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**The  
Merriam-Webster  
Thesaurus**

# Preface

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THE MERRIAM-WEBSTER THESAURUS is based on Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus and is designed especially to meet the day-to-day needs of those who want a compact and handy thesaurus. In this book we have been able to eliminate much of the bulk and weight of the larger volume while retaining the basic features that distinguish Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus.

The basic premise behind both books is that the user of a thesaurus is seeking a more appropriate term than the one he has in mind. This very broad concept is scarcely consonant with the typical thesaurus presentation of "synonyms" and sometimes "antonyms". In point of fact, the user may be seeking a synonym, a word stronger or weaker in force, one of slightly different meaning, a more starchy or more folksy word, an idiomatic phrase that conveys the same idea, or a word that to a greater or lesser degree contrasts with his starting point. Patently, all these possible uses cannot be subsumed reasonably under the rather unitary notions of "synonym" and "antonym". Perhaps the longevity of Roget's *Thesaurus* rests on the simple fact that in spite of its complexity and lack of guidance, it does spread before the user a greater body of material to browse through than any comparable book heretofore available. The Merriam-Webster Thesaurus is designed to present a similar range of material but in a readily available and highly structured form that minimizes the consultant's need to grope and guess.

In earlier Merriam-Webster<sup>®</sup> publications the pattern of supplementing synonym lists with lists of related and contrasted words, words that were relevant to the group under study yet not quite synonyms or antonyms respectively, was extensively tested. This favorably received feature not only allowed more precise delineation of synonyms and antonyms but provided the user with much additional significant and pertinent assistance. The same plan of supplementing synonyms and antonyms with genuinely germane collateral material has been made a feature of this thesaurus.

Additional features of The Merriam-Webster Thesaurus designed to facilitate its use are the provision at each main entry of a concise statement of the segment of denotation in which a group of words can be construed as synonyms, a strictly alphabetical organization, and the entry at its own alphabetical place of each word that appears as a synonym at a main entry. The absence or inadequate handling of the first of these features is a major flaw in

most existent thesauruses. Though many justifications have been offered for avoiding the second, they all boil down to the implausible notion that the members of a group of words are synonymous but some are more synonymous than others! Perhaps unfairly, one can't help feeling that the only valid explanation for non-alphabetical listing of properly chosen synonyms appears in one specialized dictionary of synonyms whose author comments: "Apologies are in order, however, for my inability to maintain alphabetical order within the categories, the plea being of course lack of time." Finally, since no one can anticipate where the user's search may start, it seems only logical to enter each synonym in such a way that it can serve as a convenient starting point in his searching.

Though The Merriam-Webster Thesaurus is based on Webster's Collegiate Thesaurus, its ultimate authority lies in Webster's Third New International Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster research file of nearly 13,000,000 instances of words in actual use by a wide range of writers and speakers. In preparing The Merriam-Webster Thesaurus the chief organizational change was the replacement of the synonym list at each secondary entry with a cross-reference to the appropriate main entry. In addition a few specialized or abstruse entries were eliminated and a few synonyms not likely to be of general interest were dropped.

The Merriam-Webster Thesaurus was prepared by Kathleen M. Doherty, assistant editor, under the immediate supervision of E. Ward Gilman, senior editor.

# Explanatory Notes

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## How to Use The Merriam-Webster Thesaurus

Every thesaurus user should read these Explanatory Notes because a thorough understanding of the scope, content, and structure of the book is essential to its effective employment. The key lines at the bottom of the text pages direct the user to these Explanatory Notes.

Since the English lexicon contains an incalculable number of fixed combinations, senses, subsenses, and nuances of meaning (for example, Webster's Third New International Dictionary records some 251 distinguishable meanings for the verb *set* and its fixed combinations), *it is essential that the thesaurus be used in conjunction with an adequate dictionary.*

## Scope of The Merriam-Webster Thesaurus

This book is concerned with the general vocabulary of the English language. Since the user may actually be hindered rather than helped by a vocabulary diluted with obsolete, archaic, or extremely rare terms or with specialized or technical jargon, such words have been omitted.

## Structure and Content

**Entry Order** The body of the book consists of main and secondary entries introduced by alphabetically ordered boldface headwords, as

**raid** *vb* 1 to make a raid on <Indians *raided* the settlers frequently>

*syn* foray, harass, harry, maraud

*rel* despoil, devastate, ravage, sack, spoliage, waste; loot, plunder, rifle, rob

2 *syn* see INVADE 1

**raider** *n* *syn* see MARAUDER

**rail** *n* *syn* see RAILING

where *raid*, *raider*, and *rail* are the headwords introducing either a main entry (as *raid vb* 1), or a secondary entry (as *raid vb* 2, *raider n*, or *rail n*).

Homograph headwords are entered in historical order: the one first used in English is entered first, as

*till prep*  
*till conj*  
*till vb*

Verbs used predominantly with one or two prepositions or adverbs may be headwords introducing main or secondary entries; in this case, they are entered with the verb segment in boldface type followed by the parenthetical element or elements in lightface type. Such verb + particle combinations immediately follow their base verb in alphabetical order:

<b>put</b> <i>vb</i>	_____	base-verb homograph
<b>put</b> ( <i>back</i> ) <i>vb</i>		verb + particle combinations
<b>put</b> ( <i>on</i> ) <i>vb</i>		
<b>put</b> ( <i>on or upon</i> ) <i>vb</i>		
<b>put</b> <i>n</i>	_____	noun homograph

Fixed verb + adverb collocations commonly entered in dictionaries as two-word verbs have boldface entry at their appropriate alphabetical positions in this book. However, they follow any verb + particle combinations occurring in the same alphabetical sequence:

<b>take</b> <i>vb</i>	_____	base verb
<b>take</b> ( <i>from</i> ) <i>vb</i>		verb + particle combinations
<b>take</b> ( <i>to</i> ) <i>vb</i>		
<b>take</b> <i>away</i> <i>vb</i>		two-word verb collocations
<b>take</b> <i>back</i> <i>vb</i>		
<b>take</b> <i>down</i> <i>vb</i>		
<b>take</b> <i>in</i> <i>vb</i>		
<b>take</b> <i>off</i> <i>vb</i>		

Headwords ordinarily conform to normal dictionary practices: for instance, they are styled as singular nouns or infinitive verbs. Special situations (as plural usage or variant spellings) are signaled by the use of boldface subheads, as

**crossroad** *n*, usu **crossroads** *pl* but *sing or pl* in  
*constr syn* see JUNCTURE 2

**woe** *n* . . . 3 usu **woes** *pl* *syn* see DISASTER

**catcorner** (or **catty-corner** or **kitty-corner**) *adv*  
*syn* see DIAGONALLY

where **crossroads** and **woes** are subheads indicating plural usage, and **catty-corner** and **kitty-corner** are subheads showing variant spellings of the headwords.

**The Main Entry and Its Basic Elements** Each main entry consists of a headword followed by a part-of-speech label, a sense number when needed, a meaning core with a brief verbal illustration, and a list of synonyms. Lists of related words, idiomatic equivalents, contrasted words, and antonyms follow the synonym list if they are called for.



A typical main entry is

**calm** *adj* **1** free from storm or rough activity <the wind died and the sea became *calm*>  
*syn* halcyon, hushed, placid, quiet, still, stilly, untroubled  
*rel* inactive, quiescent, reposing, resting; pacific, smooth, tranquil, unruffled  
*idiom* calm as a millpond, still as death  
*con* agitated, disturbed, perturbed, restless, turbulent, uneasy  
*ant* stormy

where the italic part-of-speech label *adj* indicates that the headword is an adjective. Other such labels used in the book are: *adv* (adverb), *conj* (conjunction), *interj* (interjection), *n* (noun), *prep* (preposition), *pron* (pronoun), and *vb* (verb).

Individual senses of multisense entries (as **calm** *adj*) are introduced by a boldface sense number (as **1**).

The meaning core, as at **calm 1**

free from storm or rough activity

indicates the area of meaning in which a group of words (in this case *calm*, *halcyon*, *hushed*, *placid*, *quiet*, *still*, *stilly*, and *untroubled*) are considered to be synonymous.

In other words, the meaning core pinpoints the exact relationship between the main-entry headword and its synonyms.

A meaning core may be supplemented by a usage note introduced by a lightface dash when additional information or comments on syntax or usage are required:

**yet** *adv* **1** beyond this — used as an intensive to stress the comparative degree

Some interjections express feelings but otherwise are untranslatable into substitutable meaning; in such cases, the meaning core itself may be replaced by a usage note:

**good-bye** *interj* — used as a conventional expression of good wishes at parting

Each meaning core is followed by a verbal illustration enclosed by angle brackets, as

<the wind died and the sea became *calm*>

that exemplifies a typical use of the headword (here, **calm**) in its pertinent sense (**1**). The verbal illustration also offers the thesaurus user a frame for testing the suitability of the synonyms and/or related words with regard to his particular needs. Two verbal illustrations may appear after a meaning core that is broad enough to subsume alternatives (as both a literal and an extended use):

**see** *vb* 1 to take cognizance of by physical  
or mental vision <*saw* that the boat was being  
driven ashore> <the only one who *saw* the truth>

Such double illustrations have been chosen with discretion and are used sparingly in this book.

The boldface italic abbreviation *syn* introduces a synonym list that appears at each main entry on a line below the meaning core and the verbal illustration. This list may consist of only one synonym (as *here* at *hitherto adv* 2) or of many (as *halcyon, hushed, placid, quiet, still, stilly,* and *untroubled* at *calm adj* 1). Each synonym in a main-entry list has a boldface entry at its own alphabetical place.

A compare cross-reference may appear at the end of a main-entry *syn* list. This cross-reference introduced by the italic word *compare* is used (1) when two or more groups of synonyms are very closely related and it is felt that the user examining one list should be aware of the existence of the other list or lists:

**assassin** *n* a person hired or hireable to  
commit murder <found out who paid the *assassin*>  
*syn* bravo, cutthroat, gun, gunman, ||gungel, gunslinger,  
hatchet man, hit man, torpedo, triggerman; *compare* MURDERER

**murderer** *n* one who kills a human being  
<a *murderer* who wouldn't hesitate to kill in cold blood>  
*syn* homicide, killer, manslayer, slayer; *compare* ASSASSIN

and (2) when the user should be warned that certain words have evolved derivative senses that tend to blur precise sense boundaries and consequently cause an overlapping of senses or of meaning, thus making those words somewhat less desirable choices for the user in terms of preciseness than other words in their lists. A comparison of the main entries

**ration** *n* an amount allotted or made available  
especially from a limited supply <saved up their gasoline  
*ration* for a vacation trip>  
*syn* allotment, allowance, apportionment, measure,  
meed, part, portion, quantum, quota, share; *compare* SHARE 1

**share** *n* 1 something belonging to, assumed by, or falling to  
one (as in division or apportionment) <wanted his *share* of  
the prize money>  
*syn* allotment, allowance, bite, cut, lot,  
part, partage, portion, quota, slice; *compare* RATION

reveals the usage overlap of the synonyms *allotment, allowance, part, portion, quota,* and *share,* which are indeed valid synonyms at both entries.

**The Secondary Entry and Its Basic Elements** A secondary entry consists of a boldface headword followed by a part-of-speech label, a boldface sense number when needed, and a *syn* see cross-reference in small capitals directing the user to the appropriate main entry in whose *syn* list the secondary entry appears (followed when needed by a lightface sense number of the main entry). Lists of related words, idiomatic equivalents, contrasted words, or antonyms that are specifically applicable to the secondary-entry headword in the relationship indicated by the *syn* see cross-reference may be included as well.

A typical secondary entry is

**placid** *adj* 1 *syn see* CALM 1

*rel* irenic, peaceful, serene, unagitated, unstimulating

*ant* roiled

where **placid** is the headword, *adj* is the part-of-speech label, 1 is the sense number of the secondary entry, and *syn see* CALM 1 is the *syn* cross-reference directing the user to the main entry **calm** 1 where **placid** is a synonym.

**Main and Secondary Entries: Elements Common to Both** All, some, or none of the following lists may appear at both main and secondary entries in this order: related words, idiomatic equivalents, contrasted words, and antonyms.

The boldface abbreviation *rel* introduces a list of related words. The related words — words that are almost but not quite synonymous with the headword — are included at an entry next after the synonym list. For example, at the main entry

**splendid** *adj* . . .

2 extraordinarily or transcendently impressive . . .

*syn* glorious, gorgeous, magnificent, proud, resplendent, splendid, splendorous, sublime, superb

*rel* eminent, illustrious; grand, impressive, lavish,

luxurious, royal, sumptuous; divine, exquisite,

lovely; incomparable, matchless, peerless,

superlative, supreme, unparalleled, unsurpassed;

surpassing, transcendent

the *rel* list is composed of twenty terms separated into five subgroups that each share a common likeness or relation with the headword and its synonyms. On the other hand, at the secondary entry

**splendiferous** *adj* *syn see* SPLENDID 2

*rel* dazzling, marvelous; smashing, walloping;

rattling, ripping, screaming, terrific

three subgroups of eight terms were selected as being distinctively related to **splendiferous** rather than to the whole synonym group in the context indicated by the *syn see* cross-reference to **splendid** 2. Related words appearing at a main entry are not ordinarily repeated at the secondary entries. The user should therefore check the main entry when seeking the most complete groupings of related words. Related words as such are not entered in boldface at their own alphabetical places. They may, of course, be synonyms in other lists or head their own main entries.

The boldface italic abbreviation *idiom* introduces a list of idiomatic equivalents that are essentially the same in meaning as the members of a synonym group. An *idiom* list at a main entry includes phrases that are generally pertinent to the entire *syn* list and the headword, as the ones at

**speak** *vb* 1 to articulate words in order to express thoughts . . .

*syn* talk, utter, verbalize, vocalize, voice

*rel* . . .

*idiom* break silence, give voice (or tongue or utterance) to,

let fall, make public (*or* known), open  
 one's mouth (*or* lips), put in (*or* into) words, say one's say,  
 speak one's piece

while a secondary-entry list, as the one at

**retaliate** *vb* *syn* see RECIPROCATE

*rel* . . .

*idiom* even the score, get back at, get  
 even with, give in kind, give one a  
 dose of his own medicine, give one tit for  
 tat, pay one in his own coin, settle (*or*  
 square) accounts, turn the tables on

features idioms that are particularly appropriate equivalents of its headword in the context indicated by the *syn* see cross-reference. Idiomatic equivalents, including those fixed verb + preposition combinations that function as idioms rather than as literal meanings of the verb, are not entered in boldface at their own alphabetical places in this book.

The boldface italic abbreviation *con* introduces a list of contrasted words — words that are strongly contrastable but not quite antonymous with the headword — that may appear at an entry:

**watchful** *adj* paying close attention usually  
 with a view to anticipating approaching  
 danger or opportunity . . .

*syn* . . .

*rel* . . .

*idiom* . . .

*con* careless, heedless, thoughtless;  
 inadvertent; absentminded, abstracted,  
 faraway

**alert** *adj* 1 *syn* see WATCHFUL

*rel* . . .

*idiom* . . .

*con* inattentive, unmindful; aloof,  
 detached, indifferent, unconcerned

At the main entry **watchful** *adj* the *con* list is composed of seven words separated into three subgroups that each share at least one aspect of contrast to the headword and its *syn* list, while the *con* list at the secondary entry **alert** 1 comprises six words separated into two such subgroups. Contrasted words appearing at a main entry are not ordinarily repeated at the secondary entries. The thesaurus user should therefore check the main entry when seeking the most complete groupings of contrasted words. Contrasted words as such are not entered in boldface at their own alphabetical places. They may, of course, be synonyms in other lists or head their own main entries.

The boldface italic abbreviation *ant* introduces the last possible element of a main or secondary entry: an antonym or list of antonyms, as at the entry

**perfect** *adj* . . . 2 . . .

*ant* imperfect

or at the entry

*quiet adj.* . . . 4 not showy or obtrusive . . .  
*ant* gaudy, loud

When antonyms are drawn from different classes of opposites, members of the two groups are separated by a semicolon, as at the entry

<p><i>assistance n syn</i> see <b>HELP 1</b>  <i>rel.</i> . . .  <i>con.</i> . . .  <i>ant</i> impediment, impeding;  obstructing, obstruction</p>	<p>  antonyms that are opposites    with intermediates    antonyms that are reverse    opposites</p>
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Like related and contrasted words, antonyms as such are not entered in bold-face at their own alphabetical places. They may, of course, be synonyms in other lists or head their own main entries.

**Main and Secondary Entries: The One Arbitrary Rule** Ideally, a book such as this should be free of all arbitrary restraints and curtailments. In practice, however, its editors found that one rule was essential: *No word may appear in more than one list at a main or secondary entry.* For example, *nice* is a synonym at *pleasant adj* 1. The applicable sense of *nice* is found in Webster's Third New International Dictionary at the entry <sup>1</sup>*nice* . . . *adj.* . . . 7 (binding substitute) + 7b, where the definitions are

: pleasant and satisfying: as . . . b : ENJOYABLE . . .  
PLEASING, DELIGHTFUL <a *nice* time at  
the party> <*nice* and warm by the fire> <we have  
four *nice* bedrooms upstairs to make them  
comfortable —Willa Cather>

However, one might reasonably construe senses 7e (: MILD, CLEMENT, PLEASING <the *nice* weather of late spring> <the *nice* old days of the past>) and 7g (: FITTING, APPROPRIATE, SUITABLE <the *nice* clothes she wears> <not a *nice* word for use in church>) as a basis for entering *nice* as a related word as well as a synonym at *pleasant* 1, while sense 8 in Webster's Third New International Dictionary

: most inappropriate : UNPLEASANT, UNATTRACTIVE . . .  
TREACHEROUS — used ironically <a chronic  
alcoholic is certainly a *nice* one to talk about  
temperance> <a *nice* friend, who would have  
me . . . cover myself with eternal infamy —J.A.  
Froude> <got himself in a *nice* fix>

could be construed as evidence for entering *nice* as both a contrasted word and an antonym at *pleasant* 1. Obviously, the thesaurus user would not be helped by an entry showing any word in such an involved relationship with itself.

## Labels, Punctuation, and Symbols

**Labels** Words that are labeled *cap* or *usu* [ally] *cap* in Webster's Third New International Dictionary are capitalized in this book. Thus, the synonyms *Gehenna*, *Pandemonium*, *Sheol*, and *Tophet* are so styled at the main entry *hell n* as are the related words *Styx* and *Tartarus*. A term that is capitalized

in a main-entry *syn* list is also capitalized when it appears as a boldface secondary entry at its own alphabetical position:

**Gehenna** *n syn* see HELL

If only one entered sense of a word is capitalized, an italic *cap* label followed by a boldface capitalized subhead is attached to the affected sense:

**pandemonium** *n 1 cap Pandemonium syn* see HELL  
 2 *syn* see SINK 1  
 3 *syn* see DIN

In addition to the part-of-speech label, an italic plural label may be added when a word or a sense of a word is sometimes, often, usually, or always used in the plural. Typical examples of these labels are found at

**years** *n pl syn* see OLD AGE

where *pl* indicates that the headword **years** is always plural in form and construction in this particular application, and at

**road** *n 1 often roads pl syn* see HARBOR 3  
 2 *syn* see WAY 1  
 3 *syn* see WAY 2

where sense 1 (and only that sense) of the headword **road** is often but not always used in the plural, and at

**minutia** *n, usu minutiae pl 1 syn* see  
 INS AND OUTS  
 2 *syn* see TRIVIA

where the label preceding both senses indicates that the headword **minutia** is usually used in the plural in both of these applications, and at the main entry

**trivia** *n pl but sometimes sing in constr*

where the label is qualified to show that this plural noun may sometimes be used with a singular verb, and at

**common** *n 1 commons pl but sing or pl in  
 constr syn* see COMMONALTY

which indicates that **common** occurs as a plural noun in sense 1 but may occur with either singular or plural verbs, and at

**outdoors** *n pl but sing in constr* the space where  
 air is unconfined <every night he let the dog  
 run in the *outdoors*>

whose label indicates that while the word **outdoors** is a plural noun, it consistently takes a singular verb. Use of these labels conforms to the treatment of plurals in Webster's Third New International Dictionary.

An italic subject guide phrase pointing to something with which the headword is associated may precede a meaning core in a very few instances, as at

**set** *vb . . . 11 of a fowl* to incubate eggs  
 by crouching upon them . . .

**Punctuation** A comma links items (as synonyms, idiomatic equivalents, members of a single group or subgroup of related or contrasted words or of antonyms) that are alike in their relation to the headword, as at

**conservative** *adj* . . . 2 . . .  
*syn* controlled, discreet, moderate, reasonable,  
 restrained, temperate, unexcessive, unextreme  
*rel* cautious, chary, wary; circumspect, politic, proper,  
 prudent  
*con* expansive, unconstrained; excessive, freewheeling,  
 uncontrolled, unrestrained

A semicolon signals a break in continuity and is used in *rel* and *con* lists (as between the two subgroups in the *rel* and *con* lists at **conservative 2** above) to separate subgroups of words which differ in their relation to the headword. A semicolon is also used to separate antonyms that belong to different classes of opposites, as

**arise** *vb* 1 *syn* see RISE 4  
*ant* recline; slump

where the two antonyms are so separated. A semicolon may also appear at the end of a main-entry *syn* list to introduce a compare cross-reference, as shown at **honorable** *adj* 1:

*syn* estimable, high-principled, noble,  
 sterling, worthy; *compare* VENERABLE 1

Parentheses enclose variant spellings, as at the main entry **cake** *vb* 1 where

encrust (*or* incrust)

is a synonym, and at the secondary entries, where that particular synonym is styled

encrust (*or* incrust) *vb* *syn* see CAKE 1

Parentheses also enclose a particle or particles usually associated with a base word, as

**adore** *vb* . . . 3 to love, admire, or enjoy excessively . . .  
*syn* dote (on *or* upon), idolize, worship

dote (on *or* upon) *vb* *syn* see ADORE 3

Similarly, parentheses may indicate usage alternatives in idiomatic expressions, as at **slavery** *n* 2 where

*idiom* . . . the yoke (*or* chains) of slavery

alerts the user that he may choose one of two noun elements when employing this particular idiom. Parentheses are also used in main-entry *syn* lists to enclose plural suffixes of words that are sometimes, often, or usually but not always used in the plural:

**scad** *n*, *usu* **scads** *pl* a great number or abundance . . .  
*syn* gob(s), heap, jillion, load(s), million,  
 oodles, quantities, . . .

Parentheses enclose material indicating a typical or, occasionally, a sole object of reference, as in the meaning core of **express** *vb* 2

to give expression to (as a thought, an opinion,  
 or an emotion)

where they enclose an adjunct, or at entries such as **abrogate** *vb* 2

*ant* establish, fix (as a right, a quality, or  
 a custom)

where an antonym or a group of antonyms is associated with a particular object or objects of reference — a restriction or limitation to which the thesaurus user should be alerted.

**Symbols** A warning symbol is used in this book in the form of the double bars ||.

The double bars prefixing some terms warn the user that the employment of such a term may involve a problem of diction too complex for presentation in a thesaurus, or a restriction in usage. Consequently, the thesaurus user should consult a dictionary if he is in doubt about the stylistic level or appropriateness of the word or if he is unfamiliar with its meaning. For example, ||**fat cat** (a synonym of **notable** *n* 1), ||**chuff** (a synonym of **sullen** *adj*), and ||**puxy** (a synonym of **swamp** *n*) are all double-barred in this book because they carry stigmatizing or regional labels in Webster's Third New International Dictionary.



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