

TALK OF THE '10s

Every age has its slang. In the groovy 1960s, some people were trendsetters, which was A-OK. Others had hang-ups, which was pretty heavy, and *The Man* was a downer.

The 1980s were righteous and totally tubular, and in the 1990s, anyone who didn't like their McJob had to take a chill pill—otherwise they could end up going postal. Get the idea? The 2010s were no exception. The decade had its own share of unique words and phrases. But because of the instant nature of 21st-century internet culture, a lot of them became overused almost as soon as they appeared, generating intense criticism and ending up on year-end “Most Annoying” lists (which didn't seem to hurt their popularity). Here are some of our favorite words of the '10s, and how we got them.

SELFIE

Meaning: A self-portrait taken of one or more people on a digital camera

Story: Here are two important photography milestones:

1. In 1839 Robert Cornelius produced a daguerreotype image of himself, which was the first known photographic self-portrait ever taken.
2. In 2002 Nathan Hope posted a blurry close-up photo of his cut lip, followed by this description: “Um, drunk at a mates 21st, I tripped ofer and landed lip first (with front teeth coming a very close second) on a set of steps. I had a hole about 1cm long right through my bottom lip. And sorry about the focus, it was a selfie.”

That's the first known appearance of the word “selfie.” Hope later said that he didn't coin it; it was common slang at the time in his home country. Based on the word structure of “selfie,” can you guess which country? That's right—*selfie* is Australian for “self-portrait.” A common “slanguage” practice Down Under is to take the first syllable of a word and add an “ie” ending—as in *barbie* (barbecue), *firie* (firefighter), and *Aussie* (Australian).

The word caught on internationally a few years later when the first front-facing camera phones hit the market, ushering in the age of the selfie. It was the *Oxford English Dictionary's* 2013 Word of the Year (and in 2015, the term “selfie stick” was added to the dictionary).

Backlash: Both the word (and the practice) have been blamed for everything from enabling a culture of narcissists to ruining photography, but the fad, which hit its peak in the 2010s thanks to a billion or so social network users on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, is proving to be critic-proof. As far back as 2014, Google was estimating that 93 million selfies were taken *every day*. “What [George] Orwell failed to predict,”

According to *Guinness World Records*, the most difficult tongue twister is
“The sixth sick sheik's sixth sheep's sick.”

noted comedian Keith Lowell Jensen, “is that we’d buy the cameras ourselves, and that our biggest fear would be that nobody was watching.”

MANSPLAIN

Meaning: When a man attempts to explain something to a woman in a patronizing manner, assuming she doesn’t know as much as he does

Story: This portmanteau of “man” and “explain” was borne out of a 2008 essay called “Men Explain Things to Me: Facts Didn’t Get in Their Way” by Rebecca Solnit. She tells a story about an older, distinguished man at a party who’d heard she was an author, and asked, “So, what are your books about?” When Solnit mentioned that one of them was about influential English photographer Eadweard Muybridge, the man interrupted and asked her if she’d read the “very important book” about Muybridge that had been published that year. Solnit’s friend tried to tell the man that he was actually talking *about Solnit’s book*, “but,” she writes, “he just continued on his way. She had to say that it was her book three or four times before he finally took it in. And then, as if in a 19th-century novel, he went ashen. That I was indeed the author of the very important book it turned out he hadn’t read, just read about in the *New York Times Book Review* a few months earlier, so confused the neat categories into which his world was sorted that he was stunned speechless—for a moment, before he began holding forth again. Being women, we were politely out of earshot before we started laughing.”

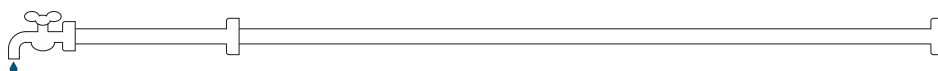
Solnit didn’t actually use the word “mansplain” in her story; it first appeared about a month later in a comment thread under a repost of the essay, where other women shared their own mansplaining tales. Then it became a trending hashtag on Twitter, and two years later in 2010, “mansplain” was the *New York Times* Word of the Year.

Backlash: Even though Solnit didn’t coin the verb, she often gets the credit for it. And at first, she tried to distance herself from *mansplain* “because it seems a little bit more condemnatory of the male of the species than I ever wanted it to be.” In fact, that was the main beef people had against the word—that it pigeonholed men in the same manner that they were accused of pigeonholing women. But then, Solnit recalled, “A PhD candidate [a young woman] said to me, ‘No, you need to look at how much we needed this word, how this word let us describe an experience every woman has but we didn’t have language for.’” So now Solnit is proud of it. (At the BRI, we call it “Unclejohnsplain”...and he does it to *everybody*.)

SAFE SPACE

Meaning: A place—either real or figurative—where one can go to escape from a hostile or traumatic environment

Story: The roots of this term can be traced to Los Angeles in the 1960s, where a “safe space” was any place LGBTQ people could go to avoid being harassed or arrested for



Longest regularly scheduled commercial flight: Singapore to New York (19 hours).

being gay (which was considered a crime). From there, it was adopted by the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s and '80s to describe, not so much a physical place, but a community where women felt they could safely speak about their experiences.

Backlash: The actual “safe spaces” that have spurned such heated debates first showed up on U.S. college campuses in the early 2000s as places for students (usually female) to go if they felt threatened. The *Telegraph* noted in 2015 that the word has been co-opted: “The notion of the ‘safe space’ first emerged to describe a place of refuge for people exposed to racial prejudice or sexism. But the phrase has changed meaning to the point where now it often implies protection from ‘exposure to ideas that make one uncomfortable,’ according to Nadine Strossen, a prominent law professor and former head of the American Civil Liberties Union.” That echoes a common sentiment—mostly among conservatives—that colleges are becoming too “politically correct” and a threat to free speech.

BAE

Meaning: An affectionate nickname for a significant other

Story: “Bae” was added to the *Oxford Dictionary* in 2015—a year after the Pharrell Williams/Miley Cyrus duet “Come Get It Bae” hit #23 on the Billboard Hot 100. But when it comes to tracking the word's origins, etymologists are stumped. The most commonly cited origin—that it's an acronym for “before anyone else”—is false. It's also not a shortened version of Beyoncé, a popular assumption that came about due to the simultaneous ascensions of the word and the pop star. Katherine Connor Martin, head of *Oxford's* U.S. dictionary, explained to *Esquire* why finding the origin of slang words can be tough to do, even in the internet age: “Slang is often very transient, first appearing in subcultures, and then tends to be proliferated online. It's usually difficult to predict which words will break through.” The earliest verifiable appearance of “bae” is from 2003, when an internet user named “Trong” submitted the word to *The Urban Dictionary*, defining it as “bastardization of the term ‘babe’.”

Backlash: “Bae” is one of those words you can put into two distinct categories: people who use it unabashedly, and people who hate it. The most common criticism of “bae,” as the *Independent UK* pointed out in 2015 after naming it “one of the most annoying words in the world right now,” is that it's a pointless abbreviation, writing, “Yeah, cos ‘babe’ takes way too long to say. Yuck.” Echoing that sentiment, the definition of “bae” as “significant other” has been demoted to only the second entry of the word in *The Urban Dictionary*. That's based on the number of “upvotes” it has amassed (about 800). The number-one definition, which has amassed nearly 70,000 upvotes, is “a Danish word for poop.”

*For more of the decade's most controversial words and phrases,
twerk your way on over to page 205.*

You sound different on a recording than you do in your head because when you speak,
your ears pick up vibrations from your throat.

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Here are some more word and phrase origins from the 2010s. Try not to get triggered, snowflake. (The first part is on page 67.)

BINGE-WATCH

Meaning: “Streaming” several episodes of a TV show in one sitting

Story: In rural England in the 1850s, the act of soaking a wooden vessel until it becomes watertight was known as “bingeing.” From that came a description of anyone who drank too much liquor as being “on a binge.” In the 1910s, the term “binge-drinker” appeared, followed in the 1950s by “binge-eater,” and in the 1990s by “binge-reader.” The term “binge-watcher” showed up around 2003, though who coined it is unknown. The first “binge-watching parties” came about after entire seasons of shows like *The X-Files* and *Sex and the City* were released on DVD sets.

But it was in the early 2010s—when Netflix transitioned from renting DVDs by mail to streaming TV shows—that the golden age of binge-watching began. In 2013 the term was voted the word “most likely to succeed” by the American Dialect Society, and two years later, the editors of *Collins English Dictionary* named it the 2015 Word of the Year, declaring binge-watching “the biggest sea change in our viewing habits since the advent of the video recorder nearly 40 years ago.”

Backlash: Hard to believe, but some people view binge-watching as an unhealthy activity. Indeed, studies have shown that it can negatively affect sleep patterns. But immersing oneself in a story for hours on end is an ancient tradition. “I imagine binge-watching is only a technologically enhanced version of a behavior that has been around, at least in rudimentary form, for at least 50,000 years,” Joseph Carroll, a literature professor at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, told *Mashable* in 2019.

Binge-watching is also changing the way TV is being written. *Mad Men* creator Matthew Weiner isn’t a fan—he prefers the weekly episode experience. “I love the waiting,” he said in 2015. “I love the marination. I think when you watch an entire season of a show in a day, you will definitely dream about it, but it’s not the same as walking around the whole week saying, ‘God, Pete really pissed me off!’”

SNOWFLAKE

Meaning: Someone who is easily offended

Story: As we reported in *Uncle John’s Actual & Factual Bathroom Reader*, Chuck Palahniuk popularized this epithet in his 1996 novel (and subsequent film) *Fight Club*. While preparing for a terror attack, the main character, Tyler Durden, tells his minions, “You are not special. You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake.” But

Skunks are immune to yellow jacket venom (but they can die from bee stings).

using “snowflake” as an insult goes back much further than *Fight Club*. According to Merriam-Webster, in the 1860s, Southerners who were pro-slavery were called “snowflakes.” The barb resurfaced in the 1970s to describe Caucasians in general, or African Americans who were accused of acting “too white.”

The positive meaning of “special little snowflake” goes back to the 1960s, but it really came to the fore in the ’80s when the phrase started appearing in self-help, meditation, and teaching manuals—such as this passage from 1983’s *Inside America’s Christian Schools* by Paul F. Parsons about a teacher who “pointed out that God not only made every snowflake different but that every person is unique, too.”

The 1990s is when savvy social commentators like Palahniuk began using it to mean “overly sensitive,” and “snowflake” was lumped in with phrases like “helicopter parent” and “soccer mom.” The word’s popularity peaked in 2016, when the *Guardian* called it that year’s “defining insult.” They tracked down Palahniuk to ask him if he thought “snowflake” is still as relevant 20 years later, and he said it was even more so. “There is a kind of new Victorianism,” he explained. “The modern Left is always reacting to things. Once they get their show on the road culturally, they’ll stop being so offended.” Then he quickly added, “But that’s just my bullsh*t opinion.”

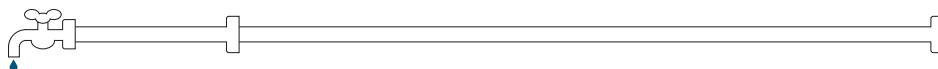
Backlash: In the late teens, the use of “snowflake” expanded from being a political snub thrown at liberals by conservatives to describing anyone—including President Donald Trump—who was accused of being easily “triggered.” One popular meme that made the rounds on Facebook after the 2016 U.S. presidential election: “Liberal Snowflake? Winter is Coming.” (That’s a reference to *Game of Thrones*.) But British humorist John Cleese had a different take: “I think sociopaths use snowflake in an attempt to discredit the notion of empathy.”

BREXIT

Meaning: The withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union, a referendum that a majority of Brits voted in favor of in 2016

Story: This portmanteau of “Britain” and “exit” first showed up in early 2012—albeit in a slightly different form—in a prophetic article in the *Economist* magazine, entitled “A Brixit Looms.” “Brixit” was inspired by “Grexit,” which was coined that same year by economist Ebrahim Rahbari, about the notion that Greece might leave the EU. The first documented appearance of “Brexit” came from Peter Wilding, founder of the think tank British Influence. His May 15, 2012, blog post was titled “Stumbling towards the Brexit.” But after the Greek crisis quieted down, the word fell into relative obscurity until the Brexit vote approached in 2016. Then it “blew up,” as one linguist described, to become Google’s number-one “What is...?” search of the year.

Backlash: “Brexit” had a competitor: “Bremain,” a combination of “Britain” and “remain.” Unfortunately for the Breainers (one of whom was Brexit coiner Peter



Wilding), that word didn't quite roll off the tongue as well as "Brexit," and they became known instead as "anti-Brexiteers"...and they lost the vote.

Bonus: The "-exit" suffix isn't going anywhere. Like "-gate" before it (from the 1970s Watergate scandal), these are two rare suffixes that have been added to modern English. So be on the lookout for "Calexit," "Texit," and "Italexit."

GHOSTING

Meaning: Abruptly ending a relationship with someone by breaking off all contact, especially on social media and dating sites

Story: Whoever gave life to "ghosting" is lost to history, but this truly is a 21st-century term, first appearing in *The Urban Dictionary* in 2006 as "the act of disappearing on your friends without notice." The word's popularity peaked in the mid-teens when news site after news site ran alarmist articles such as "And Then I Never Heard from Him Again: The Awful Rise of Ghosting," "Are Dating Apps to Blame for 'Ghosting'?" and "Ghosting: What to Do if You've Been a Victim." Though the word is modern, as *L.A. Magazine* wrote in 2019, "Ghosting isn't a revolutionary concept, it's just a newish name for something humans have done forever: choosing the path of least resistance out of selfishness or maybe self-preservation."

Proving there really is more than one way to leave your lover:

- The "slow fade" is incremental ghosting, wherein you try to ease your way out of their life, hoping they don't notice until you're gone.
- "Caspering" (named for Casper, the Friendly Ghost) is when you let your partner know you'll be eliminating them from your life, but in a friendly way.
- "Ghostbusting" is turning the tables on the ghoster by tracking them down and forcing them to acknowledge you.
- And for literature lovers, there's "Marleying," when an ex contacts you from out of nowhere during the holidays, just like the recently deceased Jacob Marley did to Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's 1843 ghost story *A Christmas Carol*.

Bonus: This is one of several modern alternate meanings of "ghost," which spent most of its thousand-year existence as a noun meaning "spirit of a deceased person" (it comes from the Old English *gast*). A few examples: There's *ghosting* in comment threads (making comments invisible to everyone but the poster), *ghosting* in digital photography (when a moving object in bracketed exposures shows up blurry), *ghosting* in identity theft (pretending to be a dead person), *ghosting* in online gaming ("collaborating with an accomplice in observer mode to view opponents' positions in order to gain a competitive edge"), and *ghost-writing* (what you could be reading right now).

*For more of the tumultuous teens' most talked-about terms,
stream your way over to page 317.*



If you straightened out a French horn, it would be about 20 feet long.

TALK OF THE '10s

More word and phrase origins from the 2010s.

CLICKBAIT

Meaning: A linked image or headline on a web page, designed to entice—and often deceive—the reader into clicking on it

Story: From the same idea as “to bait a fishhook,” this internet term started life as “linkbait” in the early 2000s. According to the website *Know Your Memes*, linkbait referred to “web content produced to encourage links from other websites for search engine optimization purposes.” Riffing on that word, in 2006 a corporate systems advisor named Jay Geiger coined “clickbait” in a blog post, defining it as “any content or feature within a website that ‘baits’ a viewer to click” the mouse button. “Clickbait” made its way into *The Urban Dictionary* that year, and into *The Oxford English Dictionary* in 2014.

Backlash: The word “clickbait” sums up the more cynical aspects of the 2010s in that it describes something that looks flashy and promises a great reward, but ultimately falls short of what was expected. But the practice was so successful at generating ad revenue that it felt like clickbait articles had started to outnumber real ones.

Swooping in to help stem the tide is an organization called “Stop Clickbait,” founded in 2016 by a Colorado college student named Daniel Tuttle. “We’ve reached a point where publishers are creating content for the sole purpose of bringing in clicks,” he complained. So he and a team of volunteers click on clickbait stories and then navigate the host site’s auto-play ads, pop-up windows, lists, surveys, and whatever other hoops they make you jump through to get to the payoff. Then they post the “spoilers” online as a public service for their 200,000 Facebook fans. Twitter users can submit their own spoilers with the hashtag #StopClickbait. Here are a few amusing examples:

Clickbait: “Find out what Prince George is Called at Preschool” (*People.com*)

Spoiler: “George.”

Clickbait: “Dogs In Wheelchairs Gather Around Owner. But What They Do NEXT? This Is Incredible...” (*Liftable.com*)

Spoiler: “They chase a stick.”

Clickbait: “He Thought It Was Bigfoot’s Skull, But Then Experts Told Him THIS” (*Diply.com*)

Spoiler: “It’s a rock.”

Clickbait: “Man Swallowed a MicroSD Card and You Won’t Believe What Happened Next!” (*The Verge.com*)

Spoiler: “He pooped it out.”

Carrots and spinach have fewer nutrients in them than they did 40 years ago.

TWERK

Meaning: A racy dance in which the backside protrudes while shaking at a high rate of speed

Story: This quirky word has had quite a history in the English language. In 1820 a man named Charles Clairmont wrote in a letter to *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley, “Really the Germans do allow themselves such twists & twirks of the pen, that it would puzzle any one.” The word was used in the 1840s as “to move something slightly by twitching” (like a cat’s tail), in the 1920s as a variant of “jerk,” and in the 1940s to describe a bad situation that just got worse. And in 1993 New Orleans–based rapper DJ Jubilee wrote in his song “Jubilee All,” “Shake baby, shake baby, shake, shake, shake. Twerk baby, twerk baby, twerk, twerk, twerk.” The modern meaning came out of New Orleans’s bounce music scene, and while the most common theory is that it’s a combination of two words, exactly which two is unclear. It’s either “twitch” and “jerk,” or “twist” and “jerk,” or it’s a variation of “work,” as in “footwork” or “work it.” In New Orleans, where the dance originated, the going consensus is that it’s a contraction of “to work,” as in “t’work,” or “t’werk,” finally morphing into “twerk.”

Backlash: However it shook into being, few people outside of America’s “dirty south” ever heard the word until August 2013, when Miley Cyrus performed the raunchy dance on MTV’s Video Music Awards. By a strange coincidence, the show aired the

“Did Miley Cyrus help ‘twerk’ land in the dictionary?” No, she didn’t.

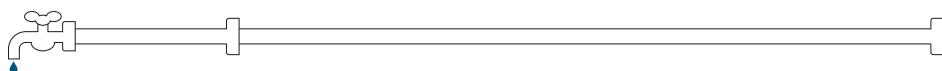
very same week that Oxford announced the addition of “twerk” to its online dictionary. The timing led some in the media to speculate, as *USA Today* did, “Did Miley Cyrus help ‘twerk’ land in the dictionary?” No, she didn’t, said Oxford’s Katherine Connor Martin, who assured outraged lexicographers that Oxford had been planning to add the word for several months. (And so far, it’s only in the *Oxford Dictionary Online*, not the more hallowed *Oxford*

English Dictionary.) Martin said that if you want to blame someone, blame the millions of people who made “twerk” Google’s number-one “What is...” search that year. (It was runner-up for Oxford’s Word of the Year, losing to “selfie.”)

Bonus: *Twerk* wasn’t the only word added to Oxford that ruffled language-lovers’ feathers. Other controversial additions included *srsly*, *vom*, *apols*, and *squee*. (In case you require translating, they mean “seriously,” “to vomit,” “my apologies,” and “an expression of great delight.”)

But what word had the biggest impact on the 2010s?

To find out, go to page 467. #heres_a_clue



The shade “Indian yellow” was originally made from the urine of cows who ate a lot of mangoes.

#TALKOFTHETEENS_

HASHTAGS

On page 317, we shared the stories behind some of the most ubiquitous words and phrases of the 2010s. As we were finishing up, we realized we almost forgot one of the most ubiquitous: “hashtag.” The story of this little symbol turned out to be so big that we had to give it its own article. #origins #technology #popculture #bathroomreading #arewedointhisright

HASHTAGS 101

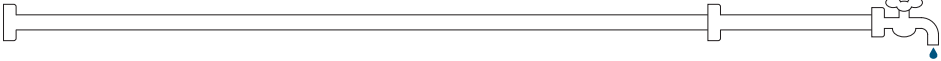
When Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers look at this thing—#—the phrase that springs to mind is probably “number sign” or “pound sign.” But for most Millennials and anyone born after 2000, the only thing this symbol has ever been is a hashtag. And it seems that the younger you are, the more natural the concept of hashtagging is. So for you older non-tech types out there, here’s how it works: the practice of “hashtagging” is typing a number sign, followed by a word or phrase, on social media websites like Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram. Once you type it, the word or phrase (the hashtag) becomes blue, turning it into a hyperlink. Now, the post or tweet that it’s attached to is instantly accessible to anyone else who views that same hashtag. Structurally, a hashtag can consist of only letters, numbers, or underscores (no other symbols or spaces).

Let’s say you post a photo of a toilet and then caption it, “Look at my awesome toilet!” No matter what social media site you’re on, if that’s all there is to your post, then only your “friends” (people you’re connected to) can see it. But if you add the hashtag #toilet after the post, then any of the other millions of people on that site who are interested in toilets can find your toilet pic. The more relevant hashtags you add (#awesome #porcelain #sitting_pretty), the more chances for people to see it. Also referred to as “keywording,” this is just one of the hashtag’s many functions. You can use them to add commentary or self-deprecating humor to your posts (such as #isanyonereallyreadingthis), for advertising campaigns, and to follow developing news stories.

But how did the number sign come to be called a hashtag?

SYMBOLIC ORIGINS

The number sign (#) and the British pound sign (£) have had an intertwining history. For example, the number sign is also called a pound sign, but that refers to the weight measurement, not British currency. Both symbols, however, come from the Latin *libra pondo* (“pound weight”), which was shortened to this: **℔**. The horizontal line was



Florida’s Kingsley Lake, a former sinkhole, is the most circular natural lake in the world.

added to clarify that it's the letter l and not the number 1. And over time, as written shorthand developed, the symbol eventually transformed into this: #. It's unclear exactly when that happened, but by the time typewriters became available in the 19th century, they all included the #. Since then, the symbol has served many purposes: it is most commonly used to indicate numbers and weights; in musical notation, it indicates a sharp; in copyediting, it means to add a space; and if you're notating a chess match, a # means "checkmate."

In the 1960s, the symbol changed yet again when technicians at Bell Labs placed it below the number 9 on the first telephones with touch-tone keypads. They called the thing an "octatherp" or "octothorpe" (the stories vary), claiming it was a combination of the ancient Greek *octo* and the Old Norse *thorpe*, meaning "eight villages." That's what we reported in 2001 in our *Supremely Satisfying Bathroom Reader*, but later research revealed that the Bell techs may have named the word after famed Native American athlete Jim Thorpe. Or maybe it came from James Oglethorpe, the British general who founded the state of Georgia.

Whatever the true origin, it doesn't matter because "octothorpe" never caught on as a name for the symbol—which has also been called a crunch, diamond, grid, mesh, thud, thump, splat, tic-tac-toe, pig-pen, crosshatch, and hash mark. And if you phone businesses in some Asian countries, you may hear, "Please enter your phone number followed by the hex key."

COMMON KNOWLEDGE

The # symbol moved from analog to digital in the 1980s when it started showing up in early text-messaging IRC (Internet Relay Chat) networks to label groups. So in August 2007, it wasn't a huge leap for a San Francisco typographer named Chris Messina to type, "How do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?" Messina was on Twitter, which was barely a year old. And #barcamp is now considered the world's first hashtag. Here's the tweet:

Chris Messina

@chrismessina

how do you feel about using # (pound) for groups. As in #barcamp [msg]?

♥ 10.4K 11:25 AM - Aug 23, 2007

💬 5,208 people are talking about this



Nintendo translates to "leave luck to heaven."

Messina, who also had a hand in developing Google and Uber, was proposing using a hyperlinked word to connect online users who were discussing the same topic. “At the time,” he later recalled, “we were thinking Twitter needs some kind of group organizing framework.” Messina said he chose the number sign mainly because it was easy to access on his Nokia phone. (In those days, phones didn’t have QWERTY keyboards, so texting was a more painstaking process on the numbers keypad.)

Two days later, a fellow techie named Stowe Boyd elaborated on Messina’s idea in a blog post he called “Hash Tags = Twitter Groupings,” writing, “I support the hash tag convention.” And that marked the first use of the term “hashtag.” Boyd was drawing from yet another name for the # symbol, a hash mark. The “hash” part is British (short for “cross-hatch”), which most likely came from the stripes on 1910s military jackets, but it’s unclear exactly when the word became associated with the symbol. Regardless, Boyd’s term “hashtag” had a lot going for it from the start: it’s short, fun to say, and nothing had ever been called that before.

TRENDING TOPIC

Messina brought the hashtag concept to Twitter executives, explaining that it might help “organize tweets so you know what to pay attention to and what to ignore.” But other Twitter users were slow to embrace it, as were the higher-ups at the company. “They didn’t like it,” Messina told the *New Statesman* in 2014. “They said it was ‘for nerds’ and would likely never catch on.”

The hashtag got a huge boost in October 2007 when a wildfire broke out near San Diego, California. Messina noticed that several people were tweeting about the fire, and suggested to one of them that he follow each tweet with #sandiegofire. Soon others were using the same hashtag, and Messina realized that a lot of people around the world wanted to be able to participate in conversations like these, and using hashtags was a simple way to achieve that goal.

Still, for the next couple of years, hashtags were mostly viewed as something that only tech geeks used. But Messina kept pushing the idea, and in 2009 Twitter started automatically linking anything that began with a hashtag. “The more companies they acquired that supported hashtags,” he said, “the more inevitable it became that Twitter would need to officially support them.” A year later, the company added hashtag-generated “trending topics” to its home page, and the word went mainstream. In January 2011, Audi released the first hashtag campaign in a Super Bowl commercial. Two Super Bowls later, half of the commercials featured hashtags.

JOIN THE CONVERSATION

In 2012 the American Dialect Society voted “hashtag” Word of the Year, explaining that it had become “a ubiquitous phenomenon in online talk...creating instant social

Truly useless trivia: The first *Brady Bunch* girl to get married was Jan.

trends, spreading bite-sized viral messages on topics ranging from politics to pop culture.” Merriam-Webster added the word to its dictionary in 2014. By that time, all the other major social media outlets had installed a hashtag feature. Result: if you want to build a huge following on photo-sharing sites like Instagram and Pinterest, you have to master the use of hashtags. In fact, some users prefer to follow hashtags and not people. Hashtag use became so rampant, in fact, that social media sites now enforce a strict no-more-than-30-hashtags-per-post limit.

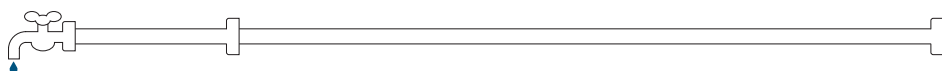
Now that the internet has been taken over by #s, their impact is being felt all over the real world. Some examples:

#breaking_news: Place a hashtag in front of an unfolding event like #puertorico or #bostonmarathon and your post becomes the leading news source. This feature has made Twitter a competitor to 24-hour cable news networks—routinely beating them to breaking news stories and allowing unfiltered, on-the-ground information to get out to the public. As a result, more and more journalists have turned to Twitter as a source.

#activism: Put a hashtag in front of an idea, and it can help launch an entire social movement. Examples: #Bahrain (the hashtag that launched the #ArabSpring), #TaxedEnoughAlready (the hashtag that launched the Tea Party), as well as #OccupyWallStreet, #BlackLivesMatter, and #MeToo. In 2014 hashtags helped the #IceBucketChallenge (a summer trend that saw people pour ice water on themselves) raise more than \$115 million for ALS research, which actually led to the discovery of a previously unknown gene that causes the neurodegenerative disease.

#advertising: Creative uses of hashtagging have become crucial tools for businesses both big and small to increase fans and awareness. One of the earliest successes was the NBA’s decision in 2012 to allow fans to vote for their All-Star Game picks using the hashtag #NBAVOTE along with the player’s name and/or Twitter handle. Marketers love these types of campaigns because they get the customers to do the advertising for them. For example, in 2015 Disney (in conjunction with the Make-A-Wish Foundation) kicked off its five-year-long #ShareYourEars campaign, inviting Twitter’s 330 million users to post a selfie wearing Mickey Mouse ears and then tag it #ShareYourEars. The tweeters got to feel like they were part of something bigger, Make-A-Wish made tens of millions of dollars, and Disney increased their brand awareness (as if they needed it).

#education: If it’s been a few years since you were in school, you’d be amazed at the ways hashtags are being incorporated into assignments and curriculums. For example, teachers who want to join a “Personal Learning Network” will read this



Every time he plays President Donald Trump on *Saturday Night Live*, Alec Baldwin gets \$1,400.

on the “Getting Smart” home page: “When used properly, education hashtags can help you take part in important conversations and make valuable connections whether you’re a teacher, principal, or superintendent. Some hashtags are genuinely helpful when you are trying to search for important things like #GOPDebate or #NationalCatDay, while some of them are #completelymadeupandridiculous.”

#completelymadeupandridiculous:

Uncle John’s favorite use of the symbol, not surprisingly, is the wordplay game “Hashtag Wars,” popularized by the Comedy Central game show *@Midnight* (2013–17), in which comedians had to come up with witty puns based on hashtag challenges. The game outlasted the show, and is still played online today. (We can’t mention this game and then not give an example. The hashtag challenge #AddStarWarsImproveAMovie inspired such entries as *A Death Star is Born*, *The Hills Have Jedis*, *R2-D2 Mighty Ducks*, *The Sith Sense*, and *Cool Hand Luke Skywalker*.)

A TIP FROM UNCLE JOHN

People with huge followings on social media tend to use a lot of hashtags. You may think that seems annoying, or that the poster is “fishing” for attention by casting a wide net with hashtags...and you’re right. Using that many hashtags will attract many more eyeballs. But how many is too many and how few is too few? According to the social media marketing experts at TrackMaven, the perfect number is nine. Posts with exactly nine hashtags receive more “engagement” (meaning views, reposts, likes, and comments) than posts with more or fewer.

When the hashtag turned 10 years old in 2017, *Wired* magazine summed up its impact: “Sure, it can indicate where you’re posting from (#OvalOffice) or what you’re posting about (#FakeNews), but the hashtag has also shaped elections, launched social movements, and transcended its meaning as a mere keystroke to become a defining symbol of the digital age.”

#BACKLASH

These days, it seems, nothing can get *this* popular and not have its share of “haters” (another term from the 2010s), especially after the term “hashtag” made the jump from cyberspace to real life. Take the 2013 Grammy Awards—host LL Cool J was either trying to sound hip, or he was making fun of the word, when he said to the crowd, “I’ve been backstage reading all your tweets about hashtag Grammys. We’re going to see hashtag Carrie Underwood, hashtag Jack White, hashtag Kelly Clarkson, hashtag Bruno Mars, and hashtag Sting.” And among Millennials and members of Generation Z, it’s not uncommon for an awkward silence to be broken with the statement, “Hashtag awkward!” Another one you might hear is “hashtag winning.”

Ew! A rat can bite through your toenail.

But for some reason, hearing the word uttered in the real world really riles some folks. Case in point: A 2017 comment thread on the website Mumsnet that was titled “To not understand what someone means when they say ‘hashtag?’” There was post after post (59 in all) of bewildered moms trying to explain to each other what “hashtag” means. Many of the posts read like this one: “It’s nonsense. It makes no sense, which is why you do not understand it! # is a reference to Twitter, but people seem to think it is cool to say it in [real life] when it should be left on Twitter.”

A 2011 *Gizmodo* article called “How the Hashtag Is Ruining the English Language” was even harsher: “Hashtags at their best stand in as what linguists call ‘paralanguage,’ like shoulder shrugs and intonations. That’s fine. But at their most annoying, the colloquial hashtag has burst out of its use as a sorting tool and become a linguistic tumor—a tic more irritating than any banal link or lazy image meme.”

HASHTAGS FOR ALL

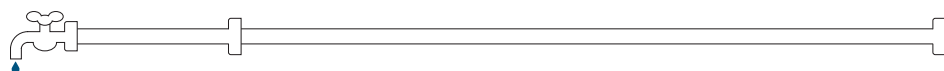
Like all elements of a living language, hashtags have proven their versatility and ability to adapt to whatever users want them to be—not unlike the # symbol from which they came. So don’t expect hashtagging to fade out like other 2010s fads (remember Gangnam Style?). “Nowadays,” wrote the entrepreneur website Seed Spot, “Hashtags are more than a #throwbackthursday or #mancrushmonday. They are the lifeline of social media, connecting followers with causes and increasing donation power. Hashtags give a voice to those without a pedestal, unify complete strangers, and can generate unstoppable momentum.”

And it’s important to note that “Open Source” advocate Chris Messina never copyrighted his idea because he believes hashtagging should be a tool that any user on any social media site can use...for free. “The hashtag was not created for Twitter,” he is quick to remind people. “The hashtag was created for the internet.” And he’s especially proud of where it came from: “Of all the possible symbols I could have chosen, I think the octothorpe was the best one. As a typography lover, I do like the look of the symbol. It’s one of the more dense characters, so you can see it from a distance or at a glance—it’s hard to miss!” #he_aint_kidding

* * *

PERFECT FOR THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE

A firearms manufacturer in Kentucky has figured out a way to weaponize the chainsaw. They developed a Chainsaw Bayonet, which is exactly what it sounds like: a small, fully powered chainsaw that attaches to the end of an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle.



What happens at the Eiffel Tower each night at 1 a.m.? They turn off the lights.