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# Chillax

If it works like a word, just use it.

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By Erin McKean August 3, 2008

Funner. Impactful. Blowiest. Territorialism. Multifunctionality. Dialoguey. Dancey. Thrifting. Chillaxing. Anonymized. Interestinger. Wackaloon. Updatelette. Noirish. Huger. Domainless. Delegator. Photocentric. Relationshipppy. Bestest. Zoomable.

What do all these words have in common? Someone, somewhere, is using them with a disclaimer like "I know it's not a real word..."

There's no good reason for the "not a real word" stigma. They all look like English words: they're written in the roman alphabet, without numbers or funny symbols. They're all easily pronounced -- not a qwrtlg or a gxrch in the group. From a purely functional point of view, they act like words: relationshipppy in the sentence "Just come to the conclusion that boys don't like talking about relationshipppy things" behaves in exactly the same way that an adjective like girly would. And funner in the sentence "I don't know a better person or a funner person to be around -- I love you, Mom," hinders the understanding of the reader not a jot. We all get that the writer really, really loves her mom, and changing funner to "more fun" wouldn't improve their relationship -- or that heartfelt tribute -- one bit.

But if all these words look wordish, sound wordish, and act wordish, why are they all hedged about with the namby-pamby "I know it's not a real word" disclaimers? (Note: wordish is a perfectly good word.) We all know that there are words that no one can complain about (when was the last time you heard a grammar rant about apple or Tuesday or fair?) and words that almost everyone finds offensive (no need to print them in a newspaper). What we don't have a firm grasp on is the acceptability of a wide range of other words, especially words we've hung affixes on. Redness is OK, but what about grossness? Heroism is fine, but what about thespianism? We have similar problems with words that have undergone a shift in function or part of speech ("shopping at thrift store" becoming thrifting, anonymous becoming verbed as anonymize), nonstandard forms (funner, huger, interestinger), and, of course, any slang words someone hasn't personally heard or used (chillaxing, wackaloon). What does a word have to do to be a "real word"?

Being in a dictionary isn't enough (since territorialism, dancey, noirish, anonymized, bestest, and yes, wordish are all in the Oxford English Dictionary). Does it have to be recognized by your spellchecker? Mine was happy with territorialism, delegator, and, surprisingly, huger. Being frequent isn't enough: funner is slightly more frequent in a two-billion-word corpus of web English than interrobang, and no one says interrobang (a combination of the exclamation point and the question mark) isn't a "real word." Being standard isn't enough: anonymized is a perfectly reasonable way to say "made

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anonymous," and has been for at least a quarter-century. In a printed book? All of the words in the above list are in printed works. (Some of them are even in the titles of printed works.)

Whenever I see "not a real word" used to stigmatize what is (usually) a perfectly cromulent word, I wonder why the writer felt the need to hang a big sign reading "I am not confident about my writing" on it. What do they imagine the penalty is for using an "unreal" word? A ticket from the Dictionary Police? The revocation (as the joke goes) of your poetic license? A public shaming by William Safire? The irony is that most of these words, without the disclaimer, would pass unnoticed by the majority of readers. (In case you noticed cromulent, that was invented in the 1990s for "The Simpsons.") Writers who hedge their use of unfamiliar, infrequent, or informal words with "I know that's not a real word," hoping to distance themselves from criticism, run the risk of creating doubt where perhaps none would have naturally arisen.

Furthermore, those same writers are giving up one of their inalienable rights as English speakers: the right to create new words as they see fit. Part of the joy and pleasure of English is its boundless creativity: I can describe a new machine as bicyclish, I can say that I'm vitaminizing myself to stave off a cold, I can complain that someone is the smilingest person I've ever seen, and I can decide, out of the blue, that fetch is now the word I want to use to mean "cool." By the same token, readers and listeners can decide to adopt or ignore any of these uses or forms.

So, please, leave off the "not a real word" apologia. A far better (and dare I say, funner) technique is to jump in with both feet and use whatever word strikes your fancy. Instead of being defensive, demand that any who dare to quibble over your use prove that your word is, in fact, not a word.

In short, if it seems wordish, use it. No apologies necessary.

*Erin McKean is a lexicographer (dictionaryevangelist.com) and blogger (dressaday.com).* ■

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