Chapter One

With apologies to Will Rogers, I never met a vocabulary book I didn’t like. Why? Because when I graduated from high school, I was “vocabularially deprived.” You see, I grew up in a house with a “flicewater” in the broom closet and a “chester” drawers in my bedroom. I was in fourth grade before the dazzling epiphany hit me—that thing in the broom closet was a fly swatter!

In the sixth grade, I snuck—yes, snuck—a look in our vocabulary book and saw a picture of a chester drawers. Underneath was a phrase that rocked my world: chest of drawers. If I had known the word surreptitiously, I would have looked around surreptitiously to see if anyone recognized my abysmal ignorance.

Embarrassingly, another year passed before I realized that I was still wrong about the phrase. I thought a chest of drawers was a piece of furniture where I put my “drawers” (my underwear), not a piece of furniture with slide-out compartments.

Ghost words—that’s what I’ve come to call words that we think we know, words that guard a buried treasure inside them. Like the word breakfast. We know the word’s meaning but have lost the original idea that breakfast is the meal we eat to break the fast of not eating while asleep.

At college, I ran into a guy who read vocabulary books like novels. I still have two of them. I look at them now with fondness, those classics of their day: Wilfred Funk and Norman Lewis’s 30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary and Peter Funk’s It Pays to Increase Your Word Power. Funky times!

Since that exciting freshman year, I’ve learned thousands of words. But don’t get me wrong. After a B.A. in history and pre-law, an M.A. in English and philosophy, and a Ph.D. in literature, I’m still vocabularially deprived. As you probably know, knowledge is relative.

That initial thirty-day investment did give me a more powerful vocabulary. Thirty more months of undergraduate attention to words expanded my verbal horizons even further. Now, after thirty years of linguistic study, I feel ready to contribute what I have discovered about words—as well as some techniques to make learning about words more efficient and even intriguing.

P.S. My graduate studies revealed one theory of the evolution of the name and piece of furniture called a chest of drawers. The story is that the frugal Puritans recycled the chest that carried their possessions to the New World as a piece of bedroom furniture. The annoyance of taking everything out in order to extract something from the bottom of the chest resulted in the convenience of a drawer inserted at the bottom of the chest. Later, a second and then a third drawer were added, the top was permanently sealed and, voilà, the chest . . . of drawers.

With a few tantalizing exceptions, this book will not introduce obscure words that few people use. I’ve taught vocabulary and word origins for a quarter of a century, but I’ve never read or heard a single instance of words like condign or temerarious. Although these words appear in good vocabulary books, the authors seemed to be reaching for words that few had heard of in order to justify the existence of the book.
One of the best ways to get to know a familiar word even better is to learn its etymology, or origin, and one of the best ways to trace its etymology is by fracturing the word into its Latin roots. You know, for example, that a **verdict** is a jury’s finding in a trial. But breaking the word into its constituent parts gives us a new insight:

- **verify** to prove the truth of by presentation of evidence or testimony
- **verisimilitude** the quality of appearing to be true or real
- **veracity** truthfulness
- **aver** to assert as a fact, especially in court
- **very** extremely, absolutely, truly
- **verily** in truth; used in archaic expressions like, “Verily, I say unto you . . .”

The Latin *verus* is also the basis of several place names like Vera Cruz, which translates as “True Cross.”

It can also be found in **high** places like Harvard, whose motto is *Veritas* (Truth), and The Johns Hopkins University, whose motto is *Veritas Vos Liberabit* (The Truth Shall Make You Free) . . .

. . . and **low** places like *National Lampoon*’s Animal House motto, *In vino, veritas. In curricula, nullus*, which can be rendered, “In wine, truth. In school, nothing.”

**CAUTION:** If you see the root *ver-* in a word, don’t assume it means *truth*. **Vermin**, a word based on the Latin *vermis*, meaning worm, can be anything from lice to roaches to rats.

**Lesson 1:** Free-style etymologizing can be dangerous!
**SALT** is one of the cheapest items in the grocery store, but in ancient times it was so scarce that Romans considered spilling it bad luck. It’s a seasoning, a preservative, and a vital part of our body chemistry. The word for salt in Latin was *sal*, and the part of a Roman soldier’s pay for the purchase of salt was called his *salarium*, which evolved into our word *salary* (after passing through French on the way up the continent).

The Latin *sal* falls unchanged into the Spanish word for salt (*sal*), but English has a number of surprising words that don’t, on their surface, seem related to their original Latin source.

By one definition, anything that is mined is a mineral.

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**MINING FURTHER**

SALT. Sodium chloride. NaCl. Whether we now call it by an ordinary or scientific name, the **mineral** was so precious until the eighth century that it was often given to grooms’ parents at wedding ceremonies.

One way to season and preserve certain foods is to **marinate** them in your own super-secret concoction of vinegar, wine, oil, herbs, and spices. Not surprisingly, the original solution used for marinating was sea water, which is 3.5% salt. The word *marinate* derives from the Latin *marinus* (of the sea), itself based on *mare* (sea).

**CAUTION:**

*Marinate* is the verb: I marinated the chicken in balsamic vinegar.

*Marinade*, the word for the solution itself, is a noun:

The marinade was made of olive oil, garlic, and rosemary.

It’s not surprising that *marine* and *mariner* (think of an “old salt”) are related to *mare*—or even *maritime* and *marsh*—but it takes a dash of imagination to see that a mermaid is a “sea maid.” And it demands a downright leap of faith to see that *marshmallow* is connected to *mare* via the salt-water marshes where European mallow plants grew. It was from the root of this marsh mallow plant that those first confections were concocted.

From **SALT MARSH** to **SALT MARCH**: In colonial India, only the British government could sell or produce salt. In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi led a group of followers in an ingenious act of independence—a 23-day, 248-mile trek to the ocean, where he raised a glob of mud and salt, declaring, “With this, I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire.” He then boiled it down to extract the salt. This defiant, theatrical act initiated the often-bloody “bloodless revolution” that culminated in India’s independence in 1947.
THE STAR-RELATED WORDS below demonstrate that some English words descended from Latin and some from Greek, which Latin itself evolved from. Greek, in turn, came from a prehistoric language that linguists have labeled Proto-Indo-European.

While *stellar* (relating to stars) came from the Latin *stella* (star), *astrology* can be traced to Middle English (1100 – 1500) via Old French, then to Latin, all the way back to the Greek *aster* (star). Even though Modern English *star* is traceable to Old English *steorra*, which is Germanic in origin, *star* ultimately evolved from the same Indo-European root as *aster*.

CAUTION: *Astrology* is the study of heavenly bodies under the assumption that they influence human behavior and earthly events. The scientific study of stars is *astronomy*.

Given the astrological notion of the evil influence of stars, one can better understand why Shakespeare called *Romeo and Juliet* “star-cross’d lovers.”

**Why Intuitive Leaps Are Hazardous:** *Astraphobia* is not the fear of stars, but of lightning and thunder. The *starboard* side of a ship is not the star-side, but the steer-side (because early Germanic navigators steered from the right side of the vessel). Conversely, the British *sterling* is related to *star*, because of the small star on the first sterling coins.

Ancestor of the sextant, the *astrolabe* was an instrument used to determine the altitude of celestial bodies. Chaucer’s “A Treatise on the Astrolabe” is the oldest technical manual in English. In 1613, French explorer and founder of Quebec City Samuel de Champlain lost an astrolabe on one of his expeditions. Remarkably, over 250 years later, an Ontario farmboy found it while ploughing!
CONGRATULATIONS! You’re now an immature etymologist. I mean *amateur*!

To strengthen your etymological musculature, try this exercise: Based on the Greek word for city, *polis*, list as many derivatives as you can. Keeping in mind that the root can also end a word, and that several American cities include the root, you should be able to conjure up at least eight.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words Based on <em>Polis</em></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>police</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>politico: a politician, often used pejoratively</td>
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</tbody>
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**QUESTION:** What’s the difference between *policy* and *policy*?

**ANSWER:** The same difference as that between *cleave* and *cleave*, or a *pool* table and a swimming *pool*.

**EXPLANATION:** In dictionaries, you won’t find *cleave* under one entry and two definitions. There will be two entries because, though spelled the same, they are actually two separate words with different ancestors. One means “stick” (like your tongue cleaving to the roof of your mouth); the other means “divide” (like cleaving a piece of firewood in two). Likewise with *policy*. Policy as “a course of action” derives from *polis*. Policy as “a written contract,” like an insurance policy, comes from the Greek *apodeiknunai*, meaning “to prove.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Words Ending with <em>Polis</em></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>acropolis—literally “high city”; a fortified height of an ancient Greek city. Best-known is the Acropolis of Athens.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cosmopolite—“world citizen”; one who is at ease in any culture, a Renaissance person with wide-ranging knowledge. The adjective is <em>cosmopolitan</em>, a word that describes plants or animals existing the world over.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>megalopolis—“large city”; a massive area where several large cities have run together: Dallas–Forth Worth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metropolis—“mother city”; a major city encircled by smaller cities; metaphorically, a mother city with baby cities around it, like Los Angeles, Houston, or Atlanta.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neapolitan—a citizen of Naples . . . and an ice cream!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>necropolis—a city of the dead; i.e., a cemetery. The Greek <em>nekros</em>, corpse, is also seen in <em>necrosis</em>, a localized death of body tissue from injury, disease, or freezing. A necrophiliac is one obsessed with things related to death or corpses—a coffin collector, for example, or William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” title character, who sleeps with her lover’s corpse for 40 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of course, a few words have *polis* scrunched between prefixes and suffixes:

| apolitical |

**CAUTION:** Be wary of wolves in sheeps’ clothing. Seeing the word *polite*, you might be tempted to think it’s based on *polis*, perhaps because sophisticated city people display refined manners, but it is in fact descended from Latin *polire*, to polish (as is, not surprisingly, our word *polish*). Thus, to be polite is to have polished etiquette.
The Days of the Week—Unveiled

We move through the days hardly knowing them. “Daughters of Time, the hypocritic Days,” Emerson called them, “marching single in an endless file.”

Well, not quite endless. By the time eighteen-year-olds graduate from high school, they have passed through a thousand Mondays.

And yet, hardly one in a thousand knows that Monday means the Moon’s Day. What a tragedy. They were only one letter away from it. “Vanna, I’d like to buy a vowel. An O, please.” The Wheel of Fortune, they know. They wanna be a Millionaire—with the help of an audience poll, a lifeline, and a 50/50 guess—on luck and someone else’s knowledge.

“Wednesday”’s child is full of woe,” says Mother Goose. “Whoa,” I said when I was a child, “what the heck is that d doing in there? Don’t we say Wensday?” If only someone had told me it was Woden’s Day, I wouldn’t have been so full of whoa. Woden was the Anglo-Saxon god identified with Odin, the Norse god of wisdom and war who created the cosmos and human beings.

Thursday. Named after Thor, the Norse god of thunder. His boomerang-hammer symbolized lightning. And yes, Norse is related to north. And Norway. And Norman: Norse Man, Man of the North. You’re catching on.

Sunday. Too easy. So let’s skip to the word’s second component, day, one of the roots of daisy. The sun is the day’s eye. The flower looks like the sun, so why not call it a day’s eye? A daisy. When you look out the window and see a daisy, did you know you’re looking out of the wind’s eye to see the day’s eye? Thoreau teaches us that in Walden.

Tuesday. Tiw’s Day. Tiw was the Old English god of war. You would be, too, with a sissy name like Tiw. Like Johnny Cash’s boy named Sue, you’d have to fight.

Friday. Frigga, wife of Odin, was the Old Norse goddess of love. By adaptation of the Latin Venus’s Day (Veneris dies), we have Friday. Venus was the Roman goddess of love. Mess around with her too much, know what you get? Venereal disease.

Saturday. Satan’s Day. “Oh, my word! That’s terrible!” Hey, take it easy. Just kidding. It’s really Saturn’s Day. Saturn was the Roman god of agriculture. “Saints preserve us, it’s named after a pagan deity!” Sorry, it’s not my fault. “We should start a national movement to banish all those heathen names from the week.” But most English words are from pagan cultures, so does that mean we should just stop talking?

Yes, I know. I got the days out of order. Relax. It’s not a big deal.

I also know that an eighteen-year-old has actually lived only 936 Mondays. The point is, they’ve lived through a bunch of Mondays and don’t even see the obvious connection to Moon Day.

“Well, it’s not MY fault.”

The Dreaded Exam

None of that wimpy fill-in-the-blank stuff here.
(We’ll save that for later.)

Quick! How many words based on the Greek polis (city) can you list in one minute?

1. ____________________
2. ____________________
3. ____________________
4. ____________________
5. ____________________
6. ____________________
7. ____________________
8. ____________________
9. ____________________
10. ____________________

Number-of-Correct-Answers

SCALE

1-5 Your friends will point at you and snicker.
6-7 Average.
8-9 Give yourself a double-latte.
10 Genius!
† Add 2 points for each word not in this chapter.

The Feared Two-part Test

You now know more about the history of salt and the etymology of the word salt than, well, than anyone who hasn’t read page 3 of this book. Now it’s time to stretch your brain cells.

List as many sayings about salt as you can in one minute. Example: A grain of salt a day keeps the doctor away. (Is that right?)

1. ____________________
2. ____________________
3. ____________________
4. ____________________
5. ____________________
6. ____________________
7. ____________________
8. ____________________

Part Two

Many English words look related to the Latin sal (like saline), but some don’t (like sausage).

Can you guess (educatedly, of course) which one word below claims kinship with the word salt?

salacious salamander sale salient sallow silt salon Minneapolis salute soil seal sail sail easel

Answer: salacious
Cruciverbalist!

Ha! Scared you with that fifty-dollar word, didn’t I? Not to worry. It can be broken into its penny-ante roots: the Latin *crux* (cross) and *verbum* (word). Guess its meaning yet? Was the image below any help?

Across

2 Woeful child’s day  
7 To pickle  
8 Spicy sauce/dip  
10 Greek *city*  
11 “Rabbit food”  
13 Latin *star*  
14 Latin *sea*  
18 Greek *star*  
19 Food-soaking liquid  
20 Evil-star word  
21 Spanish *cross*  
22 Star sailor

Down

1 Mahatma _____  
3 Pay  
4 *  
5 English pagans, originally  
6 Latin *salt*  
7 Wet, grassy lowlands  
8 Salty deli meat  
9 Stick to or split apart  
12 Assert as a fact  
15 Latin *true*  
16 Jury’s decision  
17 Latin *wine*  
19 Sea lass
Chapter One defined or discussed over 80 words, though perhaps a bit randomly, so now we’ll inspect some of the 600,000 English words in a more orderly fashion, starting with the letter “a.”

But first a little digression. The previous chapter described some words as guarding buried treasure. To change analogies, some words are like oysters that yield pearls if opened carefully. Since this is a vocabulary book (and more!), let’s pry open the word vocabulary to see what it reveals.

Vocabulary is traceable to the Latin vocabularius (of words) and ultimately to vocare (to call), which is connected to the noun vox (voice). Related words include vocal, vocalize, and equivocal. Equivocal means “open to two or more interpretations; ambiguous; intentionally misleading.” The Latin prefix aequi- (equal) became our equi-. Thus, the word essentially means having an “equal voice.” The verb is equivocate.

One’s vocation is aptly referred to as one’s “calling.” A hobby or avocation, however, calls people away from their main job. The word is based on Latin ab (away) + vocare. Through time, the “b” of ab and the “v” of vocare melted into one sound by a process called assimilation.

Knowledge of these Latin words—vocare and vox—gives us a deeper understanding of their descendents:

| **vocative** | **to call forth, from Latin ex (out of, away from) + vocare.** 
| **The fragrance of lantana evoked a memory from my childhood.** |
| **invoke** | **to call on (for example, a higher power for help). Compare invocation, an opening prayer.** 
| **Before graduation, a local pastor was called on to give the invocation.** |
| **provoke** | **to incite or induce anger, from L. pro (for, but here meaning forth).** 
| **He tried to provoke a fight with the peaceful protesters.** |
| **revoke** | **literally to call back, from L. re (again, back); to void by recalling.** 
| **Her license was revoked after she ran twenty-six red lights in one week.** |
| **vociferous** | **marked by noisy outbursts, from L. vox + ferre (to carry).** 
| **The teens were offended by the vociferous octogenarians (eighty-year-olds).** |
| **advocate** | **vb. to argue in favor of; n. one who pleads in another’s behalf, from L. ad (to) + vocare.** 
| **I don’t advocate bicycling while talking on your cell phone and juggling.** |

During the Inquisition, a defendant could call on friends to act as advocates. Unfortunately, if the accused was condemned to be burned at the stake, so was the advocate!—and the sentence was irrevocable: not-call-backable.

But what about the word etymology itself? Yes, even it has an etymology. It is based on the Greek word meaning “true,” etumos—the basis of etumon, true sense of a word. To complete the full meaning, add the root -logy, from logos (word, study of): etymology is the study of the true meanings of words.

CAUTION: Don’t confuse etymology with entomology, the study of insects. Like insects themselves, entomology can be broken into segments. The Greek word for insect, entomon, means “cut in two” because an insect’s body can be divided into head, thorax, and abdomen. We apply the useful root -tome, “a cutting,” in surgeries from the top down: tonsillectomy, appendectomy, hysterectomy.

Interestingly, the Latin insectum was translated from the Greek entomon. The Latin secare (to cut) forms the core of our words section, dissect, intersect, sector (a defined area), the less-obvious segment, and the still-less-obvious sickle, scythe, and saw.
Despite being a cute, harmless-looking little guy, “a” just might be the most powerful letter in our alphabet. The reason? Because its presence can reverse any meaning. It can turn the typical into the atypical. It can transform a believer in God (a theist) into a nonbeliever (an atheist). I admire the tiny fellow’s simple elegance and deadly force.

English has several prefixes that negate the meanings of the words they are attached to. These include a-, in-, non-, and un-, as in amoral, insecure, nonsense, and unbelievable. They can all be translated “not” or “without.”

Because a- is the negative prefix that English borrowed from Greek, it is called the alpha privative, a phrase based on alpha (the first letter of the Greek alphabet) and the Latin privare (to deprive). Thus, when a- is added to a word, it deprives it of its meaning: symmetrical, asymmetrical.

The ending of tonsillectomy comes from the Greek tomos (a cutting) and ec, an altered form of ex (out). Thus, tonsillectomy = cutting out the tonsils. When a group of ancient Greek philosophers surmised that all matter is composed of minute, indivisible particles, they called them atoms, units that cannot be cut any further.

To make pronunciation easier, an “n” is added to the alpha privative when it appears before vowels. Aspirin is an analgesic. In analgesic, the root stems from the Greek algos, pain, so an analgesic is a substance that removes pain (with the help of our strong little friend, the alpha privative).

Scarier words can be divided and conquered: anuptaphobia. Start with phobia, an abnormal fear. Add nuptial, relating to marriage. Throw in a- to perform a wrestling reversal, and, ta-da!—it’s easy to deduce that anuptaphobia is the fear of never getting married.

Because our brains are made of Teflon, we must often use memory devices—like “Roy G. Biv” to recall the colors of the rainbow. Because the Greek word for mindful is mnemon (silent “m”), such memory aids are called mnemonic devices. It shouldn’t be surprising, then, that memory loss is amnesia (the “m” speaks up!).

Likewise, the silent “g” in Gnostic is heard in agnostic, literally a person “without knowledge.” Whereas an atheist believes there is no God, an agnostic is uncertain. To him, God might exist, but there is no way of proving Her existence.

Amnesty is interesting because it has the same root meaning as amnesia, “without memory.” Amnesty is a governmental pardon, often for offenses that are treated as if they are not remembered.

Now that you’ve read my shtick on alpha, it’s time for me to say, “Omega, amiga!”
“Shticking” with the A’s

There are hundreds of words with the alpha-privative prefix—plus, you can make up your own! For example, if you know that monarchy literally means “one ruler” (Greek mon- + arkhos), it’s easy to figure out (with the aid of our little buddy, plus his helpful sidekick “n” before vowels) that anarchy means “without a ruler,” hence—disorder, confusion, chaos.

Other words with the prefix an- are anesthesia (without sensation), anemic (without blood), anorexia (without appetite), and anonymous (without name).

The solitary a- also gives us further insight into already-familiar words: amorphous (without form), apathy (without feeling; indifference), and apnea (without breathing), ceasing to breathe while asleep.

Atrophy is shrinkage of a bodily organ, tissue, or part because of disease or disuse. The word’s Greek root, trophe, means “food,” so a- + trophy (without food) suggests that the shrinkage results from lack of nourishment. Aphasia (without speech) is a condition of partial or total loss of speech from brain damage due to injury, disease, or stroke.

CAUTION: Don’t assume that every word beginning with “a” is employing the alpha privative. Avocation, for example, does not mean “without a vocation.” As we saw earlier, the prefix ab (from) lost its “b” in avocation, so this solitary “a” is not an alpha privative at all.

Also, don’t confuse the alpha privative (a-) with an entirely different “a”—the prefix a- attached to a noun to indicate “in,” “on,” or “in the direction of” (as in abed, afield, astern), or attached to a verb to indicate “in the act, state, or condition of” (a-fishing, a-hunting, a-sailing). This latter “a,” called a “verb particle,” does not reverse or negate the meaning of the verb it is affixed to.

Another “A-List” word that reverses meaning is anti-, which can indicate

- opposite, as in antithesis,
- opposing or against, as in antiapartheid,
- counteracting or neutralizing, as in antibiotic.

Antithesis (pronounced an-TITH-e-sis, not AN-tie-THEE-sis) means “the direct opposite”: Hitler was the antithesis of goodness. It can also refer to an alternating process, as in fashion or politics. The process, called a dialectic, begins with a thesis (e.g., flat shoes or wide ties), notes its opposite or antithesis (platform shoes or string ties), and resolves the difference in the synthesis (an average of the two extremes).

Antiapartheid can be broken into anti- + apartheid (apart + -heid, a suffix corresponding to our -hood). Apartheid, literally meaning aparthood, or separateness, was the policy of racial segregation in South Africa.

Antibiotics (anti- + bios, life) are substances like penicillin that destroy harmful microorganisms.

Other words in the three “anti-” categories include many from the medical field: antibacterial, anticoagulant, anticonvulsant, antidepressant, antidote, antifebrile (fever-reducing), antifungal, antihistamine, antipsychotic, antisepctic (Gk. septos, rotten: think “septic” tank), antitussive (cough-suppressing); a few from the automotive industry: antifreeze, antiknock, antilocking brakes; and some from general use: antipathy (a strong feeling of aversion, from anti- + pathos, feeling).

From the “bizarre” category come anti-antibody and antigalaxy (a galaxy made up of—what else?—antimatter).

Most of the above words allow pronunciation of “anti” as either AN-tee or AN-tie.
A Little Latin Goes a Long Way . . .

Of the Top-10 All-Time Latin contributions to the English language, tenere gets my vote as numero uno.

Knowing this one simple Latin word makes you look at dozens of English words as if for the first time.

The basic meaning of tenere is “to hold,” so you can see more clearly now why you are a tenant if you hold occupancy in a house or apartment. This type of tenancy even extends to tenants farmers.

Don’t confuse tenant with tenet, even though they sound similar. The second “n” of tenant almost disappears in normal conversation.

A tenet is a belief or principle held as true by a person or group of people, who are often bound together by that common belief—the tenets of Puritanism, democracy, Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Judaism, vampirism, or Keynesian economics.

A building occupied by tenants can be called a tenement, but the term has come to have negative connotations because of the phrase “tenement slum,” despite its being sentimentalized in “Love Child,” by Diana Ross & The Supremes.

If some of this sounds familiar, it might be because you know a little Spanish or French. One of the first verbs you’ll learn in Spanish is tener, which can mean “to hold” or “to have” and is used in statements like “Tengo sed” (I have thirst), whereas we would say “I am thirsty.” To an ancestor of the French tenir we owe our word tennis.

If a belief or intellectual position is rationally defensible, it is tenable. It can be securely “held.” Depending on your leanings, the beliefs in ghosts, UFOs, or a second gunman in the JFK assassination are tenable.

As a young assistant professor, I spent many anxious hours worrying about tenure, the status of holding a permanent teaching position. But there’s no need to let the academic world hold this word hostage. You can also speak of your tenure as lifeguard during your prep-school summers.

Do you know someone who holds on like a pit bull to dated clothing or ideas? That person is tenacious. When we play tug of war, the tenacity of my 30-pound dog amazes me.

Do you have the kind of mind that can hold onto facts for your late-afternoon history exam even though you crammed for it the day before? If so, you have good retention. You have a retentive mind that retains or “re-holds” the data just long enough for you to dump it on the paper and forget it forever.

Congratulations for holding on this long.

You have now been properly etymologized!
If tenere is the Latin heavyweight champion in English, there may be a nine-way tie for second. My unquestioned favorite among those nine, though, is vertere (to turn). Here is the armchair psychologist’s paradigm for placing millions of gloriously diverse people into three categories:

Which way do you turn?

I. Are you shy and reflective? Would you rather watch the life of the party than be the life of the party? Then you’re an introvert. You literally “turn inward” (L. intro, to the inside, + vertere).

II. Do you like to entertain others and focus on improving society rather than dwell on your own grief? Then you’re an extrovert. You turn outward (L. extra, on the outside).

*An extrovert is not necessarily an egotist, a selfish person with a falsely inflated opinion of him- or herself.

III. Are you somewhere in the middle, perhaps outgoing in the morning and reserved in the evening? Then you’re an ambivert, with personality traits of both of the above “verts.”

Another “erty” word is vertex—meaning the highest point, apex, summit, pinnacle—and the basis of vertical. In geometry, the vertex of a triangle is the point opposite its base, or it can mean the point where the sides of an angle meet. Note: the plural of vertex, vertices, follows the same pattern seen in index/indices and matrix/matrices. Likewise with vortex/vortices, which can refer to any turbulently whirling object, especially a tornado, but also a whirlpool, eddy, hurricane—even Dennis the Menace. And it can be used figuratively: New York City is the cultural vortex of the United States.

If this discussion has you spinning, it’s because vertere went spiraling down through the centuries and fell into English as vertigo, the sensation of dizziness (and the title of an Alfred Hitchcock film).

For a really “erty” word, how about pervert? If a person turns a good cause into a bad one (using charitable donations for his own profit, for example), he perverts it. Here, the verb, pronounced per-vert, means to completely turn around. Putting stress on the first syllable changes the verb to a noun. A PERvert is completely turned around. After misbehaving, public figures often convert (turn around) to good behavior only to revert (turn again) to their old habits when the watchdogs avert their eyes.

It’s enough to make you vertiginous!
An Intro to the Months

Most of us live through the beguiling months our allotted three score and ten years without ever peeking behind their clever disguises. Neil Sedaka rhymed his way through an entire year, so let’s take a stroll down memory lane with his “Calendar Girl.”

“January, you start the year off fine.” Maybe so, but only on our calendar. The oldest Roman calendar had only ten months, and no January or February. Then Julius Caesar borrowed the Egyptian way of marking time with 365 days and, once every four years, observed February 24th twice. The Julian calendar was revised in 1582 by Pope Gregory XIII, so we now cycle through the Gregorian calendar.

January is named after Janus, the Roman god of doorways and gates. Depicting Janus in a dual profile, Romans put his image near their doors so he could protect them by looking both ways for bad news—and guard both the entrance and the exit. Not surprisingly, we now call the person who keeps the keys to doors a janitor.

“February, you’re my little valentine.” This was the twelfth month in the newer Roman calendar. Their civil year began on March 5, around the vernal equinox, when the daylight hours are equal (equi) to those of the night (nox). Our second month is based on Febru, plural of februum, the Roman festival of purification that took place during that month.

“March, I’m gonna march you down the aisle.” Sounds militant—and for good reason. March was named after Mars, Roman god of war. Thus, the martial arts are the war arts.

“April, you’re the Easter Bunny when you smile.” The poet T. S. Eliot called April the cruellest month, and to etymologists it is, because they are uncertain about its origin. One cerebral guess is that it’s based on Aphro, a shortened form of Aphrodite, Greek goddess of love. That makes sense, since our first full month of spring is the time when many of Earth’s creatures have love and fertility on their minds. Need a little help “multiplying”? Try an aphrodisiac, a food or drug that increases libido (named after the Greek goddess of love).

“May, maybe if I ask your dad and mom. . . .” May is named after Maia, a Roman goddess and wife of Vulcan, god of fire. English words related to Vulcan are volcano and vulcanized. Orion, the Hunter, pursued Maia and her six sisters, whom Zeus protected by placing them among the stars, forming the Pleiades cluster.

“June, they’ll let me take you to the Junior Prom.” June is the month of Juno, the Roman goddess of marriage, which is why there are so many June brides. She was also the wife and sister of Jupiter. (Mere mortals would be jailed for that.)

“July, like a firecracker all aglow.” In ancient Rome, this month was called Quintilis, their fifth month (compare with quintet, a grouping of five). Then Julius Caesar got himself assassinated and deified, and the month was renamed to honor his highness.

“August, when you’re on the beach you steal the show.” Caius Octavius, Julius Caesar’s nephew and secretly-adopted son, became ruler of the Roman Empire in 29 B.C. and two years later was declared Augustus, which means, roughly, “imperial majesty.” So that his and his uncle’s months would be of equal length, a day was borrowed from February and added to August. That’s why February has an inferiority complex.

The origins of September, October, November, and December can be seen in their roots. Sept still means seven in French. Oct denotes eight, as in octopus. Nov means nine, as in novena, and Dec, related to decade, suggests ten. Thus, you can see that these are the seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth months . . . of the Roman calendar. Got it?
F.I.B.

It’s time to engage in a little fibbing.
(Here, FIB is an acronym for “filling in blanks.”)

Section 1: Using the words in the box below, FIB your way through the five sentences.

advocate, amnesia, amnesty, anonymous, apartheid, entomology, equivocal, febrile, insect, intersect, invoke, nostalgic, retentive, revoke, tenacity, tenement, tenure, vertiginous, vocation, vociferously, vortex

1. After being on vacation for two weeks, Lacy grew __________ for her pet rat, Mr. Binky.
2. In __________ class, our professor accidentally dissected a thousand-dollar display butterfly.
3. “Sorry,” Jessica’s mother said, “but I can’t __________ more than seven earrings.”
4. The defendant had a temporary bout of __________ when asked to recall his whereabouts that night.
5. “You have a very __________ mind,” the teacher told Billy after he recited all the presidents’ middle names in alphabetical order.

If you think we exhausted all the words based on vertere, you have another think coming.
Yes, that’s the original saying. Think about it.
Does it make any sense to say, “You have another thing coming”?

In addition to the common words based on vertere below, there are exotic one like animadversion.

adversary, adverse, advertisement, aversion, diversion, divert, inverse, inversion, invert, obverse, reverse, subversive, subvert, verse, version, versus, vertebral (plural, vertebrae)

Section 2: Use the above words to fill in the blanks below. Not all will be used.

1. While camping in the Adirondacks, the weather __________ against us. The conditions were __________.
2. The TV commercial __________ my head from my girlfriend’s kiss. It was a good __________.
3. Fidel Castro and Che Guevara wanted to undermine Batista’s government by __________ the government over to the people. Their actions were __________.
4. Your spinal column helps you __________ about. That’s why its bones are called __________.
5. The “heads” side of a coin is the obverse. If you __________ it over, you’ll see its __________ side.
6. To __________ the heavy spring-thaw river current away from the village, engineers built a __________ dam.
7. My best friend __________ away from me after I moved to another high school. Now, he’s my __________.
8. Brown __________ Board of Education (1954) was a landmark Supreme Court case outlawing racial segregation in public education facilities.
Across
1 Speech loss from brain damage
3 Rent payer
7 Triangle top
8 A fun side-profession
11 To return to old ways
13 To change from one use to another
14 Alpha _____________ (negator)
16 Outgoing person
19 Holding persistently to something
20 Rationally defensible
21 To hold in place
22 Rule by one sovereign leader

Down
2 Shrinkage of body tissue
4 The direct opposite
5 Court game with lots of “racket”
6 Call forth
7 Dizziness
9 It doesn’t “matter”
10 Severe appetite loss
12 Composed of distinct qualities, as cultures
14 Incite anger
15 The study of word origins
17 A defined area
18 Weak from blood O₂ deficiency
19 A religious doctrine