

How it all started.

It's time you had an update(1) on the fire situation here in Wenatchee, and the rest of Washington State. Most of the month, we have had smoke in the valley. We have been told that the air quality is hazardous(2). The local shops have been selling face masks for people who need to be outdoors. I actually bought a box of them the other day, and used one for the first time in my life. The smoke was really thick that particular day, and I found myself holding my breath as I went from the car into shops and out again. "This is ridiculous!" I thought to myself. "I have a box of brand new breathing filters at home; I should be wearing one!" We have got used to the situation now. It has become normal to see people walking around with filters or face masks on. It's also normal to receive emails each day of activities being canceled. It's funny how you quickly get used to a change in lifestyle when you have no choice. And this situation, like a natural disaster, has been ruling our lives. It all started with a lightning storm. I have been in storms before, but never like that one. That day, I had actually been thinking that my life needed a bit more excitement; I was bored and uninspired. By the early evening, however, I was riding on the back of my husband's new motorbike, going up through the wheat fields, and at the same time, watching the drama of a violent lightning storm. The valley was all in shadow, and fork lightning was coming down out of thick clouds. The bolts(3) were striking all over the place, and in the wheat fields as well. I suddenly realized that my life was far too exciting, almost scary. The lightning was getting closer and closer, and I wanted to go home. Most of the fires near us have been put out, but the wind will often blow the smoke from distant fires into the valley. So we have to keep our face masks at the ready(4), and be flexible with our schedules. The 2 or 3 clear days that we have had, have been glorious. Everybody has poured out of(5) their houses into the parks for walks. The noise of children at outdoor recess has been in the air. And people like me have charged into the garden to dig, and plant, and enjoy every second of clean air. For a while, we were let out (6)of prison. If we had rain, it would be over by now. Those of you from dry climates probably understand what I'm saying. When the fires are out, there will be a big celebration, but until then, I will have a face mask in my handbag, just in case(7).

1. 'An update' is a very common word. We see it used when talking about computer programs, and also news.

- a. Your photo editing program has been updated, but your anti-virus program still needs to be updated.
- b. The following is an update on the situation in Syria.

2. 'Hazardous' means the same as dangerous, but it is usually associated with chemicals, gases, or building materials. 'Dangerous' can be used more broadly.

- a. Old batteries are hazardous; they must be recycled properly.
 - b. The air quality is hazardous; the gases and poisons in the air can affect our health.
3. 'A bolt' is a metal lock that slides into place. 'To bolt down/in' is used when meaning to lock something into place with metal or chains. However, we use the word bolt with lightning, especially if it strikes the ground.
- a. The bolt on the door will keep the wild animals out.
 - b. The bolt of lightning struck the tree, and split it in two.

4. 'At the ready' is a military expression. It means to keep something close by, so it can be quickly picked up and used. In the military this term would be used with weapons, but we use it also for everyday objects. A more everyday and less serious expression to use would be 'handy'.

- a. Keep your medicine at the ready /handy in case your symptoms come back.

- b. The doctor keeps his beeper at the ready / handy in case he gets called to the hospital.
- 5. 'To pour/to pour into/out of' is used figuratively to describe how living and non-living things move.
 - a. The sheep poured out of the field as the dogs chased them.
 - b. The smoke poured out of the building and covered the surrounding parking lot.
- 6. 'To be let out' is a phrase that is easy to understand, but again, it is used figuratively a lot. It means 'to be allowed to exit'.
 - a. When the neighbor's dog had gone, we let the cat out.
 - b. They let the children out early to play because they had finished their work.
- 7. We have already seen a couple of examples of 'just in case', but because it is such a common expression, let's see some more.
 - a. Just in case the baby gets hungry in the night, I've left a bottle of milk in the fridge.
 - b. I'll check the route on the GPS just in case we get lost.
 - c. They checked in early at the airport just in case. They wanted to avoid large crowds.

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