

Can You Please Look Up Dord in Webster's Dictionary For Me?

Webster's Dictionary is by far one of the most revered and respected dictionaries in the world. Its original creation in 1829 has seen many, many subsequent versions being printed, each one a variant of its precursor. Though many adaptations of this lexicographical tome have been produced, it was during the editing stages of the 1934 edition, commonly referred to as "Webster's Second" (the "second" referring to this version being the large scale revision of the 1909 version entitled "Webster's New International Dictionary"), that one of the funniest things to happen to Webster's Dictionary (or any dictionary for that matter) occurred.

This edition of Webster's would go on to become perhaps their most well respected to date, despite (or perhaps thanks to) the 1961 release of Webster's Third New International Dictionary, a book that saw many rather liberal changes being made to the standard format, and the inclusion of certain "slang" words that resulted in mass criticism of Webster's Dictionary. But let's go back to 1934; Thomas A. Knott and William Allen Neilson were heading up the hallowed book's editing that year.

When editing any book, even the most careful of eyes and resourceful of fact checking may accidentally overlook a small mistake or two. Yet while this may mean little in the majority of books, when the dictionary does it you would think people would take notice. And when the dictionary not only creates a typo but an entirely new word, you would surely think this would catch someone's attention at some point. Yet for five whole years a word existed in the 1934 version of Webster's that was not a word at all, but rather a mistake arising from what was meant to be an abbreviation for the word "density".

When a Webster's editor spotted the mistake in 1939 he began a search to get to the root of this fictitious word, as he had never encounter "dord" before. What was discovered is that in July of 1931, a chemistry editor for Webster's submitted a definition for the word density that read, "'D or d, cont./density". The submitter's intention was to have the word "density" added to the latest set of words that the letter "D" can be used as an abbreviation for. However, somehow this definition was not linked to the word density, instead someone believed "dord" to be its very own word! A vernacular slip up that went unnoticed by the proofreaders when they checked page 771 of that edition.

What was meant to go into the abbreviation section of the dictionary at the back of the book became a very real word. This is largely the fault of the stylist editor at the time that received the submission in the first place. Instead of putting the word "or" (as in "D or d") in italics, which would have therefore indicated that the letters should be abbreviations, a wavy line was drawn underneath. This error meant that the "D or d" would go on to be set in bold, as is the manner of an entry for a word, along with the label of "Physics and Chemistry". Subsequent small errors turned the word into a noun, resulting in "dord" becoming its own word.

However in 1939 when it was discovered that dord was not a bona fide word it was yanked out as quietly as it had been entered from the pages of Webster's. A phantom word that existed for five years, yet no one in the general public is recorded as having noticed the blunder, testimony to just how much stock we really put in Webster's Dictionary.

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