what's in a word?

language ˈlāng-gwij, -wit noun 
1 a: the words, the methods of combining them by a community b (1): meaningful sound as produced by the action of the vocal organs (2): a systematic means of communicating ideas or feelings by the use of words; their pronunciation, and the methods of combining them used and understood as produced by the action of the vocal organs
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Probably more than you think.

Take the word *word*, for instance. *Word* is more than 10 centuries old. It’s related to the Germanic word *wort*. It’s also related to *verbum* (Latin for “word”) and *eirein* (Greek for “to say or to speak”). Who would think there could be so much history in four little letters?

Every word has a story, and some words have more than one. All of them together make up our language. Put them together, and you can say just about anything you want.

Words are symbols that stand for things and ideas. Each word means something in particular; we combine them to express concepts ranging from simple to complex. Each word has a spoken and a written form, so that we can communicate either by talking or writing.

But everything about language isn’t simple and straightforward. A word often has several meanings. Sometimes several words mean the same thing. A single word can sometimes have different layers of meaning – it can express one idea openly and merely hint at another. Words can also be used to disguise a meaning when we don’t want to come right out and say it.

In this supplement, we’ll explore these aspects of words and have some fun with language. To do this, we’ll have to start at the beginning.
Every word has a root. A root is a base word, which may be changed by adding prefixes, suffixes, or other root words to it. Some roots, such as bio, geo, and ped, must be combined with other parts to form complete words. Others are complete words in themselves.

The word know, for example, can be modified or combined with other word parts to create many new words:

knew
knows
knowing
knowingly
known
knowable
knower
unknown
knowability
knowingness

unknowingly
unknowingness
knowledge
know-how
know-it-all
know-nothing
knowledgeable
knowledgeably
knowledgeability
knowledgeableness

Root comes from an Old English word, root. It’s related to the Old English wyrt (“root”), the Latin radix, and the Greek rhiza. Can you think of a common vegetable whose name is related to root?

1. Find a root word in a newspaper headline. Using this word as a base, see how many other words you can form.

2. Pick a comic strip from today’s newspaper and rewrite it using only the root words (no prefixes or suffixes allowed!). Read the new version out loud.

3. Pick one section of the newspaper and see how many words you can find that are based on the following root words*:

auto (self)
chron (time)
feder, fid, fide (faith, trust)
form (form, shape)
gram, graph (write, written)
log, logo, ology (word, study, speech)
mem (remember)
mori, mors, mort (mortal, death)
port (carry)
psych (mind, soul)
sens, sent (feel)
techni (skill)
tele (far)
uni (one)

*From Basic English Revisited by Sebranek and Meyer
A compound word is formed from two or more words or word parts. Words formed with prefixes and suffixes are sometimes called compound words, but the term most often refers to whole-word combinations such as downtown, sorehead, high school, or backseat.

**Affixes** are prefixes, suffixes, and other forms that can be attached to or inserted within a root word to change its form.

A prefix attaches to the beginning of a word or root to modify the word and give it a new meaning. Do and undo, and wrap and prewrap, show how a prefix can modify a word.

A suffix is attached to the end of a word and usually changes its grammatical form. For example, kind (an adjective) could become kindly (an adverb) or kindness (a noun), and peace (a noun) could become peaceful (an adjective) or peacefully (an adverb). (Note that peacefully actually has two suffixes.)

Some suffixes change a word from singular to plural (dish to dishes) or change the tense (laugh to laughed).

4 • Cut out 10 root words from your newspaper. (Hint: Look for common words such as make, work, love, do, etc.) Paste half the words in the “Prefix” column and the other half in the “Suffix” column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prefix</th>
<th>Suffix</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

Now see how many new words you can make using either prefixes or suffixes with each root word.

5 • Some affixes are inserted within a word. For example, the past tense of know is formed by changing the “o” to an “e”: knew. And mouse becomes plural when “o-u-s” is replaced with “i-c”: mice. Look for three examples of affixes within words in your newspaper. Write each example below and identify the root word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(root: )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(root: )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(root: )</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6 • Try to find examples in your newspaper of at least three different suffixes used to form plural words. Write the plural words on the lines below, circling the suffix in each example.

|        |        |        |

7 • Cut out a group of single words from newspaper advertisements. Combine them in various ways to invent compound words.

8 • See who can find the most compound words in today’s newspaper headlines. For an added challenge, set a time limit of 2-5 minutes.

9 • Pick any compound word from today’s newspaper and use your dictionary to look up the origins of the root words involved. Be prepared to share your findings with the class.
Most Old English words have disappeared, but not all. Of the 100 most commonly used words in our language, all are Old English. Of the 200 most common words, all but 17 are Old English. These words – the, and, of, for, love, think, man, wife (which originally meant “woman”), child, heart, house, eat, drink, live, work – are the core of our language. Most of them express simple, unrefined ideas.

Language is borrowed from the Old French word langue (“tongue,” “language”), in turn borrowed from the Latin lingua (“tongue”). What other words can you think of that might be related to language? Hint: Think “pasta.” Verify your guess by checking the dictionary.

English is related to a large group of other languages, including Spanish, French, Latin, and German. Thousands of years ago, Europeans living in one area shared a common language. They began to develop separate languages after they migrated to different areas.

English developed out of the German spoken by fifth-century Anglo-Saxons who settled in England. They called their language Englisc. Today, we call it Old English. It developed over time into modern English, borrowing words from many other languages (including those closely related to it) along the way.

For extra credit: Find a letter to the editor or an editorial that expresses a strong opinion on a topic. Choose a strongly worded sentence and look up the words’ earliest origins in the dictionary. How many words come from Old English?
If you’re having trouble telling the difference between homonyms, homophones, and homographs, remember this: The root *homo* comes from a Greek word *homos*, which means “same.” Homonym equals *homo* + *onyma* (“same name”), homophone equals *homo* + *phone* (“same sound”), and homograph equals *homo* + *graph* (“same writing”).

### Synonyms, Antonyms, Homonyms...

A synonym is a word that has the same or almost the same meaning as one or more other words. Our language has many synonyms, and one of the reasons is that English has more than one source.

For example, Old English had words like *craft, hide, and carve*. Norse people who settled in England around the end of the eighth century had their own words for the same things: *skill, skin, and cut*. Both versions of these words survived through the centuries and are part of our modern vocabulary.

**11** • Go to the sports section of your newspaper and see how many synonyms you can find for the word *win*. Do the same thing for the word *lose*. Make a list.

An antonym is a word that means the opposite of another word. Antonyms are handy when you want to express a contrast between things or ideas.

Some antonyms are formed simply by adding prefixes such as *un, in, or dis* to a word. *Aware* becomes *unaware*, *active* becomes *inactive*, and *like* becomes *dislike*.

Other antonyms come in forms unrelated to their opposites: *Difficult* is an antonym for *easy*, and *noise* is an antonym for *silence*.

**12** • For fun, replace all of the adjectives in a help-wanted ad with antonyms. Share the finished ad with your class.

A homonym is one of two or more words that are pronounced and spelled alike but differ in meaning. *Mine* (not yours) and *mine* (a place where minerals are found) are homonyms.

Homophones are words that are pronounced alike but differ in spelling and meaning. *Desert* (abandon) and *dessert* (a treat) are homophones.

A homograph, on the other hand, is one of two or more words that are spelled alike but differ in meaning and (usually) pronunciation. *Produce* (make) and *produce* (fruits and vegetables), and *conduct* (lead) and *conduct* (behavior), are examples of homographs.

**13** • Go on a homograph/homophone/homonym hunt! Pick one section of your newspaper and read the articles quickly, circling any homograph, homophone, or homonym you find.
Spelling is sometimes difficult in English. There are many more sounds in our language than letters in our alphabet, so it’s no wonder letters have more than one sound.

Our spelling woes stem partly from the fact that our language is so rich and varied. Latin, Greek, French, Italian, and other languages have all contributed to ours, and each has its own system of spelling.

In addition, words and pronunciations change over time, resulting in more than one sound for a particular spelling, and vice versa. However, studies have shown that most words in English follow consistent spelling patterns.
Learning to spell properly (especially the words that don’t follow patterns) takes effort. It can be easier if you have a system. The Horn Method, described below, is one system you can use.

When you see a new word, do this:
1. Look at the word.
2. Say the word to yourself.
3. Close your eyes and spell the word to yourself, visualizing each letter.
4. Check your spelling. If incorrect, repeat the first three steps.
5. Write the word.
6. Check your spelling. If incorrect, go back to Step 1. If correct, write the word two more times.

Identify five new words in today’s newspaper and use the steps at left to learn the spelling of each. Use each word in a sentence after you’ve finished all the steps. You can repeat this activity as often as you like throughout your newspaper study of words.
Meaning is what a word conveys or communicates; it’s what words are all about.

There are two kinds of meaning: what a word denotes (what it literally means) and what it connotes (what it implies or suggests). Words with similar denotative meanings may have very different connotations.

An example is the word slow. If we describe a person as slow, we are saying he doesn’t think or act in a hurry. That’s the literal meaning of slow. But aren’t we also suggesting something: that he is sluggish or dull? If we said he was deliberate, we’d be implying something different. Deliberate also describes someone who doesn’t think or act in a hurry, but it implies something admirable. A deliberate person is one who is careful, thorough, and steady.

Deliberate writers weigh their words carefully, choosing the ones that say exactly what they mean.

17 • Find a letter to the editor that’s either critical or complimentary of a person, situation, or thing. Circle all the descriptive words used. Can you think of synonyms that would change the connotations?

18 • News stories (as opposed to columns and feature articles) usually present facts in a straightforward manner. See if you can find an example of words that reflect an attitude or a bias in a news story. If you find an example, try to rephrase it using more neutral language.

19 • One place where connotations are freely used is advertisements. Find an ad that uses connotations to give its message an emotional impact. What emotions is the ad trying to convey? Why?
In reading, you sometimes come across words you haven’t seen before. Take the following sentence as an example:

The sequins on her dress scintillated under the ballroom’s glittering lights.

You may be able to guess at the meaning of “scintillated” from the context, the words that surround it. In this sentence, the dress has sequins, which are shining things. The setting is a ballroom with bright lights. What does a shiny thing do when exposed to lights? It gives off flashes of reflected light. So “scintillated” means “sparkled.”

Guessing meaning from clues in the context is a little bit like playing detective.

20 • Use the following sentences for practice before tackling the newspaper activity at the bottom of the page. Decide what you think each italicized word means, then write the meaning on the blank line.

His flowery praise was so effusive that she wondered how sincere it was.

_________________________________

Because of her finesse as a dancer, every move looked easy.

_________________________________

He was soon lost in the winding, labyrinthine hallways.

_________________________________

Only the best students can hope to matriculate at colleges with high standards.

_________________________________

They couldn’t understand why the noisy child was suddenly quiescent until they found she had fallen asleep.

_________________________________

Stand off, thou foul and deceitful rapscallion!

_________________________________
Using metaphors and similes, also called *figures of speech*, is one way writers add zest to their writing. A simile compares two things in a straightforward way:

“My love is like a red, red rose.”
Your hands are like ice.
His eyes were like two pools of fire.

In each case, you can see that the two things compared are really unlike each other; hands are nothing like ice, and a person doesn’t really look like a rose. The simile isn’t literally true.

Instead, it emphasizes a quality the two things share: the beauty that reminds the poet of a rose; the coldness that makes you think of ice; the flash that makes the eyes seem to burn. The comparison creates an image that helps you see the person, the hands, or the expression more clearly.

In a metaphor, two things are compared without the use of “like” or “as.”

That boy’s an imp.
Her family was a rock during her time of trouble.
The pile of work was a mountain on her desk.

Was the boy really an imp? No – he was just full of trouble or mischief. Did her family really turn to stone? No, they were just steady and unchanging. Again, it’s a shared quality that makes the comparison work.

More Figures of Speech

- **Apostrophe** – a literary device in which the writer talks to an absent person, place, or thing as if it were present.
  
  *Ah, my beloved doggie, you are far away.*

- **Hyperbole** – an extreme exaggeration or overstatement.
  
  *We ate enough doughnuts to sink a battleship.*

- **Metonymy** – the substitution of one word for another that’s closely associated with it.
  
  *Headquarters (the president or boss) hired 20 workers.*

- **Personification** – a literary device in which an animal, thing, or idea is given the characteristics of a human personality.
  
  *The silly car decided to quit in the middle of traffic.*

- **Synecdoche** – the use of part of something to represent the whole, or the whole to represent a part.
  
  *Her new shades (sunglasses) look nice.

  *He addressed the country (many individual citizens) in a televised speech.*

21 • Where do you think you’d be most likely to find figures of speech in the newspaper? Why? Test your theory by checking that part of the newspaper. Try to find at least one example each of a simile and a metaphor.

22 • Find a newspaper or magazine ad that uses a figure of speech. Is the ad’s use of language effective, in your opinion? Why or why not? Why do you think the advertiser used figurative language?

23 • Pick a short news story in today’s newspaper and rewrite it, using as many figures of speech as you can. How does your use of language change the tone of the story? Share your revised story with the class.

24 • For extra credit, see if you can find an example of each of these figures of speech in your newspaper. (If you can’t find one, make up an example of your own.)
Did you go to bed last night or did you hit the sack? Do you eat lunch or feed your face? English is full of these casual words and phrases that we call slang.

Where does slang come from? Some of it begins as clever descriptions that catch on. Some grows out of jargon – the special language of a particular group. Examples of jargon are computer talk (mega, info), surfer slang (for sure, awesome, outstanding), and inner-city slang (cool, rip-off, hang-up, hip, dude).

Some slang words are made up (yuppie). Others are old words that take on a new meaning (to split). Sometimes, slang words are formed by making short words out of long words – ad instead of advertisement.

Most slang words are used for only a few years before disappearing. Part of the nature of slang is that it’s always changing, always seeking more colorful ways of saying things.

Euphemisms
(from Greek eu “good” and phem “speech”) are a way of saying something indirectly. People use them when they don’t want to offend or upset someone else by being too direct. Our language is full of euphemisms. Passed away, for example, is a common euphemism for died. Rest room is a euphemism for toilet.

• For one week, look for examples of slang in your newspaper. Keep a list, noting where each example was found. Where is slang most often used? Where is it not used?
• Pick out a product you think people your age would be interested in buying. Design a newspaper ad for that product using language aimed at your age group.
• Sportswriters have developed a special jargon for writing and talking about sports. Look through the sports section of your newspaper and circle each example of jargon you find.
• The business world has its own brand of jargon. Can you think of places in the newspaper where you might find examples of business jargon? Turn to one of the sections you’ve identified and make a list of jargon expressions along with definitions.

• Look for newspaper or magazine ads that use euphemisms. Why do you think euphemisms were used in those particular ads? Discuss.
Puns, Malapropisms & Such

Puns are a way of having fun with sound-alike words or words that have more than one meaning.

Why did the dolphin eat all the fish in the bucket?  
He did it on porpoise.

Why did the shivering chef eat the contents of the pot?  
Because it was chili.

A malapropism is a word that’s misused because it sounds like another word. The results are usually humorous. Calling a polar bear a “polo bear” or a hospital bed a “hositable bed” are malapropisms.

Onomatopoeia means words that sound like the sound they’re naming. Buzz, hiss, clang, growl, and beep are all examples of onomatopoeia.

Onomatopoeia is derived from two Greek words, onomat (“name”) and poiein (“to make”). Does poiein remind you of any other word?

30 • Look for homophones (Remember, they’re words that sound the same as another word but have different meanings and spellings.) in your newspaper. Try to find at least five. Use these five to make riddle puns of your own. For example, ate and eight are homophones. Your pun might read, “What did the octopus do with his dinner? He eight it.”

31 • Look through your newspaper’s comic section for examples of onomatopoeia. Why would onomatopoeia came in handy for a cartoonist?

32 • Pretend you’re a reporter covering one of the following events: a rock concert, a pet show, a three-alarm fire, a parade, or a severe storm. Use as many examples of onomatopoeia as you can to describe the event in a short news story.
An anagram is a word that’s formed by rearranging the letters of another word.

What’s in a word? How about words within words — another kind of word puzzle.

Another category of language oddities is portmanteau words, also called blends. These are words formed by blending two words together. For example, the name portmanteau comes from author Lewis Carroll, who used it to refer to the blended words he made up in his own writing. At that time (the late 19th century), a portmanteau was a two-compartment suitcase.

A palindrome is a word (or a phrase or a sentence) that’s spelled the same backward or forward. Tot, civic, ere, kayak, level, noon, and gag are a few examples of palindromes.

What’s even wackier than an anagram? A palindrome, of course. Palindrome comes from two Greek words, palin and dramein, which mean “to run back again.”

What’s in a word? (There aren’t a large number of these, so search carefully.) For each example you find, write down the words used to form it.

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