



The
AMERICAN
HERITAGE®

dictionary

of the
English
Language



HOW TO USE THE DICTIONARY

To look up an entry in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, use the search window above. For best results, after typing in the word, click on the “Search” button instead of using the “enter” key.

Some compound words (like *bus rapid transit*, *dog whistle*, or *identity theft*) don’t appear on the drop-down list when you type them in the search bar. For best results with compound words, place a quotation mark before the compound word in the search window.

[guide to the dictionary](#)



THE USAGE PANEL

The Usage Panel is a group of nearly 200 prominent scholars, creative writers, journalists, diplomats, and others in occupations requiring mastery of language. Annual surveys have gauged the acceptability of particular usages and grammatical constructions.

[The Panelists](#)



AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY APP

The new American Heritage Dictionary app is now available for [iOS](#) and [Android](#).



THE AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY BLOG

The articles in our [blog](#) examine new words, revised definitions, interesting images from the fifth edition, discussions of usage, and more.

THE 100 WORDS®

See word lists from the best-selling 100 Words Series!

[Find out more!](#)



INTERESTED IN DICTIONARIES?

Check out the Dictionary Society of North America at <http://www.dictionariesociety.com>

play 🗣️ (plā)

Share: [Tweet](#)

v. played, play·ing, plays

v.intr.

1. To occupy oneself in an activity for amusement or recreation: *children playing with toys.*
2.
 - a. To take part in a sport or game: *He's just a beginner and doesn't play well.*
 - b. To participate in betting; gamble.
3.
 - a. To behave in a teasing or joking manner; act in jest or sport: *She's not angry with you; she's just playing.*
 - b. To deal or behave carelessly or indifferently, especially for one's own amusement; toy: *She isn't interested in you; she's just playing with you.*
4. To act or conduct oneself in a specified way: *play fair; an investor who plays cautiously.*
5. To act, especially in a dramatic production.
6. **Music**
 - a. To perform on an instrument: *play on an accordion.*
 - b. To emit sound or be sounded in performance: *The band is playing.*
7. To be performed, as in a theater or on television: *A good movie is playing tonight.*
8. To be received or accepted: *a speech that played poorly with the voters.*
9. To move or seem to move quickly, lightly, or irregularly: *The breeze played on the water.*
10. To function or discharge uninterruptedly: *The fountains played in the courtyard.*
11. To move or operate freely within a bounded space, as machine parts do.

v.tr.

1.
 - a. To engage in (a game or sport): *play hockey; play chess.*
 - b. To compete against in a game or sport: *We play the Tigers today.*
 - c. To compete in a game or sport at (a location): *The New York Yankees played Fenway Park last night.*
 - d. To occupy or work at (a position) in a game: *Lou Gehrig played first base.*
 - e. To put (a player) at a position in a sport or in a game: *Let's play her at first base.*
 - f. To use or move (a card or piece) in a game: *play the ace of clubs*
 - g. To hit (a ball, shot, or stroke), as in tennis: *played a strong backhand.*
 - h. To attempt to keep or gain possession or control of: *No foul was called because he was playing the ball.*
2.
 - a. To perform or act (a role or part) in a dramatic performance.
 - b. To assume the role of; act as: *played the peacemaker at the meeting.*
 - c. To pretend to be; mimic the activities of: *played cowboy; played the star.*
3.
 - a. To perform (a theatrical work or part of a work): *The actors played the scene with great skill.*
 - b. To present a theatrical performance or other entertainment in (a given place): *The company played Boston last week.*
4.
 - a. To bet; wager: *played ten dollars on the horse.*
 - b. To make bets on: *play the races.*
5.
 - a. To perform or put into effect, especially as a jest or deception: *play a joke on a friend.*
 - b. To handle; manage: *played the matter quietly.*

c. To use or manipulate, especially for one's own interests: *played his opponents against each other.*

6. Music

a. To perform on (an instrument): *play the guitar.*

b. To perform (a piece) on instruments or an instrument.

7. To cause (a movie, audiotape, or other recording) to be presented in audible or visible form.

8. To discharge or direct in a certain direction: *played the water on the burning roof.*

9. To cause to move rapidly, lightly, or irregularly: *play lights over the dance floor.*

10. To exhaust (a hooked fish) by allowing it to pull on the line.

n.

1.

a. A literary work written for performance on the stage; a drama.

b. The performance of such a work.

2. Activity engaged in for enjoyment or recreation.

3. Fun or jesting: *It was all done in play.*

4.

a. The act or manner of engaging in a game or sport: *After a time-out, play resumed. The golf tournament featured expert play.*

b. The act or manner of using a card, piece, or ball in a game or sport: *my partner's play of the last trump; his clumsy play of the rebound.*

c. A move or an action in a game: *It's your play. The runner was thrown out in a close play.*

5. Participation in betting; gambling.

6. Manner of dealing with others; conduct: *fair play.*

7. An attempt to obtain something; a bid: *a play for sympathy.*

8.

a. Action, motion, or use: *the play of the imagination.*

b. Freedom or occasion for action; scope: *give full play to an artist's talents.*

9. Movement or space for movement, as of mechanical parts.

10. Quick, often irregular movement or action, especially of light or color: *the play of color on iridescent feathers.*

11. A control mechanism on an audio or video player that starts or resumes the audible or visual presentation of a recording.

12. A geological deposit, as of oil or natural gas, considered as a prospect for commercial extraction.

Phrasal Verbs:

play along Informal

To cooperate or pretend to cooperate: *decided to play along with the robbers for a while.*

play around

To philander.

play at

1. To participate in; engage in.

2. To do or take part in halfheartedly.

play back

To replay (a recently recorded tape, for example).

play down

To minimize the importance of; make little of: *played down the defect to protect the troops' morale.*

play off

1. Sports

a. To establish the winner of (a tie) by playing in an additional game or series of games.

b. To participate in a playoff.

2. To set (one individual or party) in opposition to another so as to advance one's own interests: *a parent who played off one child against another.*

play on (or upon)

To take advantage of (another's attitudes or feelings) for one's own interests: *demagogues who play on popular fears.*

play out

To use up; exhaust: *Our strength was played out early in the contest.*

play up

To emphasize or publicize: *She played up her experience during the job interview.*

Idioms:

in play

1. Sports In a position to be legally or feasibly played: *The ball is now in play.*

2. In a position, or rumored to be in a position of possible corporate takeover: *The company's stock rose in price when it was said to be in play.*

out of play *Sports*

Not in a position to be legally or feasibly played.

play ball *Slang*

To cooperate: *The opposing attorneys refused to play ball with us.*

play both ends against the middle

To set opposing parties or interests against one another so as to advance one's own goals.

play fast and loose

To behave in a recklessly irresponsible or deceitful manner: *played fast and loose with the facts.*

play for time

To use delaying tactics; temporize.

play games *Slang*

To be evasive or deceptive: *Quit playing games and tell me what you want.*

play hard to get

To pretend to be uninterested in a romantic relationship.

play in Peoria *Slang*

To be acceptable to average constituents or consumers.

play into (someone's) hands

To act or behave so as to give an advantage to an opponent.

play it by ear

To act according to the circumstances; improvise: *I don't have a set schedule, so we'll have to play it by ear.*

play (one's) cards *Informal*

To use the resources or strategies at one's disposal: *played her cards right and got promoted.*

play possum

To pretend to be sleeping or dead.

play the field

To date more than one person at the same time.

play the game *Informal*

To behave according to the accepted customs or standards.

play up to

To curry favor with.

play with a full deck *Slang*

To be of sound mind: *didn't seem to be playing with a full deck.*

play with fire

To take part in a dangerous or risky undertaking.

play with (oneself) *Vulgar Slang*

To masturbate.

[Middle English *playen*, from Old English *plegian*; see **diegh-** [in the Appendix of Indo-European roots](#).]

play'a·bil i·ty *n.*

play a·ble *adj.*

The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition copyright ©2022 by HarperCollins Publishers. All rights reserved.

Indo-European & Semitic Roots Appendices

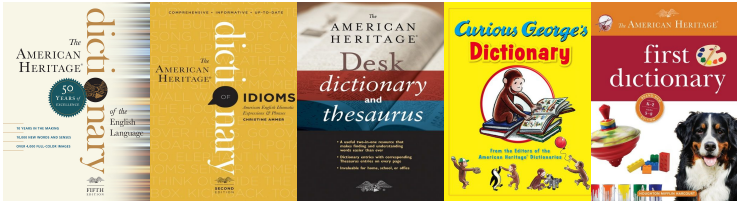
Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

[Indo-European Roots](#)

[Semitic Roots](#)

The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

American Heritage Dictionary Products



[The American Heritage Dictionary, 5th Edition](#) • [The American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms](#) • [The American Heritage Desk Dictionary and Thesaurus](#) • [Curious George's Dictionary](#) • [The American Heritage First Dictionary](#)

• CONTACT US

- [Customer Service](#)
- [Make Me An Author](#)
- [Ebooks Help with Glose Reader](#)

• ABOUT US

- [Company Profile](#)
- [Leadership Team](#)
- [Corporate Social Responsibility](#)
- [HarperCollins Careers](#)
- [HarperCollins Imprints](#)
- [HarperGreen](#)
- [Social Media Directory](#)
- [Accessibility](#)

• FOR READERS

- [Browse Reading Guides](#)

• FOR AUTHORS

- [Submit a Manuscript](#)
- [Report Piracy](#)
- [Agent Portal](#)

• MEDIA

- [Publicity Contacts](#)
- [Press Room](#)

• SERVICES

- [HarperCollins Speakers Bureau](#)
- [Library Services](#)
- [Academic Services](#)
- [Desk & Exam Copies](#)
- [Review Copies](#)
- [OpenBook API](#)
- [Marketing Partnerships](#)

• COVID-19 RESOURCES & PERMISSIONS

- [Permissions for Adult Online Readings](#)
- [Permissions for Kids Online Readings](#)

• SALES & RIGHTS

- [Booksellers & Retailer Ordering](#)
- [HarperCollins Catalogs](#)
- [Permissions](#)
- [Subsidiary Rights](#)

- [Media Rights and Content Development](#)

• GLOSE APP

- [iPhone](#)
- [Android](#)

• GLOBAL DIVISIONS

- [HarperCollins US](#)
- [HarperCollins Canada](#)
- [HarperCollins Christian](#)
- [HarperCollins Australia](#)
- [HarperCollins India](#)
- [HarperCollins UK](#)

 HarperCollins Publishers

News Corp.

[Terms of Use](#) • [Terms of Sale](#) • [Your Ad Choices](#) • [Privacy Policy](#) • [California Privacy Policy](#)
[Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#)

Copyright 2022 HarperCollins Publishers All rights reserved.

*This website is best viewed in Chrome, Firefox, Microsoft Edge, or Safari. Some characters in pronunciations and etymologies cannot be displayed properly in Internet Explorer.