

# American Dialect Society

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## In First-Ever Virtual Vote, American Dialect Society Selects “Covid” as 2020 Word of the Year

In a selection that was held virtually for the first time ever, “Covid” was chosen as Word of the Year (2020) by the American Dialect Society in its annual vote. It was the 30th anniversary of the society’s original Word of the Year vote in December 1990. While the selection is typically held in person at the society’s annual meeting, this time the event was conducted as a webinar open to all who were interested in attending via Zoom. More than three hundred attendees took part in the deliberations and voting.

Presiding at the Dec. 17 voting session was Ben Zimmer, chair of the ADS New Words Committee and language columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*.

“A year ago, the word *Covid* didn’t even exist, and now it has come to define our lives in 2020,” Zimmer said. “The selection recognizes how ubiquitous the term has become, from the time that the name for the disease caused by novel coronavirus was dubbed *Covid-19* by the World Health Organization back in February. That was quickly clipped to *Covid*, which then appeared in phrases like *Covid crisis*, *Covid relief*, and *Covid vaccine* – and even *Covid baking*, *Covid hair*, and *covidiot*. It has become a stand-in for the entire pandemic and the societal impacts that we’ll be experiencing for years to come.”

Word of the Year is interpreted in its broader sense as “vocabulary item”—not just words but phrases. The words or phrases do not have to be brand-new, but they have to be newly prominent or notable in the past year.

The vote is the longest-running such vote anywhere, the only one not tied to commercial interests, and *the* word-of-the-year event up to which all others lead. It is fully informed by the members’ expertise in the study of words, but it is far from a solemn occasion.

Members in the 131-year-old organization include linguists, lexicographers, etymologists, grammarians, historians, researchers, writers, editors, students, and independent scholars. In conducting the vote, they act in fun and do not pretend to be officially inducting words into the English language. Instead, they are highlighting that language change is normal, ongoing, and entertaining.

## AMERICAN DIALECT SOCIETY VOTING RESULTS

Raw vote totals and percentages of the vote are given after each nomination. In cases requiring a runoff, two figures are given. Winners are indicated by an asterisk.

### WORD OF THE YEAR (2020)

\* **Covid**: shorthand for *Covid-19*, the name given to the disease caused by infection from novel coronavirus; also used more broadly to refer to the pandemic and its impacts 79 (26%) / 167 (54%)

**2020**: used to sum up chaotic and despondent feelings inspired by the year's events 92 (30%) / 143 (47%)

**antiracism**: the practice of actively working to prevent or combat racism 5(2%)

**Before Times**: the time before the beginning of the pandemic (followed by *Now Times* or *After Times*) 7 (2%)

**BIPOC**: acronym for *Black, Indigenous and People of Color* or *Black and Indigenous People of Color* 0 (0%)

**doomscrolling**: obsessively scanning social media and websites for bad news 55 (18%)

**pandemic**: epidemic over a wide area affecting a large proportion of the population 4 (1%)

**social distancing**: keeping away from others as much as possible to prevent the spread of coronavirus 40 (13%)

**unprecedented**: never having happened, existed, or experienced before 30 (10%)

### MOST LIKELY TO SUCCEED

\* **antiracism**: the practice of actively working to prevent or combat racism 136 (44%) / 219 (72%)

**BIPOC**: acronym for *Black, Indigenous and People of Color* or *Black and Indigenous People of Color* 27 (9%)

**contactless**: requiring no physical contact, to avoid transmitting disease 52 (17%) / 87 (29%)

**curbside**: adjacent to a curb, as for pickup of goods without entering a store or restaurant 23 (7%)

**gigafire**: a wildfire that burns at least a million acres of land 31 (10%)

**Zoomer**: term for Generation Z, originally modeled on *boomer*, now highlighting their use of Zoom for remote learning and other activities 40 (13%)

### MOST USEFUL

\***Before Times**: the time before the beginning of the pandemic (followed by *Now Times* or *After Times*) 114 (36%) / 189 (61%)

**Blursday**: humorous indication of difficulty in determining what day of the week it is 79 (25%) / 120 (39%)

**bubble/pod**: terms for the group with which one remains in quarantine 71 (23%)

**PPE**: abbreviation for *personal protective equipment* 16 (5%)

**superspreader**: a patient or event responsible for spreading infection to many people 22 (11%)

### POLITICAL WORD OF THE YEAR

\* **abolish/defund**: verbs used (at times hyperbolically) to call for drastic restructuring or reforming of law enforcement in the aftermath of the George Floyd police killing 235 (74%)

**dissent collar**: jabot collar worn by Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg when issuing dissenting opinions, and worn by others in her honor after her death 34 (11%)

**freedumb:** reckless or thoughtless invocation of “freedom,” for instance in refusing to wear a mask 19 (6%)

**petromasculinity:** form of masculinity on display during pro-Trump highway rallies 3 (1%)

**red mirage/blue shift:** appearance from early returns in the 2020 presidential election that voting was skewing toward Republicans before more Democratic-leaning votes were counted 27 (9%)

### DIGITAL WORD OF THE YEAR

\* **doomscrolling:** obsessively scanning social media and websites for bad news 255 (81%)

**#BlackInTheIvory:** hashtag used to amplify the voices of Black scholars and their experiences of systemic racism within academia 19 (6%)

**fancam:** video clip made by a fan of a musical act, especially a K-Pop band, which can be used to derail an online conversation or as a form of subversive political protest; also a verb 20 (6%)

**sus:** clipping of “suspicious” often used in the game Among Us to label a player suspected of being an impostor 13 (4%)

**TikToked:** to be made the target of a campaign mobilizing TikTok users, as for political purposes 9 (3%)

### ZOOM-RELATED WORD OF THE YEAR (special 2020 category)

\* **you’re muted:** refrain on Zoom to remind someone to unmute when speaking 215 (65%)

**oysgezoozt:** fatigued or bored by Zoom (formed in Yiddish) 31 (9%)

**Zoombombing:** disruptive intrusion on a Zoom session by online trolls 24 (7%)

**Zoom fatigue:** exhaustion experienced by being over-exposed to Zoom 60 (18%)

**zumping:** [Zoom + dumping] breaking up with someone via Zoom 1 (0%)

### PANDEMIC-RELATED WORD OF THE YEAR (special 2020 category)

\* **social distancing:** keeping away from others as much as possible to prevent the spread of coronavirus 192 (58%)

**contact tracing:** the process of identifying who may have come into contact with a person carrying an infectious disease like coronavirus 1 (0%)

**coronials:** the coronavirus generation, for the predicted baby boom in the wake of the pandemic 10 (3%)

**Covid:** shorthand for *Covid-19*, the name given to the disease caused by infection from novel coronavirus; also used more broadly to refer to the pandemic and its impacts 109 (33%)

**flattening the curve:** the effort to slow the spread of coronavirus by taking community isolation measures 20 (6%)

**moronavirus:** disparaging term for foolish behavior or ideas related to the coronavirus pandemic 0 (0%)

### SLANG/INFORMAL WORD OF THE YEAR

\* **the rona:** playful term for “coronavirus” (also: *Rona, Miss Rona, Aunt Rona*) 107 (35%) / 186 (60%)

**covidiot:** a person who foolishly ignores COVID-19 protocols 39 (13%)

**girls, gays, and theys:** inclusive form of address encompassing female-identifying, LGBTQ, and nonbinary identities 44 (15%)

**poggers:** term used to denote excitement, derived from a Twitch emote showing someone with a surprised expression 34 (11%)

**WAP:** acronym for “wet-ass pussy,” from the song of that title by Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion 82 (27%) / 127 (41%)

**MOST CREATIVE COMBINING FORM**

\* **quaran-**: as in *quarantini*, *quaranteam*, *quaranbeard*, *quarantigue* 119 (38%) / 211 (69%)

**corona-**: as in *coronasomnia*, *coronababies*, *coronacut*, *coronacation* 54 (17%) / 96 (31%)

**Covid-**: *Covid baking*, *Covid fatigue*, *covidiot*, *Covid hair* 25 (8%)

**fatigue**: as in *Covid fatigue*, *lockdown fatigue*, *pandemic fatigue*, *Zoom fatigue* 37 (12%)

**mask-**: as in *maskne* (acne caused by mask-wearing), *maskhole*, *mask break* 34 (11%)

**Zoom-**: as in *Zoombombing*, *Zoom mom*, *Zoom party*, *Zoom school* 37 (12%)

**EUPHEMISM OF THE YEAR**

\* **essential (workers, labor, businesses)**: used for people, often underpaid, who are actually treated as expendable because they are required to work and thus risk infection from coronavirus 209 (65%)

**everything is cake**: expression of extreme distrust, based on memes in which objects turn out to be hyper-realistic cakes 5 (2%)

**freedom seeds**: nickname for ammunition used by the National Rifle Association 8 (3%)

**humaning**: marketing term for a consumer-oriented approach 1 (0%)

**officer-involved shooting**: shooting by a police officer 97 (30%)

**Toobin**, v.: to expose oneself on Zoom in the manner of Jeffrey Toobin 4 (1%)

**EMOJI OF THE YEAR**

\* 🤒 (face with medical mask): indicating mask-wearing during the pandemic 108 (36%) / 184 (60%)

👉👈 (two fingers touching): used to indicate shyness, hesitation, or pleading 55 (19%)

🙏 (face with pleading eyes): used for timid begging or beseeching 29 (10%)

👁️👄👁️ (eye mouth eye): “It is what it is,” also used to express amazement, shock, disgust, or confusion 28 (8%)

✍️ (writing hand): used for bullet-pointed lists of how to fix things 1 (0%)

🤗 (emoji hugging a heart): used on Facebook for the “care” reaction 80 (27%) / 123 (40%)

Founded in 1889, the American Dialect Society is dedicated to the study of the English language in North America, and of other languages, or dialects of other languages, influencing it or influenced by it. ADS members are linguists, lexicographers, etymologists, historians, grammarians, academics, editors, writers, and independent scholars in the fields of English, foreign languages, and other disciplines. The society also publishes the quarterly journal *American Speech*.

The American Dialect Society began choosing Words of the Year in 1990. Winners are listed below. A full account of the previous choices may be found on the American Dialect Society’s website, [www.americandialect.org](http://americandialect.org).

Not all words chosen for a particular year are destined to become permanent additions to the vocabulary. *Y2K* in 1999 and *chad* in 2000 are examples of prominent terms that faded quickly. An explanation of which words are likely to succeed may be found in *Predicting New Words: The Secrets of Their Success* by Allan Metcalf.

**American Dialect Society Words of Previous Years are at**  
**<http://americandialect.org/woty>**