Parent's Signature