

Word of the Day

May 2 – May 8

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

May 2, 2020

gratuitous

grə- 'tü-ə-təs | gruh-TOO-uh-tuss

Definition

1 : not called for by the circumstances : not necessary, appropriate, or justified : [unwarranted](#)

2 a : given unearned or without [recompense](#)

b : costing nothing : [free](#)

c law : not involving a return benefit, compensation, or consideration

Did You Know?

Like [gratitude](#), [grace](#), and [congratulate](#), *gratuitous* is a descendant of the Latin word *gratus*, which means "pleasing" or "grateful." When *gratuitous* was first used in the 17th century, it meant "free" or "given without return benefit or compensation." The extended meaning "done without good reason" or "unwarranted" came about just a few decades later, perhaps from the belief held by some people that one should not give something without getting something in return. Today, that extended meaning is the more common sense, employed, for example, when graphic cruelty depicted in a work of fiction is described as "gratuitous violence," or when unkind words better left unsaid are described as "a gratuitous insult."

Examples

"The language of lawyers often disparagingly referred to as [legalese](#) is [abstruse](#), verbose, [rife with](#) *gratuitous* Latin phrases, and designed to create a linguistic barrier between lawyers and non-lawyers."
— [Mark A. Cohen, Forbes, 3 Mar. 2020](#)

[legalese](#): the specialized language of the legal profession

[abstruse](#): difficult to comprehend : recondite

[rife](#): copiously supplied : abounding —usually used with *with*

"The responses are varied but reflect two main themes that have infiltrated design thinking globally: The first is how to create products that are meaningful and enduring as opposed to *gratuitous* and disposable; the second focuses on process over product...." — [Stephen Todd, *The Australian Financial Review*, 7 Mar. 2020](#)

May 3, 2020

politesse

ˌpɑːli-ˈtes | pah-lih-TESS

Definition

: formal [politeness](#) : [decorousness](#)

Did You Know?

Nowadays, no one refers to a "polite" looking glass or houses "polite" and in good repair, but *polite* (or *polit* or *polyt*, as it was spelled in Middle English) originally meant simply "polished" or "clean." By the early 1600s, *polite* was being used of polished and refined people, and *politeness* had been **penned** to name the shining quality of such people. *Politesse* (a French borrowing) debuted in the late 17th century. All three words stem from Latin *polire*, which means "to polish" (and which is, by way of the Anglo-French stem *poliss-*, an ancestor of the English [polish](#)). Today we tend to use *politeness* for everyday good manners and reserve *politesse* for more formal courtesies.

pen: write, indite

Examples

"The *politesse* of good society and the *politesse* of the dueling ground were, as we shall see, cut out of the same cloth." — [Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France*, 1993](#)

"Now it's true that no one should expect an American football coach to possess the *politesse* of a career diplomat. But c'mon. There is a place and time for righteous indignation, especially if you're, say, Bill Belichick and you've just lost the Super Bowl." — [Lincoln Millstein, *The New Haven \(Connecticut\) Register*, 19 Oct. 2019](#)

May 4, 2020

collimate

ˈkɑːlə-, māt | KAH-luh-mayt

Definition

: to make parallel

Did You Know?

One might expect a science-y word like *collimate* to have a straightforward etymology, but that's not the case. *Collimate* comes from Latin *collimāre*, a misreading of the Latin word *collineāre*, meaning "to direct in a straight line." The erroneous *collimāre* appeared in some editions of the works of ancient Roman statesman Cicero and scholar Aulus Gellius. The error was propagated by later writers—most notably by astronomers, such as Johannes Kepler, who wrote in Latin. And so it was the spelling *collimate*, rather than *collineate*, that passed into English in the 19th century as a verb meaning "to make (something, such as light rays) parallel."

Examples

"Amazingly, some astrophysical jets—streams of charged particles *collimated* and accelerated over astronomical distances—also exhibit a [helical](#) structure." — [Mario Livio, *The Huffington Post*, 6 Dec. 2017](#)

"Multiple sessions will demonstrate how to set up different kinds of telescopes.... Another session will be held on *collimating* the reflector, which means aligning everything so it works well." — [Rebecca Hazen, *The Houston Chronicle*, 1 Feb. 2018](#)

May 5, 2020

lorn

'lɔrn | LORN

Definition

: left alone and [forlorn](#) : [desolate](#), [forsaken](#)

Did You Know?

Lorn and [forlorn](#) are synonyms that mean "desolate" or "forsaken." The similarity in form and meaning of the two words is hardly a coincidence. *Lorn* comes down to us from *loren*, the Middle English past participle of the verb *lesen* ("to lose"), itself a descendant of the Old English *lēosan*. Similarly, *forlorn* comes from the Middle English *forloren*, a descendant of the Old English verb *forlēosan*, which also means "to lose." The *for-* in *forlorn* is an archaic prefix meaning, among other things, "completely," "excessively," or "to exhaustion." Nowadays, *forlorn* is considerably more common than *lorn*. *Lorn* does, however, appear as the second element in the compound [lovelorn](#) ("bereft of love or of a lover").

bereft: deprived or robbed of the possession or use of something —usually used with *of*

Examples

"So the day passes, and it is evening. Rough and I have been to see a grave. It is a *lorn* place, and the wind has grown **shrill**, and we come home feeling rather desolate." — [Rosa Mulholland, "Bracken Hollow" in *Irish Monthly*, February 1890](#)

shrill: having or emitting a sharp high-pitched tone or sound : piercing

"Romantic poets had a particular fondness for the lone, *lorn* shore—while a string of impressionist painters **expounded** the moral usefulness of the beach...." — DJ Taylor, *The Mail on Sunday* (London), 19 July 1998

expound: **a**: to set forth : state **b**: to defend with argument

May 6, 2020

quintessence

kwin-'te-s^ən(t)s | kwin-TESS-unss

Definition

1 : the fifth and highest element in ancient and medieval philosophy that permeates all nature and is the substance composing the celestial bodies

2 : the [essence](#) of a thing in its purest and most concentrated form

3 : the most typical example or representative

Did You Know?

Long ago, when people believed that the earth was made up of four elements—earth, air, fire, and water—they thought the stars and planets were made up of yet another element. In the Middle Ages, people called this element by its Medieval Latin name, *quinta essentia*, literally, "fifth essence." Our **forebears** believed the *quinta essentia* was essential to all kinds of matter, and if they could somehow isolate it, it would cure all disease. We have since given up on that idea, but we kept *quintessence*, the offspring of *quinta essentia*, as a word for the purest essence of a thing. Some modern physicists have given *quintessence* a new twist—they use it to refer to a form of the [dark energy](#) believed to make up almost 70 percent of the energy in the observable universe.

forebear : ancestor, forefather

Examples

Roasting marshmallows over an open fire and making **s'mores** is the *quintessence* of camping in the great outdoors.

s'more: a dessert consisting usually of toasted marshmallow and pieces of chocolate bar sandwiched between two graham crackers

"Native, which opened in 2016 and **garnered** the number 12 spot on this year's World's 50 Best Bars list, is discretely located above a Japanese noodle restaurant in a 200-year-old building. Shiny steel-and-glass skyscrapers, the *quintessence* of modernity, cast shadows on this historic structure." — [Liza Weistuch, *The Daily Beast*, 17 Dec. 2019](#)

garner: to acquire by effort : earn

May 7, 2020

truckle

'trə-kəl | TRUK-ul

Definition

: to act in a subservient manner : [submit](#)

Did You Know?

When *truckle* was first used in English in the 15th century, it meant "small wheel" or "pulley." Such small wheels were often attached to the underside of low beds to allow them to be easily moved under high beds for storage. These beds came to be known as [truckle beds](#) (or [trundle beds](#)), and a verb *truckle*—meaning "to sleep in a truckle bed"—came into being. By the 17th century, the fact that truckle beds were pushed under larger standard beds had inspired a figurative sense of *truckle*: "to yield to the wishes of another" or "to bend **obsequiously**." The initial verb sense became obsolete; the newer sense is fairly rare but is still in use.

obsequious: : marked by or exhibiting a fawning attentiveness

Examples

"[Walt Whitman](#) became a pop star for reminding his **countrymen** of the duty never to *truckle*: "Take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any man or number of men." — [Virginia Heffernan, *The Los Angeles Times*, 3 June 2018](#)

countrymen: an inhabitant or native of a specified country. Compatriot.

"More, though, than simply *truckling* to mass taste, [Gore] Vidal is clearly using the **pulp** format to figure out what he's good at (**sardonic worldliness**) and what he's not (romance). And through it all, he keeps the words flowing." — [Louis Bayard, *The New York Times*, 12 Apr. 2015](#)

pulp: a magazine or book printed on cheap paper (such as newsprint) and often dealing with sensational material also : sensational or tabloid writing — often used attributively

sardonic: : disdainfully or skeptically humorous : derisively mocking

worldly: of, relating to, or devoted to this world and its pursuits rather than to religion or spiritual affairs

May 8, 2020

verboten

vər-ˈbō-tən | ver-BOH-tun

Definition

: [forbidden](#); *especially* : prohibited by dictate

Did You Know?

Despite its spelling, the adjective *verboten* has nothing to do with [verb](#), or any of the other words in English related to Latin *verbum*. Rather, *verboten* comes from German, and originally from Old High German *farboten*, the past participle of the verb *farbioten*, meaning "to forbid." ([Forbid](#) itself derives from Old English *forbēodan*, a relative of *farbioten*.) *Verboten* is used to describe things that are forbidden according to a law or a highly regarded authority. There also exists the rarely used noun *verboten*, meaning "something forbidden by authority," as in "well-established verbotenens."

Examples

"An array of other city meetings have been canceled.... Scott said his office is working as fast as it can to find new, 21st-century solutions to the needs of the community and of city government at a time when physical gatherings are *verboten*." — [Kevin Rector and Liz Bowie, *The Baltimore Sun*, 30 Mar. 2020](#)

"Yet divorce was still frowned on in British society—and marrying a **divorcee** whose former spouse was still alive was *verboten* according to the Church of England. This is why Edward VIII had to abdicate the throne for his brother George VI: He couldn't be both the head of his country's Church—a role established, ironically, by his divorced ancestor Henry VIII—and the husband of a divorced woman with two living spouses." — [Kate Williams, *CNN.com*, 22 Mar. 2020](#)