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Judges Hammer Thing Called

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What Is That Judges Hammer Thing Called? A Deep Dive into the Gavel

If you have ever watched a courtroom drama, caught a glimpse of a legislative session, or seen an auctioneer bring down a sale, you have likely encountered a small, often wooden hammer. This object is instantly recognizable as a symbol of authority, finality, and decisive action. But many people find themselves asking the simple question: **what is the judges hammer thing called?**

The answer is the **gavel**. While the term "judges hammer thing called" might seem informal, it perfectly captures the curiosity many have about this iconic tool. The gavel is far more than just a hammer; it is a deeply symbolic instrument used to call a court to order, signal a verdict, or enforce discipline. In this comprehensive article, we will explore everything you need to know about the gavel—its history, its design, its role in the judiciary, and its broader cultural significance.

The Official Name and Its Origins

The object in question is officially called a **gavel**. This word likely derives from the Old English term *gafol* or *gavel*, meaning a tribute or rent. Over time, the meaning evolved to refer to a mallet used by a presiding officer to signal a decision or call for attention. The term "judges hammer thing called" is a natural way for people unfamiliar with legal jargon to describe the item, but in professional settings, the proper terminology is always "gavel."

Interestingly, the origin of the gavel in common law courts is somewhat obscure. Some historians believe it was adopted from Masonic lodges, where a gavel was used by the Worshipful Master to open and close meetings. Freemasons have long used a gavel as a symbol of discipline and order, and the practice may have influenced early American courtrooms. Regardless of its exact beginnings, the gavel has become an inseparable part of judicial and parliamentary tradition.

What Does a Gavel Look Like?

A standard gavel consists of two main parts: the handle and the head. The head is typically cylindrical or octagonal, and it is used to strike a **sound block**(also called a striking plate) to produce a sharp, authoritative sound. The material of the gavel can vary, but the most common choices include:

- Hardwood – oak, mahogany, walnut, or maple are traditional choices due to their durability and resonant sound.
- Metal – some modern gavels are made from brass or stainless steel, offering a distinct, high-pitched tone.
- Plastic or resin – budget-friendly options, often used in toy court sets or novelty items.

The size of a judicial gavel is usually around 10 to 12 inches in length, with a head about 2 to 3 inches in diameter. The sound block is a small, flat piece of wood that sits on the judge’s bench. The combination of the

gavel striking the block creates the signature "rap" that commands silence.

Why Do Judges Use a Gavel?

The primary function of the gavel is to establish and maintain order. In a courtroom, the judge is the ultimate authority, and the gavel serves as a physical manifestation of that authority. Here are the most common uses:

1. To call the court to order – The judge raps the gavel once or twice to signal the beginning of a session, and everyone stands.
2. To signal a decision – After reading a verdict or making a ruling, the judge may tap the gavel to indicate finality.
3. To silence an outburst – If a lawyer, defendant, or spectator becomes disruptive, a sharp rap from the gavel restores quiet.
4. To adjourn the court – A single rap can end a session for the day.

It is a common misconception that judges use the gavel to physically strike people. In reality, the gavel is never used as a weapon; it is strictly a ceremonial and functional tool. The phrase "judges hammer thing called" might imply a heavy, dangerous object, but the gavel is lightweight and designed for sound, not force.

The Symbolism of the Gavel in the Judicial System

The gavel is one of the most potent symbols of justice worldwide. Alongside the scales of justice and the sword, the gavel represents the power of the court to make binding decisions. When a judge brings down the gavel, it signifies that a matter is settled—whether it is the end of a trial, the acceptance of a plea, or the passing of a sentence.

In many cultures, the sound of the gavel is instantly associated with fairness, impartiality, and the rule of law. It is a reminder that the courtroom is a place where disputes are resolved by reason, not by violence. The gavel also embodies the concept of "order in the court," which is essential for the proper administration of justice.

Gavel Traditions Around the World

While the gavel is most famously associated with American and British common law systems, other countries use similar objects with different names. For example:

- In Canada and Australia, judges also use a gavel, though the tradition is less common in lower courts.
- In some civil law jurisdictions, judges use a wooden mallet or have no striking implement at all.
- In the United Kingdom, the gavel is more commonly used in Parliament (by the Speaker of the House of Commons) than in courtrooms, where judges often simply speak to command order.
- In Japan, judges do not typically use a gavel; instead, they rely on verbal commands.

This variation shows that while the gavel is a powerful symbol, it is not a universal requirement for a functioning judiciary. However, in the popular imagination—especially through film and television—the gavel remains an iconic piece of courtroom furniture.

The Gavel in Popular Culture

Hollywood has played a massive role in cementing the gavel as part of the public's understanding of courts. Dramatic scenes of a judge pounding the gavel and shouting "Order in the court!" are staples of movies and TV shows. These portrayals, while exaggerated, have created a strong association between the gavel and judicial authority. It is also why so many people ask, "What is that judges hammer thing called?"

Beyond entertainment, the gavel appears in children's toys, board games like Monopoly (the banker uses a miniature gavel), and even in political cartoons. The phrase "passing the gavel" is used metaphorically to

describe the transfer of leadership or authority. Auctions, too, rely on the gavel—the auctioneer brings it down to confirm a winning bid, a tradition that dates back centuries.

How to Choose a Gavel

If you are in a position of needing a gavel—perhaps for a mock trial, a student government, or a ceremonial role—there are several factors to consider. The ideal gavel should be well-balanced, produce a clear sound, and feel comfortable in the hand. Here is what to look for:

- Weight – Heavier gavels produce a louder sound but can be tiring to use repeatedly. A medium-weight hardwood gavel is often best.
- Grip – The handle should be smooth but not slippery. Some gavels have a carved handle for better control.
- Sound Block – A good sound block is essential. Many gavels come with a matching block, often made of the same wood. The block should be hard and dense to produce a sharp rap.
- Aesthetic – For official use, a classic wooden gavel with a lacquered finish is professional. Engraved gavels are popular as gifts for retiring judges or lawmakers.

It is also worth noting that some modern courtrooms are moving away from the gavel entirely. With microphones, electronic sound systems, and strict decorum, the physical rap is sometimes replaced by a simple verbal command. Nevertheless, the gavel retains its ceremonial importance.

Famous Gavels in History

Several gavels have achieved fame due to the historical significance of the proceedings in which they were used. For example:

- Chief Justice John Marshall – Often credited with establishing the authority of the U.S. Supreme Court, Marshall may have used a gavel to call the court to order during Marbury v. Madison.
- Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn – His gavel was used during some of the most contentious congressional debates of the mid-20th century.
- Judge Judy – While her television courtroom is not an actual court, her use of the gavel has become iconic, further shaping public perception.

Some gavels are even made from unusual materials—like wood from an old warship or oak from a historic building—adding layers of symbolism.

Conclusion

The phrase "judges hammer thing called" points directly to one of the most recognizable objects in the legal world: the gavel. Far from being a mere piece of wood, the gavel is a symbol of authority, order, and finality. Its origins may be mired in mystery, but its role in courtrooms, legislatures, and auctions is clear. Whether used to open a session, close a trial, or bring silence, the gavel commands respect.

Understanding what the judges hammer thing called—and appreciating its history and significance—gives us a deeper insight into the traditions that uphold the rule of law. The next time you watch a court scene and see the judge reach for that small wooden mallet, you will know exactly what it is: a gavel, and its single rap can change everything.

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