

LITERARY CARDINALS

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Numbers are not just for counting!

The cardinal numbers (1, 2, 3, 4 and so on) are learnt fairly early on in life and, for the most part, seem to be used in a fairly mundane way by most people. There is nothing startling about such everyday items as "one man", "two dogs", "three cars", "four shops", "five trains", and so forth. This is what the cardinal numbers were originally meant for and this is, indeed, how most people use them.

The logologist, ever-aware of the flexibility of the English language, has discovered, though, that numbers have been put to a wide range of uses at different times and places by many different people, these uses not generally being recognized by devotees of the English language. For example, FIVE is a slang name for a Jew; THIRTEEN is a slang term used in shops, factories, etc. to indicate that the boss is around; TWENTY-THREE is a railway telegraph signal used for a message of the greatest urgency; FORTY-ONE is a pool game; and FORTY-NINE is something trite.

When we became aware of just how many different meanings that numbers could have, we set about collecting these meanings. In the list presented here, there is a meaning for each of the cardinal numbers from 0 to 50, with 37, 39, 43 and 47 being the only exceptions. Perhaps readers might be able to plug these four gaps; or maybe they would care to start work on the numbers 51 to 100, taking over where we left off. We do know for sure that many of the numbers in this range do have additional meanings. For example, SIXTY-SIX is a two-handed card game; SEVENTY-FOUR is a South African food fish; EIGHTY-SIX means nothing; and NINETY-FIVE is a lunch-counter customer who doesn't pay. Who will fill the gaps?

- 0: a place in Lauderdale County, Mississippi
- 1: the ultimate being
- 2: a two-dollar bill
- 3: a rugby three-quarter
- 4: the crew of a four-oared racing boat
- 5: a basketball team
- 6: arsphenamine
- 7: the rower behind the stroke in an eight-oared boat
- 8: an octosyllabic line of verse

- 9: a baseball team
- 10: a measure of coal, from 48 to 50 tons
- 11: a football team
- 12: a shilling
- 13: an English shilling
- 14: a special order
- 15: the first score in a game of tennis
- 16: a place in Meagher County, Montana
- 17: a corpse
- 18: the size of a piece of paper cut eighteen from a sheet
- 19: a score of zero in cribbage
- 20: a twenty-dollar bill
- 21: limeade
- 22: a rifle or pistol with a 22 caliber
- 23: the end
- 24: a day
- 25: a variety of spoil-five
- 26: a gambling game involving dice
- 27: three 9 cards
- 28: a West Australian parakeet
- 29: an article of clothing in the 29th size
- 30: a mark or sign of completion
- 31: any of various card games
- 32: a pistol with a 32 caliber
- 33: an order of ground beef steak
- 34: go away!
- 35: a gambling game for from two to five players
- 36: a spotlight with a 36-inch lens
- 37:
- 38: a pistol with a 38 caliber
- 39:
- 40: a crook
- 41: a small glass of milk
- 42: a game played with dominoes
- 43:
- 44: a prostitute
- 45: a microgroove phonograph record
- 46: an auctioneer's signal
- 47:
- 48: a flower pot of the third smallest size
- 49: a 17th-century name for a kind of liquor
- 50: the letter L

The numbers and meanings presented in this article can be found in various dictionaries: Webster's Third New International Dictionary; Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition; Oxford English Dictionary; A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary (Volume 1, A-G); The American Thesaurus of Slang; A Dictionary of American Slang; A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English; A Dictionary of the Underworld; The Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide, 98th Edition.