

Word of the Day

June 13 – June 19

Highlighted word: New word. Unsure about its meaning or pronunciation.

whodunit

Noun | hü-'də-nət | hoo-DUN-it | June 13, 2020

Definition

: a detective story or mystery story

Did You Know?

In 1930, Donald Gordon, a book reviewer for *News of Books*, needed to come up with something to say about a rather unremarkable mystery novel called *Half-Mast Murder*. "A satisfactory whodunit," he wrote. The relatively new term (introduced only a year earlier) played fast and loose with spelling and grammar, but *whodunit* caught on anyway. Other writers tried respelling it *who-done-it*, and one even insisted on using *whodidit*, but those sanitized versions lacked the punch of the original and fell by the wayside. *Whodunit* became so popular that by 1939 at least one language pundit had declared it "already heavily overworked" and predicted it would "soon be dumped into the taboo bin." History has proven that prophecy false, and *whodunit* is still going strong.

pundit (n.): a person who gives opinions in an authoritative manner usually through the mass media: CRITIC

Examples

"What made *Broadchurch* so inherently watchable was its odd-couple detectives: David Tennant's Hardy was as bitter and cantankerous as Olivia Colman's Miller was open and warm. The *whodunit* unfurled episode by episode, crossing off suspects who doubled as relatives and friends." — [Gwen Inhat, *The A.V. Club*, 10 Apr. 2020](#)

"For all the detective tales that dot television screens, the Agatha Christie-styled *whodunit* has gone curiously absent from movie theaters. The nostalgia-driven 'Murder on the Orient Express' (2017), popular as it was, didn't do much to dispel the idea that the genre has essentially moved into retirement, content to sit out its days in a warm puffy armchair, occasionally dusting itself off for a remake." — [Jake Coyle, *The Associated Press*, 25 Nov. 2019](#)

dot (v.) to intersperse with dots or objects scattered at random?

remake (n.): one that is remade. Especially: a new version of a motion picture.

divagate

Verb | 'dī-və-, gāt | DYE-vuh-gayt | June 14, 2020

Definition

: to wander or stray from a course or subject : [diverge](#), [digress](#)

Did You Know?

Divagate hasn't wandered far in meaning from its Latin ancestors. It descends from the verb *divagari*, which comes from *dis-*, meaning "apart," and *vagari*, meaning "to wander." *Vagari* also gave us [vagabond](#), meaning "a wanderer with no home," and [extravagant](#), an early, now archaic, sense of which was "wandering away." Latin *vagari* is also probably the source of our noun [vagary](#), which now usually means "whim or caprice" but originally meant "journey, excursion, or tour." Even the verb [stray](#) may have evolved from *vagari*, by way of Vulgar Latin *extravagare*. Today, *divagate* can suggest a wandering or straying that is literal (as in "the hikers divagated from the trail"), but it is more often used figuratively (as in "she divagated from the topic").

Examples

The novel *divagates* and [meanders](#) through a labyrinth of subplots and asides.

[meander \(v.\): to wander aimlessly or casually without urgent destination : \[ramble\]\(#\)](#)

"Having [spirited](#) us [briskly](#) through Manhattan, New Bedford and Nantucket, and having flushed Ahab from his [lair](#) on to the [deck](#) of the Pequod, Herman Melville *divagates* into a disquisition on whale taxonomies." — [Stephen Phillips, *The Spectator*, 2 Nov. 2019](#)

[spirit \(v.\): to infuse with spirit especially : \[animate\]\(#\)](#)

[brisk \(adj.\): keenly alert : \[lively\]\(#\)](#)

[lair: a resting or sleeping place : \[bed\]\(#\)](#)

[deck \(n.\): something resembling the deck of a ship: such as a story or tier of a building \(such as a sports stadium\)](#)

bellwether

Noun | 'bel-'we-thər | BEL-WEH-ther | June 15, 2020

Definition

: one that takes the lead or initiative : [leader](#); *also* : an indicator of trends

Did You Know?

We usually think of sheep more as followers than leaders, but in a flock one sheep must lead the way. Long ago, it was common practice for shepherds to hang a bell around the neck of one sheep in their flock, thereby designating it the lead sheep. This animal was called the *bellwether*, a word formed by a combination of the Middle English words *belle* (meaning "bell") and *wether* (a noun that refers to a male sheep that has been castrated). It eventually followed that *bellwether* would come to refer to someone who takes initiative or who actively establishes a trend that is taken up by others. This usage first appeared in English in the 15th century.

Examples

"The tech giant has long been a *bellwether* for global industry, and investors will now hope that is still the case. Apple said on Thursday that its revenue rose nearly 1 percent to \$58.3 billion in the first three months of the year...." — [Jack Nicas, *The New York Times*, 30 Apr. 2020](#)

"That transition to natural gas as the *bellwether* of the state's energy portfolio has decreased emissions in the state nearly 90% since 1990 as natural gas production grew eleven-fold from 2010 to 2018." — [Mike Butler, *The Observer-Reporter* \(Washington, Pennsylvania\), 4 May 2020](#)

null

Adjective | 'nəl | NULL | June 16, 2020

Definition

1 : having no legal or binding force : [invalid](#)

2 : amounting to nothing : [nil](#)

3 : having no value : [insignificant](#)

4 a : having no [elements](#)

b : having zero as a limit

5 : of, being, or relating to zero

Did You Know?

English borrowed *null* from the Anglo-French *nul*, meaning "not any." That word, in turn, traces to the Latin word *nullus*, from *ne-*, meaning "not," and *ullus*, meaning "any." *Null* often pops up in legal and scientific contexts. It was originally used in Scottish law and still carries the meaning "having no legal or binding force." In mathematics, it is sometimes used to mean "containing nothing"; for example, the set of all whole numbers that are divisible by zero is the "null set" (that is, there are no numbers that fit

that description). But *null* also has some more general uses. We often use it with the meaning "lacking meaning or value," as in "By the time I heard it, the news was null."

Examples

"If a teacher organization is found in **contempt**, any [collective bargaining](#) agreement they worked on would be rendered *null* and they would be barred from collecting **dues**." — [Jesse Paul, *The Denver Post*, 23 Apr. 2018](#)

contempt (n.): willful disobedience to or open disrespect of a court, judge, or legislative body

dues plural : fees, charges

"While negative and *null* results can often be overlooked—by authors and publishers **alike**—their publication is equally as important as positive outcomes and can help fill in critical gaps in the scientific record." — [PLOS.org, 6 Apr. 2020](#)

alike : in the same manner, form, or degree : [equally](#)

harangue

Noun | hə-ˈrɑŋ | huh-RANG | June 17, 2020

Definition

- 1 : a speech addressed to a public assembly
- 2 : a [ranting](#) speech or writing
- 3 : [lecture](#)

Did You Know?

In Old Italian, the noun *aringo* referred to a public assembly, the verb *aringare* meant "to speak in public," and the noun *aringa* referred to a public speech. *Aringa* was borrowed into Middle French as *arenge*, and it is from this form that we get our noun *harangue*, which made its first appearance in English in the 16th century. Perhaps due to the bombastic or exasperated nature of some public speeches, the term quickly developed an added sense referring to a speech or writing in the style of a rant (though the word [rant](#) is not etymologically related). There is also a verb [harangue](#), which refers to the act of making such a speech.

Examples

The comedian's stand-up act included some delightfully incisive *harangues* against celebrity culture.

"The **loquacious** 49ers' **cornerback** always has a thought, opinion, **retort**, reply, instinct or handy *harangue* regarding just about anything. That's why the cameras and notebooks are usually in heavy

supply for Sherman, whose skill as a crafty defender is **accentuated** by his proficiency as one of the NFL's deepest thinkers." — [Jarrett Bell, USA Today, 29 Jan. 2020](#)

loquacious (adj.) : full of excessive talk : wordy

cornerback (n.): a defensive halfback in football who defends the flank

retort: a quick, witty, or cutting reply especially : one that turns back or counters the first speaker's words

accentuate (v.): to make (something) more prominent or noticeable : accent, emphasize

conflate

Verb | kən-'flāt | kun-FLAYT | June 18, 2020

Definition

1 a : to bring together : [fuse](#)

b : [confuse](#)

2 : to combine (things, such as two readings of a text) into a composite whole

Did You Know?

We're not just blowing hot air when we tell you that *conflate* can actually be traced back to the same roots as the English verb [blow](#). *Conflate* derives from *conflatus*, the past participle of the Latin verb *conflare* ("to blow together, to fuse"), which was formed by combining the prefix [com-](#), meaning "with" or "together," with the Latin verb *flare*, which means "to blow" and is akin to English's *blow*. Other descendants of *flare* in English include [afflatus](#) ("a divine imparting of knowledge or power"), [inflate](#), [insufflation](#) ("an act of blowing"), and [flageolet](#) (a kind of small flute—the [flageolet](#) referring to a green kidney bean is unrelated).

Examples

"Some wonder if students are *conflating* a decision to put off school for a year, and maybe take a job, with the more formal process of an actual [gap year](#)—a planned experience that has career and academic benefits." — [Bill Schackner, The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 11 May 2020](#)

"Given its name, St. Thomas in Houston has on occasion been *conflated* with St. Thomas in Minnesota, which as one of the nation's most successful Division III programs is now trying to make the jump to NCAA Division I. St. Thomas in Houston has no such aspirations." — [David Barron, The Houston Chronicle, 28 Apr. 2020](#)

stalwart

Adjective | 'stól-wært | STAWL-wert | June 19, 2020

Definition

: marked by outstanding strength and vigor of body, mind, or spirit

Did You Know?

Sometime in the 15th century, English speakers began to use *stalwart* in place of the older form [*stalworth*](#). Although *stalworth* is now archaic, it laid the groundwork for today's meaning of *stalwart*. During the 12th century, forms of *stalworth* began to be used to describe strongly built people or animals (a meaning *stalwart* carries). It also came to be used as an adjective for people who showed bravery or courage (likewise a meaning passed on to *stalwart*). So, in a way, *stalwart* has been **serviceable** in keeping the spirit of *stalworth* alive. This character of *stalwart* is true to its roots. *Stalworth* came from the Old English word *stǣlwierthe* (meaning "serviceable"), which, in turn, is thought to come from terms meaning "foundation" and "worth."

serviceable (adj.): HELPFUL, USEFUL. Fit for use. Of adequate quality.

Examples

"Hubert and Phan—two defenders—stepped in ... and played key roles in a *stalwart* defensive attack that gave up a mere 17 goals all season." — [Chris Jackson, *The Coppell \(Texas\) Gazette*, 11 May 2020](#)

"But female birds make *stalwart* mothers. After all, theirs is the job of nest making. For example, a female northern cardinal collects nesting material of **twigs**, leaves, grasses and **sundry** fibers. The bird chews on twigs with her **beak** to make them **pliable**. Her feet then shove the bendable twigs into an open cup shape **wedged** against a fork of limbs in a bush or tree. Finally, the bird carpets the nest interior with leaves and grasses." — [Gary Clark, *The Houston Chronicle*, 8 May 2020](#)

twig (n.): a small shoot or branch usually without its leaves.

sundry (adj.): including many things of different kinds: MISCELLANEOUS, VARIOUS.

beak (n.): the bill of a bird.

pliable (adj.): supple enough to bend freely or repeatedly without breaking.

wedged (adj.): shaped like a wedge.

wedge (n.): a piece of a substance (such as wood or iron) that tapers to a thin edge and is used for splitting wood and rocks, raising heavy bodies, or for tightening by being driven into something