

HARD-WORKING WORDS

CHRIS COLE

Newport Beach, California

There are about two million words in the English language and exactly twenty-six letters in the English alphabet. Therefore, the average English word should be less than five letters long, since there are over eleven million words that can be spelled with five letters. However, in fact the average length of an English word is around twelve letters.

One possible explanation is that human physiology and the laws of acoustics prevent an arbitrary combination of letters from being pronounced or understood. However, something else must be going on, because even if we restrict every word to be an alternation of consonants and vowels, we need fewer than seven letters to express two million words.

Probably the explanation for this redundancy is that English (like all natural languages) was not engineered; it evolved. Words evolved from earlier words. If the earlier lexicons were smaller than English, and decreasing in size the further back in time we go, then this goes a long way to explain the inefficiency of English today.

If we imagine that at some point lost in the mists of prehistory we find a small number of primitive word forms, then these word forms should have left their footprints in the current English lexicon. One form these footprints might take is hard-working words, i.e., words that function as many different parts of speech or have many different senses.

For example, the word *like* functions as eight parts of speech:

noun	We may never see its like again
verb	Fruit flies like a banana
adjective	People of like tastes agree
adverb	The rate is more like 12 percent
preposition	Time flies like an arrow
conjunction	They acted like they were scared
interjection	Like, man, that was far out
verbal auxiliary	So loud I like to fell out of bed

The word *but* functions as seven parts of speech:

conjunction	It never rains but it pours
adverb	He is but a child
interjection	But, your honor, I object!
preposition	I want nothing but my due

pronoun	Nobody but has his fault
noun	The but [halibut] put up a fight
adjective	He lived in the but [Scottish for <i>outer</i>] room

Other words that function as five or more parts of speech include:

after	adjective, adverb, conjunction, noun, preposition
aught	adjective, adverb, noun, pronoun, verb
as	adverb, conjunction, noun, preposition, pronoun
best	adjective, adverb, noun, verb, verbal auxiliary
better	adjective, adverb, noun, verb, verbal auxiliary
bully	adjective, adverb, interjection, noun, verb
con	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
cross	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
dear	adjective, adverb, interjection, noun, verb
down	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
fast	adjective, adverb, interjection, noun, verb
fore	adjective, adverb, interjection, noun, preposition
gin	adjective, adverb, conjunction, noun, preposition, verb
in	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
less	adjective, adverb, conjunction, noun, preposition, pronoun
near	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
off	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
out	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
over	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
plus	adjective, adverb, conjunction, noun, preposition, verb
round	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
so	adjective, adverb, conjunction, noun, pronoun
still	adjective, adverb, conjunction, noun, verb
that	adjective, adverb, conjunction, noun, pronoun
thwart	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
up	adjective, adverb, noun, preposition, verb
well	adjective, adverb, interjection, noun, verb
what	adjective, adverb, conjunction, noun, pronoun

Another way to measure the work that a word is doing is the number of different homographs that it has. This is related to the different etymologies and functions of the word.

In Webster's Third, the following words have ten or more homographs. In this table and the next one, Senses refers to the number of senses that the word has, Hom refers to the number of

homographs that the word has, Pos refers to the number of parts of speech it functions as, and the remaining columns contain counts for each part of speech.

Word	Senses	Hom	Pos	Noun	Verb	Adje	Adve	Conj	Prep	Inte
buck	62	13	4	32	28	1	1			
con	20	13	5	9	7	2	1		1	
pan	46	13	3	30	14	2				
pink	40	13	3	22	14	4				
rack	58	13	2	38	20					
port	36	12	3	30	5	1				
post	77	12	4	48	26	1	2			
flush	59	11	4	18	22	16	3			
frank	30	11	3	11	10	9				
gin	19	11	6	3	1	1	2	1	1	
pike	32	11	2	28	4					
scale	95	11	3	56	38	1				
tip	53	11	2	31	22					
bay	45	10	3	37	7	1				
bob	51	10	2	31	20					
chuck	30	10	2	17	13					
cog	23	10	2	14	9					
flag	60	10	3	39	20	1				
how	31	10	4	6			15	6		4
mull	18	10	2	9	9					
peel	20	10	2	11	9					
plat	23	10	3	16	5	2				
race	50	10	3	37	12	1				
shag	23	10	3	12	10	1				

Probably the best way to measure a word is the count of the senses or different meanings that the word has. Of course, when two meanings are different is a matter of judgement. There are two kinds of lexicographers, splitters and groupers. Splitters tend to assign more meanings to a word; groupers tend to combine many meanings into one definition. It is interesting to note that the editors of the Merriam-Webster dictionaries assign hard-working words to groupers. Thus the sense counts of these words tend to be minimized in Merriam-Webster dictionaries.

In Webster's Third, the following words have 100 or more senses:

Word	Senses	Hom	Pos	Noun	Verb	Adje	Adve	Conj	Prep	Inte
break	245	4	2	89	156					
set	223	3	3	85	122	16				
turn	216	3	2	85	131					
take	179	2	2	33	146					
run	178	3	3	74	97	7				

strike	174	2	2	46	128				
cut	168	3	3	68	90	10			
draw	146	2	2	45	101				
line	142	6	3	114	22	6			
point	142	2	2	113	29				
up	138	6	5	4	10	55	59	10	
shoot	135	5	3	42	92				1
open	133	4	4	11	35	86	1		
stock	133	5	4	104	18	10	1		
round	130	6	5	50	26	24	16	14	
pass	129	4	2	49	80				
stick	126	6	4	75	48	2	1		
block	121	3	3	84	32	5			
down	121	9	5	24	18	30	40	9	
lead	121	6	3	68	49	4			
close	120	5	4	20	53	40	7		
flat	118	5	4	55	11	44	8		
pitch	114	4	2	63	52				
beat	114	6	3	40	70	4			
roll	114	3	2	56	58				
slip	113	8	3	61	48	4			
head	111	3	3	88	19	4			
drive	108	3	3	40	67	1			
blow	107	5	2	38	69				
double	106	4	4	44	42	16	4		
go	106	3	2	18	88				
hold	106	4	2	27	79				
light	106	6	4	43	17	45	1		
play	103	2	2	30	73				
drop	102	2	2	50	52				
stop	102	3	3	47	53	2			
well	101	9	5	51	3	17	26	4	
cover	100	2	2	39	61				
out	100	5	5	14	12	7	64	3	
right	100	5	4	43	10	33	14		
top	100	5	3	62	29	9			

So what is the hardest-working word in English? My vote goes to *break*, with four homographs, 89 noun senses., 156 verb senses, and an incredible 245 senses overall. Now there's a word!