

Vocabulary Energizers: Stories of Word Origins

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Chapter 1

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|----------------|--------------|
| 5. herculean | 1. cynical |
| 6. bowdlerize | 2. stoical |
| 3. pandemonium | 8. stigma |
| 4. pander | 9. impede |
| 5. quixotic | 10. expedite |

1. *herculean* (hur kyuh LEE un, hur CUE lee un) — tremendous in size, strength, difficulty, or effort

Hercules was the greatest and strongest of the heroes from Greek mythology. While still in his cradle, he crushed in his fists two serpents that were sent to kill him. Barehanded, the teenage Hercules slew a lion. Unfortunately Hercules was quick-tempered and, rebuked by his music teacher, slew the teacher as well. The epitome of male virility, Hercules fathered fifty-one sons of forty-nine women in a single night (two of the women bore twins). Hercules was continually plagued by tragedy. Cursed with momentary insanity by the goddess Hera, he killed his three sons by his first wife. He atoned for this act by accomplishing twelve super-human tasks known as "the Labors of Hercules." Hercules' life came to an end when a second and most devoted wife was tricked into giving him a poisonous robe as a present. This robe, spelling instant death for any normal mortal, caused Hercules to feel as if his body were aflame. Too powerful to be killed, he suffered prolonged, excruciating torture. Finally he asked to be burned on a funeral pyre. As the fire rose about him, the gods took pity and flew his soul to heaven.

Today a heavily muscled man such as a champion body builder is said to have a herculean build. Herculean tasks are those which seem almost impossible, such as establishing peace among nations and distributing the world's wealth more equitably so that no one goes hungry. These tasks can only be accomplished through herculean efforts.

Synonyms: mighty, powerful, massive, immense, colossal (kuh LOS ul)

Related words: titanic, mammoth

Contrasted words: frail, puny

2. *bowdlerize* (BOHD luh rize) — remove or change parts considered vulgar or immoral

Today's X-, R-, and probably even some PG-rated films might have caused Thomas Bowdler to have a stroke. For Bowdler, even Shakespeare was too naughty. In 1818 Bowdler prepared an edition of Shakespeare's plays in which "those expressions are omitted which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family" and are "unfit to be read by a gentleman in the company of ladies." The plays were drastically altered; many passages were changed, and some characters were totally removed. Bowdler's next act of literary butchery was to amputate from Edward Gibbon's *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* "all passages of an irreligious or immoral tendency." Like all censors, Bowdler evidently thought himself uncontaminated by what he felt would contaminate others. His name has become synonymous with prudish censorship. When we read a bowdlerized work, we risk being deprived not only of pleasure but also of literary quality and historical truth.

Synonyms: delete, censor, expurgate (EK spur gate)

Related word: purge

3. *pandemonium* (pan de MOH nee um) — utter confusion or wild uproar

The seventeenth-century English poet John Milton coined the word "pandemonium" in his epic poem *Paradise Lost*. This poem described the Fall of Adam and Eve and the casting of Satan and the other rebellious angels into Hell. Milton named the capital of Hell "Pandemonium," an apt description since *pan* means "all" and *daimon* means "demon" in Greek. "Pandemonium" is now used in a metaphorical sense for the condition when "all Hell breaks loose." Teachers experience pandemonium when they confront a wild and unruly class, a chaotic situation created by the noisy chatter of "little devils."

Synonyms: disorder, chaos, noisy confusion, tumult (TOO mult)

Related words: bedlam, turmoil, clamor

Contrasted words: tranquility, placidness, serenity

4. *pander* (PAN der) — play up to another's desires and weaknesses

Chaucer, famous for his fourteenth-century classic *The Canterbury Tales*, wrote the long poem *Troilus and Criseyde*, a story about the Trojan War. Troilus was a prince of Troy, Criseyde a young and beautiful widow. Troilus fell in love with Criseyde and asked Pandarus, Criseyde's uncle, to help him get acquainted with Criseyde. After arousing his niece's interest in Troilus, Pandarus arranged for the couple to make love in his home. Because of his morally questionable manipulation of these lovers, Pandarus has given us the word "pander," which as a noun means a "pimp." More commonly used as a verb, the word "pander" means "to cater to one's baser emotions," as when tricky land developers pander to our greed, pornographic movies pander to our lust, and ambitious politicians pander to the uneducated masses for their votes.

Synonyms: indulge, gratify, cater (KAY ter)

5. *quixotic* (kwik SOT ik) — idealistic but not practical

The Spanish novelist Cervantes, a contemporary of Shakespeare, created the world-famous novel *Don Quixote*. Don Quixote imagines himself to be a knight who must fight for right and defend the weak. Accompanied by his faithful companion and squire Sancho Panza, Don Quixote engages in wildly impractical feats, such as fighting a windmill he mistakes for evil giants and demonstrating his courage by challenging two enormous lions to a fight. This tall, gaunt, middle-aged, and ultimately lovable knight has become synonymous with the romantic and impractical. Hence, quixotic solutions are visionary and idealistic but unlikely to succeed. Critics of summit conferences think it quixotic that brief meetings of world leaders can bring about lasting peace.

Synonyms: romantic, visionary, fanciful, chimerical (kuh MER ih kul)

Related word: utopian

Contrasted words: mundane, pragmatic

6. *cynical* (SIN ih kul) — doubting the goodness and sincerity of human motives

The ancient Greek philosopher Antisthenes transmitted and elaborated upon the teaching of his master Socrates. Because his mother was not born in Athens, Antisthenes had to conduct his school outside the city of Athens in a gymnasium called *Cynosarges*, meaning "white dog." He taught that virtue was the greatest good and that pleasure, power, and wealth should be scorned. Diogenes, a famous pupil of Antisthenes, used a tub for shelter and sleep to show his contempt for material success. According to legend, when Alexander the Great met Diogenes sunning himself

and offered to grant any wish of the philosopher, Diogenes asked Alexander to step aside since he was blocking the sun. Diogenes was also said to go around with a lighted lamp in broad daylight. When questioned why he did so, he replied that he was looking for an honest man, thus implying that such a man was impossible to find. We can probably see how the followers of Antisthenes and Diogenes came to be regarded as insolent and contemptuous. Originally the school of thought of Antisthenes became associated with the name of his gymnasium, *Cynosarges* ("white dog"), but eventually those philosophers were associated with the name *cyn* ("dog") because of their dog-like forgoing of human comforts, uncivil curish behavior, and snarling contempt for others. Today a cynic is one who thinks self-interest motivates all action. A cynical person is skeptical and sarcastic. According to the Victorian playwright Oscar Wilde, a cynic is a "man who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing," perhaps a cynical remark about cynicism.

Synonyms: distrustful, sneering, derisive (dih RYE siv)

Related words: sarcastic, skeptical, sardonic, pessimistic

Contrasted words: credulous, ingenuous, gullible, naive, optimistic

7. *stoical* (STOH ih kul) — indifferent to pain and pleasure

A pupil of the Cynic philosophers, Zeno founded his own school in Athens about 300 years before the birth of Christ. Since he met his students at the *poikile stoa* ("painted porch"), a place famous for its painting of the Trojan War, his teachings became associated with the Greek work for "porch" (*stoa* or *stoikos*). Zeno believed that one should cultivate wisdom by not being concerned with gaining or losing material possessions and by calmly accepting both fortune and misfortune. A stoical person, therefore, shows great self-control, whether confronting pain, pleasure, joy, or grief. The following passage from the Hindu classic the *Bhagavad-Gita* describes a stoic:

One to me is loss or gain,
One to me is fame or shame,
One to me is pleasure, pain.

Shakespeare's Hamlet praises his stoical friend Horatio:

A man that Fortune's buffets and rewards
Hast ta'en [taken] with equal thanks; and blest are those
Whose blood [passion] and judgement are so well commeddled [mixed together]
That they are not a pip [musical instrument] for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee [i.e., Horatio].

Synonyms: self-controlled, imperturbable (im pur TUR buh bul)

Related words: tranquil, impassive, dispassionate, stolid

Contrasted word: volatile

8. *stigma* (STIG muh) — mark of disgrace

In ancient Greece captured runaway slaves were branded on the forehead with a *stigma* ("tattoo") to make escape in the future more difficult. When a criminal was stigmatized in seventeenth-century England, he was branded with a hot iron. Slaves in the United States were also branded, as we see Margaret Walker describe in her novel *Jubilee* the brutal searing of a young girl's face. Even after the Civil War, former slaves were stigmatized by much of white society, that is, "marked

with disgrace," the modern meaning of the word. Many employers stigmatize ex-convicts as untrustworthy by refusing to hire them. Benedict Arnold bears the stigma of being America's most famous traitor.

Synonyms: stain, taint (TAINT)

Related words: odium, onus

Contrasted words: accolade, tribute

9. *impede* (im PEED) — hinder, obstruct, slow down the process of

10. *expedite* (EK spuh dite) — speed up; hasten or help the accomplishment of

Slaves and convicts in ancient Rome were sometimes shackled with leg-irons. The Latin word *impedio*, coming from *im* ("in") and *pedis* ("foot"), meant "to chain the feet." Today when we are impeded from doing something, we are hindered in our action, though usually not by having our feet tied. A noisy roommate may impede one from studying for exams. Administrative red tape impedes registering for classes. To overcome impediments, we strive to expedite matters, *expedio* in Latin meaning "to release the feet." When the leg-irons were taken off the slaves, they were able to take the "foot" (*pedis*) "out" (*ex*) of its chain. If we know a college president, he may expedite our acceptance to his institution. Computers expedite problem-solving by releasing us from laborious calculations.

Synonyms for "impede": block, delay, retard, thwart (THWORT)

Related words for "impede": obstruct, hinder

Synonyms for "expedite": accelerate, quicken, facilitate (fuh SIL uh tate)

WORKING WITH WORDS

I. Fill in each blank with the appropriate word from the following list:

stoical	quixotic
impeded	cynically
stigma	pandemonium
bowdlerize	pandering
herculean	expedited

Each word must be used only once.

The greatest of all English dictionaries is the multivolume *Oxford English Dictionary*, *OED* for short. This work defines and dates the first written use of a word and then traces, through a wealth of quotations, how the word has been used over the years. The *OED* thus presents a historical portrait of our English words. The man chiefly responsible for the (1)_____ task of producing this enormous dictionary was the British scholar James A. H. Murray (1837-1915). Some people probably thought such a visionary task was impractical and (2)_____; others (3)_____ thought that no one would undertake such an immense project unless promised a fortune or international acclaim. Murray, however, was not interested in (4)_____ to the masses for a quick reward, but painstakingly labored to produce a work of the highest scholarship despite being (5)_____ by inadequate funding. He would not suffer the dictionary to bear the (6)_____ of failing to meet the most exacting standards. The production of this work was in part (7)_____ by Murray's large family, the children helping with the

tedious filing. The (8)_____ present in many large families was absent from Murray's orderly household. Basically self-disciplined, persevering, and (9)_____, Murray rarely complained about his herculean labor. He would have become enraged, however, at any attempt to alter or (10)_____ what he thought essential to the dictionary.

II. Match the word on the left with its synonyms

- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| ___ 1. cynical | a. taint, stain |
| ___ 2. bowdlerize | b. tumult, disorder |
| ___ 3. expedite | c. chimerical, fanciful |
| ___ 4. stigma | d. cater, indulge |
| ___ 5. pander | e. expurgate, delete |
| ___ 6. stoical | f. colossal, immense |
| ___ 7. quixotic | g. imperturbable, self-controlled |
| ___ 8. herculean | h. derisive, distrustful |
| ___ 9. impede | i. facilitate, accelerate |
| ___ 10. pandemonium | j. thwart, hinder |

III. Word Part: VOC — voice, call (vocation, vocal)

vociferous (voh SIF ur us) — noisy; loudly insistent

evocative (ih VOK uh tiv) — calling up, producing; suggestive

avocation (av uh KAY shun) — hobby

irrevocable (ih REV uh kuh bul) — unable to be called back or undone; unchangeable

equivocate (ih KWIV uh kate) — use words ambiguously or unclearly, usually in order to mislead; hedge

Using each of the five VOC words only once, complete the following sentences

1. My vocation is engineering, my _____ gardening.
2. The _____ crowd demanded its money back when the star performer failed to appear.

3. Don't _____; I want a clear answer immediately.

4. My decision is _____; nothing will make me change my mind.

5. The _____ sea breeze recalled our childhood in Rockaway Beach on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean.