

Prompt

To be prompt is to be ready and quick to act. If you ask a prompt person to check how your investments are doing, he or she will either inform you immediately or arrange to get back to you, and do so asap. He will be doing so as good business practice. If you ask your friend to take you to the mechanic's shop, so you can pick up your car, he will do so as promptly as he can. Even a prompt person can only be as prompt as circumstances allow. If your friend is down with the flu, he may or may not be able to help you. Or he may ask you to wait until he is better. Will we still call your friend prompt, if for unforeseen reasons he cannot respond quickly to your request?

Examples

1 Promptness and fussiness

I hate to keep people waiting—for a ride, for an expected report or job assignment, or for the payment of a bill. Sometimes, therefore, I act too hastily, in my desire to be prompt. I cut corners in the work I am handing in or the service I am providing. The result is that I need to counteract this over prompt attitude. When I am preparing an essay for a book I have to over-assure myself that my work has been well done. I print it out as often as needed, so I can see my corrections. I ask a friend to look at the material. I am still, usually, prompt in providing what is expected, for in fact it gives me pleasure to be prompt. (It makes me feel useful, creative, and 'on top of things.') Balancing promptitude with persnickety care seems to be my ideal working formula.

2 Witty conversation

I like prompt responses in conversation. Mild middle class prof though I am, I have always treasured talk with an edge. I coined the word 'femalestrom' (a play on 'maelstrom') to delight, when I was a graduate student. I love quickies like Wilde's 'I don't want to go to heaven; none of my friends are there.' As a teen ager I heard my Father, with a group of French Department colleagues, capping alexandrines in my living room; and to this day thrill to the brilliance of that totally unexpected festival of wit. What is the delight here? The brilliance of promptitude is never sharper than in repartee, though of course the dangers of promptitude are as apparent in conversational thought as in writing. Take the Wilde quote. Irresistible, no? You can repeat it, you cannot not repeat it. But has it any meaning in itself, or only in what it 'tells us' about Wilde?