

## The stories behind the words

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*You might use these terms on a daily basis, but do you know where they originate – and if you're actually using them in context? While many wordsmiths disagree on the various theories and interpretations, here are some possible explanations of a few commonly used phrases.*

Most of us use terms or phrases in our everyday speech without ever wondering why they sound so nonsensical or where they come from. Take this sentence: He behaved like a namby pamby [weak, ineffectual] when read the riot act [a vigorous reprimand] for being a loose cannon [dangerously uncontrollable]. The unmanly title of namby pamby originated in the 18th century when poets John Gay, Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift came up with the name to mock Ambrose Philips, a fellow poet who tutored King George's grandchildren and often wrote about them using childish language. Also from the 18th century, the Riot Act refers to the document recited by a British public official to a group of unruly or disorderly people. Going even further back in time to the 17th century, a loose cannon was literally a cannon that had come loose and was rolling around dangerously on the warship deck. Here are some more quirky phrases:

**Flea market: A street market selling second-hand goods**

A literal translation of the French words *marché aux puces* – 'market of the fleas' - because the second-hand clothing and furniture sold at these outdoor street markets were sometimes flea-infested.

**Turn a blind eye: Pretend not to notice**

This dates back to the legendary Admiral Horatio Nelson, a British Naval hero who was blind in one eye. During the Battle of Copenhagen in 1801 when up against a Danish-Norwegian fleet, Nelson ignored the command to withdraw, allegedly claiming as he put the telescope to his bad eye, that "I do not see the signal." He proceeded to attack... and take victory.

**Paint the town red: To go out and have a good time**

In 1837, the rather wayward Marquis of Waterford went drinking with his mates in Melton Mowbray, a town in Leicestershire, England. The drunken antics included acts of vandalism – breaking windows; knocking over flower pots; pulling knockers off doors; and, now famously, painting a number of doors, a tollgate and a statue red.

**Bite the bullet: To force yourself through an unpleasant situation**

In the absence of anaesthetic, injured soldiers were told to bite down on a bullet to distract them from the pain and stop them screaming.

**The green-eyed monster: Jealousy personified**

Before William Shakespeare's time, the colour green was associated with illness. In his tragedy *Othello*, he took the notion of feeling sick (and green) to describe the sickening feeling of jealousy, in this famous quote by Iago: "O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock the meat it feeds on." It's one of many phrases by the acclaimed playwright that is still used today.

**Meet a deadline: To finish a job when it is meant to be finished**

Everyone in the workplace can identify with this, but hopefully the repercussions are not what they used to be! It comes from the Civil War where lines were drawn on the prison grounds and prisoners who ventured beyond these lines in an attempt to escape, were shot dead.

**Butter someone up: Flatter someone to gain their support**

This comes from an ancient Indian religious custom in which the devout threw or smeared small balls of ghee butter on their statues to secure favours and seek forgiveness.

**Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater: *Don't throw out the good when getting rid of the bad***

The story goes that back in the 1500s when bathing in a tub was an annual affair, the men bathed first, followed by the women, the children and then the babies. By the time the infants were washed, the water was understandably dirty – hence the reference to babies inadvertently getting chucked out with the murky water. Unlikely, but a colourful tale, nonetheless.

**Barking up the wrong tree: *Pursuing a misguided course of action***

This dates back to the 1800s when hunting with packs of dogs was a common pastime. If the dogs chased their prey up a tree they barked to alert the pack, but sometimes barked in vain as the prey had escaped.

**The walls have ears: *People may be eavesdropping so watch your words***

This is generally believed to have its origins as far back as the 4th century BC and the Greek tyrant Dionysius of Syracuse. It's said that he had an ear-shaped cave cut and connected between the palace rooms so that he could hear what was being said in other rooms. The Louvre Palace in France was also believed to have a network of listening tubes to eavesdrop on political secrets and plots.

**Big wig: *An important person***

In the 18th century, wigs and ostentation were the order of the day with rich and powerful men – the bigger the wig, the more important and influential the person. An interesting aside: the wigs were usually made from animal hair and, being difficult to keep clean, tended to attract lice.

**Look a gift horse in the mouth: *Don't be ungrateful for a gift or favour***

This probably comes from the practice of looking at a horse's teeth to determine its age and condition, as buyers were known to do. Long in the tooth, also still used, means a sign of age – the teeth look longer as the gums recede.

**Straight from the horse's mouth: *From the person who has direct knowledge***

This most likely refers to a tip in horse racing. Those closest to the horses – the grooms or stableboys, and therefore the most trusted - circulated tips on the likely winners, which were picked up by the punters. You may also have heard the phrase 'from the horse itself', which literally means one step further and better.

Sources: [Grammarly.com/](https://www.grammarly.com/) [History.com/](https://www.history.com/) [Lexico.com](https://www.lexico.com/) / [Oxford Languages](https://www.oxfordlanguages.com/)