

Teflon diet, garlic milk and zebra cows triumph at 2025 Ig Nobel prizes

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- Have you ever read about any unusual or surprising scientific discoveries? What were they?
- Do you think all scientific research needs to have serious practical applications, or is there value in studying unusual topics?
- If you could investigate anything using scientific research, what would you choose and why?

2 Key words

a. Write the words in bold in the article next to the following definitions.

1. talking too proudly about something you have or have done _____
2. succeeded in getting something you wanted, often with some luck _____
3. having a very good reputation; respected and admired _____
4. forming a group or mass by sticking together _____
5. paused, lost strength or began to make mistakes _____
6. drunk; having had too much alcohol _____
7. (of an idea or suggestion) unusual; surprising _____
8. a group of people or things _____
9. happening after a person has died _____
10. people who have won an important prize, often for art or science _____
11. explaining something clearly and making it easier to understand _____
12. having too much interest in yourself and your appearance _____
13. real, genuine; not false _____
14. to satisfy; give someone enough food or drink so they are no longer hungry _____
15. very careful and hard to please; not easily satisfied _____

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16. imagined or planned something for the future _____
17. crashing into each other with force _____
18. given something again and again, often food or drink _____
19. spoken in a way that is unclear, often because of tiredness or alcohol _____
20. bringing in a lot of money; very profitable _____

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

1. Salma dated a(n) _____ guy for six months, but because he was only interested in himself, she ended the relationship.
2. The drunk man _____ his words, making it difficult to understand what he was saying.
3. Travelling around Asia for a year did nothing to _____ Nicole's appetite for adventure and excitement.
4. VIP guests were _____ food and champagne at the gala dinner.
5. The CEO's confidence _____ when the investors asked for more detailed sales figures.
6. It could be argued that _____ proposals often lead to the most innovative solutions.
7. A fresh _____ of graduates is entering the technology sector this summer.
8. To avoid any _____ when making cheese sauce, always use a whisk to stir in the flour.
9. _____ about wealth rarely makes a good impression in professional settings.
10. Dicken's final novel – The Mystery of Edwin Drood – was published _____.
11. Few institutions are as _____ as Oxford in the field of law.

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12. Clearly _____, the actor stumbled through the television interview.
13. Several _____ spoke briefly at the ceremony spoke about their research.
14. There's no point _____ on abstract theories unless you can do so with patience and clarity.
15. Several vehicles _____ on the icy motorway, causing major delays.
16. After signing her first publishing contract, Carmen finally _____ the career she had dreamed of.
17. Nick is very _____ and likes everything to be exact and precise.
18. All contracts must be totally _____ in order to be legally binding.
19. Although Pat's job is very _____ and her salary high, she admits to not enjoying her job.
20. I _____ our new extension would take six months, rather than the three years it actually took!

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Researchers into idea to blend powdered PTFE into food as a zero-calorie filler to curb hunger win chemistry prize

Steven Morris

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- 1 For decades scientists, doctors and public health officials have battled to solve the obesity crisis. Now researchers have won an Ig Nobel prize for a radical new approach: drastically reducing people's calorie intake by feeding them Teflon.
- 2 The **left-field** proposal was inspired by zero calorie drinks and **envisaged** food manufacturers blending powdered polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE) into their products in the hope it would **sate** people's hunger before quietly disappearing.
- 3 The team is one of 10 to be recognised at this year's Ig Nobel awards, which celebrate research that first makes people laugh and then makes them think. They are not to be confused with the rather more **prestigious**, and **lucrative**, Nobel prizes that are doled out in Scandinavia every year. The latest **crop** of winners were handed their awards by **bona fide** Nobel **laureates**, and showered with paper planes, at a ceremony at Boston University.
- 4 Researchers honoured on the night discovered that alcohol, in small doses at least, boosted people's foreign language skills; that cows disguised as zebras suffered fewer insect bites, and that people became more **narcissistic** after being told they were more intelligent than most, even when they weren't. Another prize went to a **fastidious** doctor who measured the growth of his nails for 35 years.
- 5 "I feel honoured," said Dr Rotem Naftalovich at Rutgers University in New Jersey, whose work on the Teflon diet **landed** the chemistry prize. After discussing the idea for a zero calorie filler with his brother David, the pair chose Teflon as their favoured substance.
- 6 Making their case in Obesity Technology, the researchers explained how PTFE could make up a quarter of our food by volume. But while Naftalovich made – and ate – chocolate bars containing Teflon, the US Food and Drug Administration was cool on the idea. "I don't think they wanted to review it because it was such a silly idea," Naftalovich said.
- 7 The peace prize went to a German, Dutch and British team who showed that a shot of vodka improved people's foreign language skills. "A small sip seemed to boost confidence without making the words fall apart," said Dr Fritz Renner, a psychologist at the University of Freiburg.
- 8 But the improvement wasn't huge. "It's not like people were transformed into perfect Dutch speakers after a single drink," added Prof Matt Field, a psychologist at the University of Sheffield who worked on the study.
- 9 If communication with foreigners improved with alcohol, flying did not. The aviation prize went to researchers who studied Egyptian fruit bats they had **plied with** ethanol. The bats became slow and their echolocation **faltered**, much as speech becomes **slurred** in the **inebriated**. Bats that binged on fermented fruit may be "at higher risk of **colliding** with obstacles", the team concluded.
- 10 Food featured heavily in the 2025 awards. An exploration into the impact of diet on breast milk flavour won the paediatric prize for showing that babies fed for longer after their mothers ate garlic. A largely Italian team won the physics prize for **elucidating** a phase transition in pasta dish cacio e pepe that leads to unpleasant **clumping**. Another group discovered that, even when given a choice, rainbow lizards in Togo had an extreme preference for "four cheeses" pizzas, earning them the nutrition prize.
- 11 Elsewhere, Indian researchers landed the engineering prize for building a shoe rack that neutralised the odour of smelly trainers. The rack, more of a cardboard box, contained a UV lamp that killed the offending bacteria in minutes. It also burnt the trainers. The psychology prize went to work that found people who were told they had above average intelligence believed it and were prone to **bragging**.
- 12 Dr Tomoki Kojima at the National Agriculture and Food Research Organization in Japan won the biology prize. His team showed that cows suffered fewer fly bites when painted with black stripes. "I couldn't believe it," he said. "I thought I was dreaming."
- 13 The literature prize went **posthumously** to the late Dr William Bean of the University of Iowa. In a succession of papers, he documented the growth rate of his fingernails and toenails over 35 years. His son Bennett said the whole family was drawn into the effort.

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- 14 “He was interested in the world and we were part of it,” his son Bennett told the Guardian. “He would have loved this and used it as an event to write some perfect acceptance speech. He would say: ‘Finally, recognition!’”

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and answer the questions.

1. What distinguishes the Ig Nobel prizes from the regular Nobel prizes?

2. According to the research, how much of our food by volume could potentially be made up of PTFE?

3. What inspired the researchers to develop the idea of adding Teflon to food products?

4. Why did the researchers conclude that a small amount of vodka improved foreign language skills?

5. What parallel does the article draw between drunk bats and drunk humans?

6. What was the unexpected consequence of using UV lamps to eliminate odour from trainers?

7. Why did researchers paint cows with black stripes, and what was Dr. Kojima's reaction to the results?

8. How long did Dr William Bean document the growth of his nails, and who helped him with his research?

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4 Key language

a. Find these phrases in the article. Then match them to the correct definitions.

- | | |
|---------------------|---|
| 1. battled to | a. distributed something (often food or money) in a measured way |
| 2. improved with | b. tried hard to achieve or resist something, often with significant difficulty |
| 3. confused with | c. excessively consumed something (often food or television programmes) within a short period of time |
| 4. doled out | d. became better because of an addition or use of something |
| 5. transformed into | e. changed in form or character into something else |
| 6. binged on | f. mistakenly regarded as the same as something else |

b. Complete the sentences with the correct form of the phrases from the previous activity.

1. These two legal concepts are often _____ each other, though in practice, they have very different implications.
2. His quality of life _____ the help of his mental health support group.
3. At the weekend, we _____ two series of the TV show Married at First Sight.
4. Some months after the devastating floods, the government _____ emergency funds, but were sharply criticised for not acting sooner.
5. Many deserted mill buildings in Manchester have been _____ luxury apartments.
6. Vets _____ save the horse after it broke its leg in a riding accident.

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Which of the prize-winning entries mentioned in the article do you think is the most thought-provoking and why?
- Do you think awards like the Ig Nobel award should serve a more serious purpose? Why or why not?

6 In your own words

a. Work in pairs to research other awards that celebrate unusual or quirky things (e.g. the Golden Raspberry awards for the worst films, or the Pluto award for the most boring or pointless tourist attractions). Gather information on the following things:

- when and why the award was created
- who organises it
- how the winners are chosen
- one or two memorable winners and what they won the award for

b. Prepare a presentation and present it to your classmates. Then decide as a class which award you like best.