

SESQUIPEDALIAN ENGLISH

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Early in my career as a verbivore, I became fascinated with long words. My heart leapt up when I beheld the likes of *inappropriateness* (17 letters) *incomprehensibility* (19 letters), and the 22-letter *counterrevolutionaries* and *deinstitutionalization*.

Then I was introduced to the 28-letter *antidisestablishmentarianism*, "a doctrine against the dissolution of the establishment." In the nineteenth century, the word meant "opposition to the separation of the established church and state."

Only in my early middle age did I discover that *antidisestablishmentarianism* is a mere pigmy in the hierarchy of truly long words. Gazing upon their length and bulk reminds us of the bizarre shapes that English words can assume.

Floccinaucinihilipilification, meaning "the categorizing of something as worthless or trivial," is a 29-letter, 12-syllable word that dates back to 1741. Until 1982, *floccinaucinihilipilification* was the longest word in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. While it contains nine *i*'s, it is the longest word devoid of any *e*.

Hippopotomonstrosesquipedalian (30 letters) is a very long word that means "a very long word" and is, hence, self-referential. This mouthful breaks down into Greek word parts that signify "like a monstrous hippopotamus with half again as many feet."

Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious is a thirty-four letter word invented for the film version of *Mary Poppins* (1964) that has become our best known really, really big word. Etymologically, this is not entirely a nonsense word. Stitched together, *supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* means "atoning for extreme and delicate beauty [while being] highly educable."

Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis This hippopotomonstrosesquipedalian word is the longest enshrined in *Merriam Webster's Third New International Dictionary* and, since 1982, the longest in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The word describes a miners' disease caused by inhaling too much quartz or silicate dust. Among its 45 letters and 19 syllables occur nine *o*'s, surely the record for a letter most repeated within a single word; six *c*'s; and but one *e*.

Here's my limerick about superultramultimagnamega words:

A Gimerick

It's true that I have halitosis,
At least it's not pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcaniosis.
Thus, rather than floccinaucinihilipilification,
I feel hippopotomonstrosesquipedalian elation
That's supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.

So . . . what is the longest word in the English language? One could argue for *run*, in the sense that its 645 meanings take up more room in our biggest, fattest dictionaries than any other word. But how many meanings can *run* have beyond "to move rapidly on alternate feet"? Well, you can run for the school board, run the motor of your car, run a flag up a pole, run up your debts, run your stocking, run your mouth, run a fence around a property, run an idea past a colleague, run an antagonist through with your sword, run an ad in a newspaper, run into a childhood friend, never run out of meanings for *run*—and your nose can run and your feet can smell.

If you need a fancy term for multiple meanings of a word, it's *polysemy*. *Run* takes up half again as much space as its nearest polysemous competitor, *put*, which itself is far more polysemous than the third word in this race, *set*. So the three "longest" words enshrined in our dictionaries are each composed of three letters.

Rounding out the top ten most polysemous words—each but a single syllable—are, alphabetically, *cast*, *cut*, *draw*, *point*, *serve*, *strike*, and *through*.

A child's riddle identifies the longest word in the English language as *smiles* because there is a ":mile" between its first and last letters. But it is comedian Red Skelton who deserves credit for identifying the longest word of all. Skelton maintained that the most sesquipedalian word in the English language is the one that follows the voice that streams from your radio or TV set and announces, "And now a word from our sponsors."