



# PICTURESQUE WORD ORIGINS

*With forty-five Illustrative Drawings*



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## Introduction

**B**ACK of almost every word in the English language there is a “life story” that will come to the average reader as a fascinating revelation. Our words have come to us from sources and in ways that will prove most surprising to anyone who has not before discovered the delights of tracing words back to their origins. Some of them have lived for thousands of years and have played their parts in many lands and many civilizations. They may record ancient superstitions. They may be monuments to customs dating back to classical antiquity. They may reveal the manners and beliefs of ancestors shrouded in the mists of ancient history. Words that you use to-day may have been the slang of Roman soldiers twenty centuries ago or the lingo of a Malay savage. They may have been used by an Athenian poet or by an Anglo-Saxon farmer. Thousands of our words are, in themselves, miniatures from the history of humanity—glimpses of episodes in the growth of civilization, pictures of life in a dim past.

This little book offers merely a taste of the wonders of word origins. Its purpose is to demonstrate the extraordinary interest of a subject that has always hidden behind the forbidding name *etymology*.

The information presented in this book is taken from WEBSTER'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY,

which is famous for the completeness and scholarliness of its etymologies. The word stories which follow are but a few chosen at random. Many thousands more may be found in WEBSTER'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY, to which readers who wish to pursue this fascinating study are referred.

## *Picturesque Word Origins*

Abet



## PICTURESQUE WORD ORIGINS



### **Abet:** *from the baiting of wild animals*

From the ancient sport of bear baiting, the English language has taken a violent word and applied it to men rather than to animals. *Abet* goes far back to an old Teutonic origin that conjures up a picture of hardy men going to the chase with their packs of hunting dogs. Our English verb *bite* appeared long ago in a Low German derivative *bētan*, meaning “to cause to bite,” “to make bite,” as, to *make* dogs *bite* the bear, and so to *send* them *out to hunt* the bear. Icelandic *beita* meant “to feed,” “make bite,” and also “to hunt” with dogs. The French adopted both the sport and the Teutonic name for it, making the Old French verb *beter*, meaning “to bait” a bear, and *abeter*, “to excite,” “incite,” which we have taken into English as *abet*. No longer applied to the hunt, it now means to encourage or incite persons, usually in an evil enterprise.



## Abeyance: *waiting with gaping mouth*

Something “held in abeyance” may cause some anxiety or impatience, but it hardly suggests “open-mouthed expectancy.” Yet that was originally the literal meaning of the word *abeyance*. It comes from the Late Latin *badare*, “to gape.” The word passed into the Old French form *baer*, *beer*, “to gape,” “to look with open mouth,” “to expect.” From this was derived the Old French *abeance*, literally, “a gaping at,” but used metaphorically to express “expectation” or “longing.” This is the English *abeyance*, a legal term used of rights which were suspended, “held in abeyance,” awaiting a proper claimant. Its meaning, however, has broadened in general use to denote any kind of suspension or temporary suppression.



## Abject: *literally, thrown away*

A transition from the literal to the figurative, and from cause to effect, has occurred in the meaning of *abject*. *Ab*, meaning “off,” “away,” and *jacere*, meaning “to throw,” were combined in Latin to form *abjicere*, “to throw away,” with a past participle *abjectus*, “thrown away.” Directly from this source came the English word *abject*, which was formerly not only an adjective but also a

verb meaning “to cast off,” “to throw down,” and, with a figurative application, “to degrade.” It is this latter meaning that survives in the Modern English adjective *abject* which characterizes one who has been cast off or degraded and who is therefore low in condition or cast down in spirit.

### **Abominate:** *to shrink from an evil omen*

To the ancient Romans an *omen* was a sign from the gods—a promise of good or a warning of evil. Naturally, they turned away in fear from an evil omen. To express this aversion they combined *ab*, “away,” and *omen*, “a foreboding,” into the verb *abominari*, meaning “to deprecate as ominous,” “to abhor,” with a past participle *abominatus*, the source of English *abominate*. The word has largely lost its original connotation of dread and has come to mean “to loathe,” “to despise.”

### **Abrupt:** *broken off*

*Rumpere*, in Latin, means “to break,” “to burst.” With the prefix *ab*, “off,” Latin formed *abruptere*, “to break off.” The past participle *abruptus* gives the English word *abrupt*, “broken off.” In Modern

English this meaning has been applied figuratively to the manner of a person who speaks or acts suddenly and curtly, or to things that change suddenly—“breaking off” unexpectedly.

*Rupture* is an English word that still retains the literal meaning of “bursting,” as do *disrupt* and *interrupt*, all derived from the same *rumpere*. *Corrupt*, however, is figurative: “broken faith.”

## Abundance: *in a wave*

Nothing suggests great abundance more vividly than overflowing waves—and that is the literal meaning of the word *abundance*. In Latin, *unda* means “wave,” poetically “sea.” The Romans combined *ab*, “from,” and *unda* into the word *abundare*, “to overflow”—literally, “to come from the waves” or “from the sea”—applied to anything very plentiful. The stem of *abundare* gave the English verb *abound*, and a derivative gave the noun *abundance*.

*Inundate*, “to flood,” also comes from *unda*, as does *undulate*, “to move like the waves.”

## Accost: *rib to rib*

*Costa* is the Latin word for “rib,” and hence “side.” With the prefix *ad*, “to,” it formed the Latin

verb *accostare* meaning “to bring to the side of,” “to bring side by side.” From this or from the French derivative *accoster*, we have made English *accost*, which first meant “to lie alongside,” then “to come alongside,” “to approach,” “to approach and greet,” and finally simply “to greet,” “to speak to.”

### ✓ **Accumulate:** *to pile up*

When, in colloquial speech, a man refers to the accumulating of a fortune as “making his pile,” he is using exactly the same figurative language as that which first suggested the word *accumulate*. *Cumulus* is Latin for “a heap or pile,” and *cumulare* means “to pile up.” With the prefix *ad*, “to,” we have *accumulare*, “to heap together,” which is the source of our English word *accumulate*.

### **Accurate:** *done with care*

To do a thing accurately, one must do it carefully—as even the etymology of the word suggests. Latin *cura* means “care,” and *accurare* means “to expend care on,” “to take care of.” The past participle *accuratus* means “done with care,” and from it we have made our word *accurate*.

## Achieve: *to bring things to a head*

To achieve something is to bring plans and action to a head. This is the literal meaning of the ancestor of our word *achieve*, which was borrowed from the French in Norman times. They had made the verb *achever* out of the preposition *a*, “to,” and *chief*, “head”: “to bring to a head.” Old French *chief* comes, in turn, through a thousand years of gradual changes, which only the strongest (accented) syllables survived, from Latin *caput*, “head.” The original sense, “bring to a head,” easily acquired the present significance, “bring to a successful conclusion,” “make a success” of the task in hand.



## Acumen: *the sharpness of the mind*

A keen mind may be likened to a sharp knife, which penetrates easily and quickly. For clean-cut action, both the knife and the mind must be sharp. So it is natural that, when a word was needed to denote the faculty of keen, penetrating thought, the Latin word for “sharpness” should be borrowed. *Acuere*, in Latin, means “to sharpen,” and *acumen* means “sharpness.” English borrowed *acumen* and used it figuratively for sharpness of the mind.

Acumen



*Acute*, from the past participle of the same Latin verb *acuere*, means “sharpened,” “keen,” and is used broadly in a figurative sense.

### *Affluent: with flowing riches*

The metaphor of the tides that we find in the word *abundance* is found also in *affluent*. Latin *affluere* means “to flow to,” from *ad*, “to,” and *fluere*, “to flow.” From its present participle, English borrowed *affluent*, originally in the literal meaning “to flow toward.” Its meaning broadened to “flow freely or abundantly.” Then a figurative use developed, “flowing with riches,” “wealthy.”

### *Aftermath: the second mowing*

*Math* is Old English for “a mowing” or the “crop” gathered by mowing. *Math* is a noun made from the old root of the verb *mow* (*māwan* in Old English) with the suffix *-th* which we find in *grow-th*, “a growing,” from the verb *grow*, and *bir-th* from the verb *bear*, “give birth to.” *After-math* is the “after-mowing” or “second mowing,” that is, the crop of grass that grew up and was cut after the first had been harvested. This was an appropriate figure of speech for after-effects or consequences in general; so we may now say “the *aftermath* of a battle.”

## Aggravate: *to make heavy*

The Latin word *gravis* means “heavy,” and *aggravare* means “to make heavy.” From the past participle *aggravatus* English borrowed *aggravate*, “to make heavy, weighty, serious, grievous.” Then the sense becomes transferred from the *thing* which is made grievous to the person who is annoyed by it, and *aggravate* acquires the sense of “provoke,” “annoy,” sometimes thoughtlessly used in a flippant sense, as, an “*aggravating* shoestring.”



## Agony: *from an ancient athletic meet*

It is strange that a word which denotes anguish and intolerable pain should have its origin in a festive sport event; yet that is the case with *agony*. In ancient Greece, *agōn* was a public assembly, especially one for public games and athletic contests. *Agonia* was the contest or struggle for the prize. From the meaning “a struggle for victory in the games,” *agonia* gradually broadened to mean any physical struggle, an activity fraught with difficulty or pain, and then mental anguish as well. Our own word *agony*, borrowed from this source, meant struggle or anguish of mind, then the throes of death, and hence any extreme suffering of body or mind.



# Agony

