

Now, the VOA Special English program Words and Their Stories.

Our expression today is “getting down to brass tacks.” It means to get serious about something, to get to the bottom of the situation. For example, a man may say, “I want to work for you. But how much will you pay me?” He is getting down to brass tacks. Or a woman may ask, “You say you love me. Will you marry me?” She, too, is getting down to brass tacks.

How did this expression get started?

There are several ideas.

At one time most women made their own clothes, buying the cloth in small stores. The material was kept in large rolls. And the storekeeper cut off as much as a woman wanted. Brass tacks along his work table helped him measure the exact amount.

Sometimes a busy storekeeper might try to guess how much material to cut off. But this would not be correct. He could get an exact measure only by laying the material down along the brass tacks.

One word expert, however, has another theory. He believes the expression came from seamen who cleaned the bottoms of boats. Strong heavy devices called bolts held the ship's bottom together. These bolts were made of copper. The seaman had to clean the ship down to the copper bolts. American speech soon changed the words copper bolts into brass tacks.

Another idea is that the expression began when furniture was made by hand. Brass tacks were used around the bottom part of the chair. The brass tacks showed that the chair was built to be strong. When something went wrong with the chair, someone quickly examined the bottom to discover the trouble. In other words, someone got down to the brass tacks.

No one is sure where the expression first was used, but everyone is sure what it means today.

It is used by people who dislike empty words. They seek quick, direct answers. They want to get to the bottom of a situation. There are others, however, who have no such desire. They feel there is some risk in trying to get down to brass tacks.

This happened in the case of a critic who made the mistake of reading a play written by a close friend. The critic disliked the play a lot. He felt his friend should not be writing plays. But he said nothing. This silence troubled the writer. He demanded that his friend the critic say something about the play. The writer finally heard the critic's opinion. And this "getting down to brass tacks" ended a long friendship.

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