

Words without friends

Written by gallupsun
Thursday, 09 March 2023 21:53

Talking about unpaired socks is like talking about the need to eat food — it happens to everyone. Anyone in the history of humanity who has ever done a load of laundry has ended up with a missing twin sock. This is what it means to be human. Death, taxes, missing socks.

Fortunately for my five-year-old daughter, this isn't a problem. She purposefully mismatches her socks, matching her constantly imaginative personality. Maeve sees unpaired socks as an opportunity for self-expression.

There is a verbal equivalent of unpaired socks — unpaired words. And, just like missing socks, you've encountered them, thought about them... yearned for them, even.

Unpaired words are words that, at first glance, seem to have an obvious, related word. You'd think an unpaired word would have an opposite word based on the usual rules of English etymology. Sure, you can be "nonchalant," but can you be "chalant"? Although you'd think the answer is, "Sure, I guess," "chalant" is not a word; it's an example of an unpaired word.

Have you ever felt "disheveled"? Welcome to my life. These words don't play by the rules, and here's why: if something is "disheveled," then surely something else can be "sheveled," right? Nope — "sheveled" is not a word.

Not only is "disheveled" an example of an unpaired word, but it is also a special example called an "orphaned negative." An orphaned negative has a prefix or suffix like "un-" or "-less" that would lead you to believe you could drop the prefix or suffix to get a word that means the opposite. Other examples include dismayed, disambiguate and irritate.

The more you search "is _____ a word?" in the context of unpaired words, the more you'll find that the answer is, "Yeah, but no one uses the word anymore."

Words without friends

Written by gallupsun

Thursday, 09 March 2023 21:53

What I mean by this, for example, is that “innocent” does have a base word, “nocent,” which means “harmful” or “guilty.” The same goes for words including overwhelm/whelm, debunk/bunk, unkempt/kempt, unwieldy/wieldy and ruthless/ruthful. These words are akin to the socks you find near the dryer six months after losing them.

Before I leave you today, I have to address Michael Scott’s famous unpaired words from The Office

In separate lines, he uses the word “gruntled” to claim his employees aren’t “disgruntled,” and “a little stitious” to contrast himself from someone who is “superstitious.” In the case of “gruntled,” it is a real, although uncommon, word. As for “sticious,” I’m afraid to say, it’s not a word.

Curtis Honeycutt is an award-winning syndicated humor columnist and author. Connect with him at curtishoneycutt.com.

