June, 2026 Adventures In the English Language

(changed the title again to include spoken words)

Contains a shocking personal confession I've never shared with anyone.

Is "antidisestablishmentarianism" in the dictionary?

Somebody asked this on Facebook. It looks like a simple yes/no question, but as you know now from reading these stories for the last little while, there are no simple questions about language.

First, "the dictionary." It Does Not Exist. "Is 'antidisestablishmentarianism' in the dictionary?" is logically equivalent to "Are there any left-handed bassoonists in the orchestra?" There's more than one orchestra. And there are way more dictionaries than orchestras. Here in my town there's one orchestra, (three if you count high schools, too many if you count middle schools) and I've got over 40 dictionaries myself. Ten or more general dictionaries of English, six or more foreign languages, two dictionaries of music, the gigantic Dictionary of American Regional English, two Bible dictionaries, one medical, one legal, one chemical, a dictionary of hardware parts . . . My years of teaching English 102 or its equivalent in six colleges and two prisons, I made it clear that if a paper contains the phrase "the dictionary" I would not read it. I would ask the student to rewrite and resubmit, and it would be counted as late work.

(I similarly banned writing that anything today is "like Nazi Germany," but sadly, I would need to lift that proscription now.)

So okay, a better question is "Is 'antidisestablishmentarianism' in the [one specific] dictionary?" Let's narrow it down to general dictionaries of English. It will not be in Zilberman's *Compact Up-To-Date Hebrew-English English-Hebrew Dictionary.* That's not Zilberman's meshayama.

But even among general English dictionaries, there are some differences in what they are trying to do, and how well they are doing it. Based on their perceived audience, they all begin with a corpus, a body of texts (a text is expression of language: novels, TV shows, road signs, whatever), and that is the foundation of their differences. Do the editors of a specific dictionary decide to include the words in the *Journal of Organic Chemistry*, or not? How about the assertively present-day teen magazine *Defiant Ones?* The commentary on *Monday Night Football? The Congressional Record? Highlights for Children?* Ads on AM radio? That's why American Heritage and, for example, Random House produce such different products.

Here's that personal confession thing. Let the world judge me as it will, I cannot hold this dark secret inside any longer:

The Merriam-Webster online is a crappy dictionary!

It's become the standard reference for spelling, and that's fine. I use it a lot. In the book editing job I just finished, I went to m-w.com to learn "postcard" is one word, and "travelling" is correct, as is the more common "traveling." It's only in actually defining words that they fail. And everything about the cook's food is fine, except for the taste.

Thinking of a word as an example, I chose “prescription,” because I had just run an errand for one. Sure enough, M-W screws it up. There are two words spelled “prescription,” an arcane obsolescent legal term, and the medical use we all know. M-W combines them into one entry.

And this is endemic in M-W. To their credit, they do treat “bat,” the baseball bludgeon, as a different word from the one for the flying mammal. But then they even get that wrong, putting the primary meaning to most of us, “a usually wooden implement used for hitting the ball in various games,” in third place. First is “a stout solid stick,” and second is “a sharp blow.” I don’t think I’ve ever heard “bat” used in either of these ways. And if you have, the usually wooden sports implement still belongs at the top. And it’s time to stop saying “usually wooden.”

But, back to “prescription.”

So you’re not proficient in English, you hear someone say they got a new prescription or whatever, and you go to M-W. A prescription is:

1. the establishment of a claim of title to something under common law . . .
2. the process of making claim to something by long use . . .
3. the action of laying down authoritative rules or directions.

Then, at last, *[drumroll please]*

4. a. a written direction for a therapeutic or corrective agent *specifically*: one for the preparation and use of a medicine
   b. a prescribed medicine
   c. something (such as a recommendation) resembling a doctor's prescription

So finally there it is, in clunky, first-draft type wording. And they left out that we often call the slip of paper the doctor gives us a prescription.

Here’s how some other dictionaries handle “prescription.”

Collins, best know for their English-to-other languages-and-vice-versa dictionaries, uses sentences, and the entries are marvels of elegant simplicity. <u>This is absolutely the dictionary I would recommend to an English learner</u>, whether a young person or someone new to the language. The Collins folk do not mention the legal term in the default online entry, but maybe they do if you click on prompts for more information.

1. countable noun
A prescription is the piece of paper on which your doctor writes an order for medicine and which you give to a pharmacist to get the medicine.
The new drug will not require a physician's prescription.
2. countable noun
A prescription is a medicine that a doctor has told you to take.
I'm not sleeping even with the prescription Ackerman gave me.
3. countable noun

A prescription is a proposal or a plan that gives ideas about how to solve a problem or improve a situation.
...the economic prescriptions of Ireland's two main political parties.

Already outscoring M-W like the 49ers and the Broncos in that Super Bowl, Collins adds one more point with the mention of the pharmacist. Also, note the sagely constructed example sentences. M-W automatically gleans citation from current print sources, with the inevitable disaster of unclear meaning or inappropriate language.

The OED offers nine definitions, including four labeled as obsolete. This is <u>not</u> the place to find out what a word means, and they make that clear.

Cambridge Free Online Dictionary maintains several dictionaries, weighted toward different searchers: default, advanced learner's, intermediate, business, medicine, and maybe a couple more. The differences are primarily in the words they choose to include, and also in the level of detail they offer for selected words especially important to their looker-uppers. For common words like "prescription" there is little or no difference in the various editions. Cambridge covers the different uses listed under "Collins" above, and make special mention of eyeglass prescriptions. Well played, old chaps.

thefreedictionary.com combines the medical and legal prescriptions, but they mitigate their guilt by placing medicine first. Entry 1 is especially clear, and mentions the pharmacist's role.

1. a direction, usually written, by the physician to the pharmacist for the preparation and use of a medicine or remedy.
2. the medicine prescribed

[*et cetera about the medical word*]

5. *Legal.* a long or immemorial use of blah blah blah. . .

Speaking of legal matters: I rest my case against Merriam-Webster's online dictionary.

What was I writing about when I started this whatever-it-is? Oh, yeah. Antidisestablishmentarianism. But is it a word? Is it a candidate to be selected—or not—in a dictionary of English? When I mistyped it just now, Word offered the correct orthography, so that's one "yes" vote. Also, most native English speakers have at least seen or heard "antidisestablishmentarianism," and somewhat agree on its uses. That's more evidence of wordhood. But what does it mean? The word is from the nineteenth century, and had to do with a political question regarding separation of church and state in Great Britain and the Commonwealth. That word is dead, and if any dictionary includes it, it ought to be labeled "obsolete." But that old word has led to a new one, though the few dictionaries I consulted shied away from listing and defining it. Even the redoubtable Collins fails doubly, labeling it "American English" then giving the antique political definition. M-W skips the word entirely, a wise choice since they would bungle any attempt to define it. Here's my own attempt, in the whole-sentence Collins style. If any of you edit a dictionary, let's negotiate the fee for using it.

1. Antidisestablishmentarianism is an obsolete British political term, now used humorously or instructively in the United States as an example of blurring a word's meaning through addition of prefixes and suffixes.

* * *

Watch Your Language

The New World screwworm is the larval form, or maggot, of the New World blowfly, *Cochliomyia hominivorax*, which resembles a housefly in size and charmlessness. NYT

A well-crafted sentence, clearly conveying its message and having a little fun as well. (The "vorax" element of the species name hominivorax *is from Latin for eating with gusto, related to "voracious." And you already know "homini." Unlike most flies, whose maggots eat dead tissue, these little critters feast on living mammals. Any mammals.)*

Columbia Should Control Its Campus, Not Its Neighbors – NYT headline

A rarity, a precisely ambiguous construction, offering no hint as to its meaning. If we were to poll our studio audience, I feel certain they would come out nearly equal in taking this headline to mean Columbia should not control the neighbors, or the neighbors should not control Columbia.

Remains found in wooded area being cleared for bridge project. – (news headline)

That's good. Building a bridge atop remains is just plain rude.

For dessert, here's a brief passage from a long-ish short story by Evelyn Waugh. I chose this passage from a random page of the Complete Short Stories. *Actual random, asking* random.com *for a value from 1 to 396. This is to emphasize that Waugh is a master stylist, and presents us with gems like this all day long. He's one of the 20 or so writers I return to again and again. No other writer I know I am aware can say so much while lurking behind a facade of not saying anything. The characters here suffer from nervousness, that scourge of modern middle-class life, and have been advised to spend some time in a bucolic setting.*

from "Basil Seal Rides Again, or The Rake's Regress*"*

in *The Complete Short Stories of Evelyn Waugh*

It may one day occur to a pioneer of therapeutics that most of those who are willing to pay fifty pounds a week to be deprived of food and wine, seek only suffering and that they could be cheaply accommodated in rat-ridden dungeons. At present the profits of the many thriving institutions which cater for the ascetic are depleted by the maintenance of neat lawns and shrubberies and, inside, of the furniture of a private house and apparatus resembling that of a hospital.

Basil and Angela could not immediately secure rooms at the sanatorium recommended by Molly Pastmaster. There was a waiting list of people suffering from

every variety of infirmity. Finally they frankly outbid rival sufferers. A man whose obesity threatened the collapse of his ankles, and a woman raging with hallucinations were informed that their bookings were defective, and on a warm afternoon Basil and Angela drove down to take possession of their rooms.

* * *

If anyone is still reading after 1,900 or so words, I'd like to remind you that I edit books, and I'm darn good at helping any writer make their work say and do precisely what they want it to do. Tell me about your baby, whether it's embryonic or silver citizen discount-eligible, and I'll share a little evaluation and a heap of encouragement.

Danny Williams. editorwv@hotmail.com