

The view from the back of our house faces North, looking at the hills on either side of the Columbia river. They are brown this time of year, after a hot and dry summer. For a few days, the view was hard to see because there was smoke to the North(1). The bridge that crosses the Columbia from Wenatchee to East Wenatchee has a view that follows the river upstream(2) for a long way. As I drove across it the other day, I took a quick photo on my phone of the thick smoke that was now filling the valley. I know that I shouldn't really do that when I'm driving, but it was just a quick second snap, and I had the picture. A fire had started in a place called Chelan, and the smoke had blown in our direction. Thankfully, it cleared up(3) in a few days. If you are familiar with forest fires, you might know that they can last much longer, and the smoke can invade surrounding towns, bringing everything to a halt(4). Once, a long time ago, my husband and I left Wenatchee for the day because the smoke in the valley was so bad; we couldn't stand it any longer(5). I don't envy the work of the firefighters this time of year. It's grueling(6). Smoky the Bear is a cartoon character that appears on television and talks about avoiding forest fires. He is part of a campaign by the government to educate the public. He appears as a friendly bear in a hat, carrying a shovel, and his motto is "Only you can prevent wildfires." Statistics show that, in this country, 9 out of 10 wildfires are caused by humans. And, as you can imagine, a 'wildfire' is one that is unwanted, and out of control. As you drive near forests, you will randomly see Smoky the Bear posters on the side of the road as a reminder to be careful with fire. The effects of being careless can be devastating. The wildfire up in Chelan is out now, and the smoke to the North has cleared, but the expense and waste of forest will be long lasting.

1. 'Smoke to the North'. When we talk about what we see in a certain direction, we use 'to the..'
 - a. The mountains are to the North, and the desert is to the South.
 - b. This house has a lot of windows, and to the East is a view of a golf course.
2. 'Upstream' is a direction. It refers to rivers and streams, and it is the opposite direction of the water flow. Generally it is said that a river flows 'down', and so 'upstream' is against the flow of water.
 - a. Salmon swim upstream when they return to their birthplace to lay eggs.
3. 'To clear up' has several meanings. It can mean to tidy up. It can also be used when an infection is going away/getting better. And it is an expression used with the weather.
 - a. Let's clear up these toys; the place is a real mess.
 - b. Her ear infection has finally cleared up.
 - c. The thick clouds have cleared up/ the storm cleared up later in the day.
4. 'To bring something to a halt', 'to grind everything to a halt', or 'to bring everything to a grinding halt' are often used to describe how something (powerful or unwanted) will stop normal activity. 'Grinding' is an excellent descriptive word that refers to metal brakes.
 - a. The sudden snow storm brought the whole town to a grinding halt.
 - b. When Lady Sotherby found the cockroach in her salad, it brought the dinner party to a halt.
5. 'To not stand it any longer' is a very common phrase which means the same as 'to bear' or 'to put up with'.
 - a. I had to put earplugs in last night. The neighbors were having a party, and I couldn't stand the noise any longer.
 - b. I tried so hard to not scratch my mosquito bites, but then I had to do it. I couldn't stand it any longer.
6. 'Grueling' means extremely exhausting and physically punishing. It comes from the word 'gruel' which is an old, rare word meaning a kind of soup. The exhausting activity leaves a person like gruel. It can be used figuratively as well.
 - a. The triathlon was grueling; it took us days to recover.
 - b. My interview was grueling. I don't feel confident about the result.

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