

Nine things you should probably know about swearing.

Name _____ Date _____

Adapted from a Time article by Katy Steinmetz, April 2013

<https://newsfeed.time.com/2013/04/10/nine-things-you-probably-didnt-know-about-swear-words/>



Four-letter words have been around since the days of our forebears—and their forebears, too. In *Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing*, a book out this month from Oxford University Press, medieval literature expert Melissa Mohr traces humans’ use of naughty language back to Roman times.

1. The average person swears quite a bit.

About 0.7% of the words a person uses in the course of a day are swear words, which may not sound significant except that we use first-person plural pronouns — words like *we*, *our* and *ourselves* — at about the same rate. The typical range goes from zero to about 3%. What would it be like to have a conversation with a three-percenter? “That would be like Eddie Murphy,” Mohr says. Presumably from *Eddie Murphy Raw*, not from *Shrek Forever After*.

2. Kids often learn a four-letter word before they learn the alphabet.

Timothy Jay, a psychology professor at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts, who uncovered the 0.7% statistic above and has also charted a rise in the use of swear words by children — even toddlers. By the age of two, Mohr says, most children know at least one swear word; it really “kicks off” around the ages of three or four.

3. Some of today’s most popular swear words have been around for more than a thousand years.

“S— is an extremely old word that’s found in Anglo-Saxon texts,” Mohr says. What English-speakers now call *asses* and *farts* can also be traced back to the Anglo-Saxons, she adds, though in those times the terms wouldn’t have been considered as impolite as they are today.

4. The ancient Romans laid the groundwork for modern day f-bombs.

There are two main kinds of swear words, says Mohr: oaths—like taking the Lord’s name in vain—and obscene words, like sexual and racial slurs. The Romans gave us a model for the obscene words, she says, because their swearing was similarly based on sexual taboos, though with a different spin. “The Romans didn’t divide people up [by being heterosexual and homosexual],” she says. “They divided people into active and passive. So, what was important was to be the active partner.” Hence, sexual slurs were more along the lines words like *pathicus*, a rather graphic term which basically means *receiver*.

(MORE: [Children Who Hear Swears on TV Are More Aggressive, Says Study](#))

Nine things you should probably know about swearing.

Name _____ Date _____

Adapted from a Time article by Katy Steinmetz, April 2013

<https://newsfeed.time.com/2013/04/10/nine-things-you-probably-didnt-know-about-swear-words/>



5. In the Medieval era, oaths were believed to physically injure Jesus Christ.

In the Middle Ages, Mohr says, certain vain oaths were believed to actually tear apart the ascended body of Christ, as he sat next to his Father in heaven. Phrases that incorporated body parts, like swearing “by God’s bones” or “by God’s nails,” were looked upon as a kind of opposite to the Catholic eucharist—the ceremony in which a priest is said to conjure Christ’s physical body in a wafer and his blood in wine.

6. However, obscene words were no big deal.

“The sexual and excremental words were not charged, basically because people in the Middle Ages had much less privacy than we do,” Mohr explains, “so they had a much less advanced sense of shame.”

Multiple people slept in the same beds or used privies at the same time, so people observed each other in the throes of their, er, natural functions much more frequently — which made the mention of them less scandalous.

7. People in the “rising middle class” use less profanity.

“Bourgeois people” typically swear the least, Mohr says. “This goes back to the Victorian era idea that you get control over your language and your deportment, which indicates that you are a proper, good person and this is a sign of your morality and awareness of social rules,” she explains. The upper classes, she says, have been shown to swear more, however: while “social strivers” mind their tongues, aristocrats have a secure position in society, so they can say whatever they want — and may even make a show of doing so.

8. Swearing can physiologically affect your body.

Hearing and saying swear words changes our skin conductance response, making our palms sweat. One study, Mohr notes, also found that swearing helps alleviate pain, that if you put your hand in a bucket of cold water, you can keep it in there longer if you say *s*— rather than *shoot*. Which is a good piece of info to have next time you’re doing a polar bear plunge.

9. People don’t use curse words just because they have lazy minds.

Mohr discusses the myriad social purposes swearing can serve, some nasty and some nice. “They definitely are the best words that you can use to insult people, because they are much better than other words at getting at people’s emotions,” she says. Swear words are also the best words to use if you hit your finger with a hammer, because they are cathartic, helping people deal with emotion as well as pain. And studies have shown that they help people bond — like blue-collar workers who use taboo terms to build in-group solidarity against management types. When asked if the world would be better off if everyone stop swearing, Mohr answers with a four-letter word of her own: “Nope.”

Nine things you should probably know about swearing.

Name _____ Date _____



Reading questions

Work with a partner if possible. Answer as many questions as you can.

There will probably be a few words you need to look up. Decide which ones you really need to help with your understanding of the paragraphs.

1. Have a **quick** look – what do you think the article is about?

2. Who wrote @Holy Sh*t: A Brief History of Swearing?

3. What is the technical term for words like *we*, *our*, *ourselves*?

(Bonus question – can you think of a few more examples?)

4. At what age does the average toddler learn their first swear word?

5. How old is the word *fart*? (Bonus question – were words like sh*t, ass and fart thought of as more rude or less rude than they are today?)

Nine things you should probably know about swearing.

Name _____ Date _____



6. If you were a Roman, what was worse – to be gay or to be passive?

(Bonus idea to consider – what do you think of this?)

7. Find a synonym for the phrase ‘useless swearing’ in paragraph 5.

Use a dictionary if it will help.

8. How does swearing affect our bodies?

9. What are some of the uses of swearing? Name 2 from the article.

Can you think of any more?

Curriculum links

Covers several aspects of Level 2 Reading including:

- L2.11 Identify the different situations when the main points are sufficient and when it is important to have specific details
- L2.15 Use a range of reference materials and appropriate resources (e.g. glossaries, legends/keys) for different purposes, including to find the meanings of words in straightforward and complex sources
- L2.16 Understand organisational features and use them to locate relevant information in a range of straightforward and complex sources
- L2.18 Follow an argument, identifying different points of view and distinguishing fact from opinion