

RD.COM > CULTURE

# The 11 Words That Defined 2019

**Dana Robinson**

Updated: Dec. 19, 2019

What sent people straight to their trusty online dictionaries this year? These telling words that are mostly derived from politics, crime, and pop culture.

Every product is independently selected by our editors. If you buy something through our links, we may earn an affiliate commission.



THPSTOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK

## More than words

Once again, the Merriam-Webster team has compiled a list of the top [Words of the Year](#). And 2019's Word of the Year is...[drum roll, please]...*they*. Yes, the very basic word *they*, though its definition has expanded as of late. It is now also being used as a singular pronoun instead of *he* or *she* for a nonbinary individual, or someone who doesn't identify as strictly male or female. This use of *they* was also added to Merriam-Webster.com in September. Speaking of which, [this is how words get added to the dictionary](#).

So, how did the folks at Merriam-Webster decide on this as [the defining word of 2019](#)? The Word of the Year must have been a top lookup at Merriam-Webster.com in the past year, and it must have seen a notable rise in lookups over the previous year. The same goes for the other words on the list, which also typically reflect political and cultural changes in our society. Here are more of the words that shaped 2019 for us.



MICHAEL CANDELORI/SHUTTERSTOCK

## Quid pro quo

The literal translation of this phrase is "[something for something](#)." The term has been all over the news since President Donald Trump has been accused of withholding congressionally approved aid to Ukraine unless the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky, agreed to announce the launch of an investigation into former vice president Joe Biden. Of course, people wanted to know what this Latin phrase meant, but there's more to it than that. "The search popularity of this phrase indicates that people want to understand what's really true," says Shel Horowitz, author of [Guerrilla Marketing to Heal the World](#). What is the "something" that's wanted in response to "something" else? That was the question, in particular, on September 25th, October 17th and 18th, and November 20th, when searches for this term spiked on the dictionary site, resulting in a 644 percent increase over last year.



ANDREA IZZOTTI/SHUTTERSTOCK

## Impeach

And we're back to Donald Trump, who has been the subject of impeachment proceedings this year; just recently, the House of Representatives [voted to impeach him](#). "Since [impeachment proceedings were] only used three times previously since the founding of the Republic, voters...want to know exactly what it means," says Horowitz. They also want to know the details, including "when it may be invoked, what the consequences are, and perhaps what the Founders had in mind when they wrote it into the Constitution." But even when they know the basic definition, these are [13 things people often get wrong about impeachment](#).



MELANIWRIGHT/SHUTTERSTOCK

## Crawdad

This word experienced a lookup spike when [Where the Crawdads Sing](#) by Delia Owens hit the *New York Times* Best Sellers list. It's a nickname for a crawfish—a little lobster-like delicacy that's popular in the South. "The fact that this word made the list is a testament to Southern slang being alive and well," says Jen Susca, former culture writer for *Sonnet Dame Magazine*. Here are some [slang words no one outside your state will understand](#). But depending on what happens in the world over the next few months, maybe they'll make the list next year!



MARCO MENEZES/SHUTTERSTOCK

## Egregious

A Boeing pilot used this word to describe an issue with [737 MAX planes](#), which were involved in several fatal crashes in 2018 and 2019. It's a more elegant and damning vocabulary choice than using the term "very, very bad." It's "a word so heavy with negative connotations [that it] seems the only appropriate way to convey the anguish of disasters, such as the Boeing 737 MAX planes," says Susca. While *egregious* has had a home in the dictionary for many years, [these 25 brand-new words were added to the dictionary in 2019](#).



MARK HUMPHREY/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK

## Clemency

Lookups spiked a whopping 9,900 percent after the governor of Tennessee granted clemency (an act or instance of mercy, compassion, or forgiveness) to Cyntoia Brown, a woman who had been convicted of murdering a man when she was a 16-year-old victim of sex trafficking. "The word represents the extraordinary healing power inherent in forgiveness," says Paul L. Hokemeyer, PhD, author of [Fragile Power: Why Having Everything Is Never Enough](#). "It also represents our human capacity to see things in shades of gray rather than in polarizing black and white." Check out these [15 fascinating facts about dictionaries that will make you want to pick one up](#).



KEN WOLTER/SHUTTERSTOCK

## The

We use it so much, but do we really know what it means? This 500 percent lookup spike was prompted by The Ohio State University filing a trademark application for the word *the* with the U.S. Patent Office. The goal was to protect new branding logos that emphasize that "The" is part of the official name of the institution. It "inadvertently reaffirmed the importance of even the most elementary of words," says Susca. Believe it or not, [these 16 words you use every day are trademarked](#).

