

Ask about English

Perhaps, possibly and maybe



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Hello, my name is Ketsarin; I'm from Thailand... And I would like to know the difference of the words 'maybe', 'perhaps', and 'possibly'... and when to use those words in each situation. Thank you.

Ok, well thanks very much Ketsarin. Well, all of those words mean more or less the same thing, as I'm sure you know. They all show that something is possible, or might be true. However, the real difference in meaning between them is when we use them and in what context. One is informal, another is neutral and another one is formal.

So 'maybe', we can say, is a rather informal word. For example, 'Maybe we'll skip school today.' Or: 'Are you going to Anna's party?' 'Hmmm... maybe.'

Getting to the word 'perhaps'... 'Perhaps' is, we could say, more neutral and polite. It's just a neutral way of expressing possibility. For example: 'There were 200, perhaps 250, people at the theatre'. Or: 'Perhaps we should start again.'

Now moving on to 'possibly'... 'Possibly' sounds, I think we could say, a bit more formal than either maybe or perhaps, and especially in agreement or disagreement. For example, in answer to the question 'Do you think he will apply for the job?' the answer: 'Hmm. Possibly, possibly not.' Or: 'He may possibly decide to apply for the job.'

So, I think that we could sum it up that largely - not every time, but largely - there's a difference in register: 'maybe' is quite informal, 'perhaps' is neutral, and 'possibly' would be a little bit formal. Does that answer your question?

: Yes, I think so.

Ok! Well, thank you very much.

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