



American Expression E2618 On cue

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“On cue” is an idiomatic expression used to describe something that happens at exactly the right moment, often as if it were carefully timed or planned. When an event occurs on cue, it appears to follow a signal or prompt, even if the timing is coincidental. The phrase suggests precision and coordination, giving the impression that events unfold according to a script.

The origin of the expression comes from the world of theater. In stage performances, actors rely on cues—signals that tell them when to speak, move, or act. A cue might be a specific line spoken by another actor, a sound effect, or a lighting change. When an actor delivers a line on cue, it means they respond at precisely the right moment. This theatrical background shapes the modern figurative meaning of the phrase.

In everyday conversation, “on cue” is often used humorously or dramatically. For example, if someone mentions the possibility of rain and thunder suddenly rumbles in the distance, a person might say, “And right on cue, the storm begins.” The phrase highlights how perfectly timed the event seems, even though it was not truly orchestrated. It adds a sense of narrative flair to ordinary experiences.

The expression can also describe predictable patterns of behavior. If a child begins to complain immediately after being told to clean their room, a parent might say the reaction came on cue. In such cases, the phrase emphasizes expectation. The response feels almost scripted because it follows a familiar pattern.

In professional settings, “on cue” can refer to smooth coordination and teamwork. During presentations, performances, or live broadcasts, participants must respond accurately to cues to maintain flow and professionalism. When everything happens on cue, the result feels seamless and polished. The phrase thus conveys reliability and timing.

At times, the expression carries a subtle tone of irony. When something inconvenient or dramatic happens at the most predictable moment, describing it as occurring on cue may express mild amusement or resignation. It acknowledges the strange way life sometimes imitates art, with events unfolding as though part of a rehearsed scene.

In conclusion on cue describes events that occur at precisely the expected or dramatically appropriate moment, whether by planning or coincidence. Rooted in theatrical practice, the phrase has come to symbolize timing, coordination, and predictability in everyday life. It reminds us that while not everything is scripted, certain moments can feel so perfectly timed that they seem guided by an unseen signal.

Questions for Discussion

1. How does the theatrical origin of “on cue” influence its meaning in everyday conversation?
2. Why do people often use “on cue” to describe coincidences or predictable reactions?
3. In what situations is responding accurately on cue especially important?
4. Can describing something as happening on cue carry irony or humor? How?
5. How does timing affect the impact of events that occur on cue in real life?