



Words Change over Time

New words are added to the English language, and others go out of use or develop new or different meanings. Today, there are around 3,000 words regularly spoken, and of these, 89% of these words we use to write—only around 1,000 words. That may change with texting soon!

The word *capitalism* came into popular use around 1850, and the word *intellectual* became popular during the Dreyfus Affair in France. The word *vulgar* meant “common,” or “not part of the upper class”; today, *vulgar* means “off color” and not just “common.” When studying history, one should remember that the meanings of words change over time. The words *rabble*, *mob*, *discover*, *awful* and *natural* all had different meaning at the time of the American Revolution.

In the 17th century, the terms *rabble* and *mob* were applied to crowds that put pressure on the government and had purpose, not just create chaos. The term *rabble* appeared around the 15th century as a swarm of animals or an unruly crowd, and the term *mob* appeared around 1688 from the Latin *mobile vulgus* (fickle crowd). Today, *mob* is used as an irrational violent force without purpose other than destruction. Freedom of speech was referred to as political speech and not public speech, or in other words, what one said about politics and not in plain public conversation. The word *virtue* had a public and a private meaning to the early American leaders, when honor could lead to a duel.

Word	Word use in 1780s	Word use today
Discover	To disclose or reveal	To uncover or find
Nervous	Strong or vigorous	To worry or to be jittery
Awful	That which inspires to awe and reverence	Extremely bad
Natural	Discoverable by reason, as opposed to being revealed by God	Nature
Liberty	Private property	Freedom

Thomas Bowdler (1754–1825) set out to clean up William Shakespeare’s works by changing words that were offensive or objectionable at the time. It was a complete failure because the words Bowdler substituted themselves became offensive or objectionable over time. Today, it is known as *bowdlerizing*.

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