

# F is for ...



## We can write luck, chuck or duck, but there's one word polite society won't spell out. What the f---?

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I WROTE A story recently with five f---s in it and when the story was published, sure enough, three of the four letters in each f--- had been removed. On publication, it just read as f---, not f--- with the “c”, “k” and “u” in there.

It always happens. You write f--- because someone says f--- and you want to quote them accurately, but you know that as soon as you commit that word to the page, those three offending letters will be removed. Fine to write luck, duck, suck, pluck and muck, but not f---.

Why is that? Is it that in 2024 we're still too squeamish to read one of the most commonly used words in the English language? Is the reading public scandalised by this word because it contains a clear and penetrating sexual inference, one that renders it an obscenity? Why so easily offended?

The subject of my story had used the “f” word a number of times during our interview and I'd quoted her faithfully. She'd said, “No f---ing way.” “What the f---.” “Holy f---.” And “What the actual f---”. Then a bit later, “Oh you beautiful thing. Holy f--- I'm sorry.”

It was arresting the way she used the word, almost a form of haiku one could dance to. But then the story appeared and the affronting letters had been deleted. I mean, seriously, WTF.

By all means show on the nightly news cities devastated by relentless bombing campaigns, hospitals overrun by the sick and dying, mass graves being dug for entire families, children begging for food or wandering aimlessly through the moonscape of their destroyed homes.

Allow social media networks to disseminate scenes of torture, murder, public execution. Give us unregulated hardcore porn in which men often take pleasure in hurting women. Allow misogyny, public shaming and hate speech to flourish. Stream every conceivable act of blood-curdling awfulness that a script-writer can dream up for our already creaped out, sleep-deprived bodies.

Allow all this, but don't on any account write f--- in full, even though it's one of the most widely used words in the English language, certainly the most supple and versatile.

YEARS AGO, I listened to an Indian spiritual teacher do a meditation on this word. Listening to him, I realised I'd heard it before – from an Australian scientist, the late, great geneticist and theologian, Professor Charles Birch, whom I'd interviewed for this magazine back in the 1980s.

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“One of the most interesting words in the English language today is the word f---,” Birch told me. “It is one magical word. Just by its sound, it can describe pain, pleasure, hate and love. It falls into many grammatical categories.

“It can be used as a verb, both transitive – John f---ed Mary – and intransitive – Mary was f---ed by John – and as a noun: Mary is a fine f---. It can be used as an adjective: Mary is f---ing beautiful.

“As you can see, there are not many words with the versatility of f---. Besides the sexual meaning, there are also the following uses:

“Fraud: I got f---ed at the used car lot.

“Ignorance: F---ed if I know.

“Trouble: I guess I'm f---ed now!

“Aggression: F--- you!

“Displeasure: What the f--- is going on here?

“Suspicion: What the f--- are you doing?

“Enjoyment: I had a f---ing good time.

“Request: Get the f--- out of here!

“Greeting: How the f--- are you?

“Apathy: Who gives a f---?

“Surprise: F---! You scared the shit out of me!”

Around the same time that Birch was waxing lyrical on the merits of f---, I watched Eddie Murphy perform his one-man show, *Delirious*. It was his breakout, stand-up comedy special for television and it was to end up catapulting him into the celebrity stratosphere.

Twenty-two years old and stalking the stage in skin-tight red leather, Murphy used the “f” word 230 times – he used shit 171 times as well – and I remember lying on my couch thinking I might actually die from laughing because of all the f---ed-up motherf---ers Murphy was hurling at us, his scandalised – but thoroughly delighted – audience.

It was a seminal moment in stand-up comedy and, quite possibly, a seminal moment in the history of this rather extraordinary word.

ACCORDING TO Wikipedia, although the etymology of f--- is uncertain, it seems to have ancestral links to the German word *ficken*, which means to f---. It might also derive from the Dutch word *fokken*, which means to breed, or possibly the Icelandic word *fokka* – to mess around – or the Norwegian word *fukka*, meaning to copulate. All this suggests that people are much the same the world over. We like to *ficken* and to *fokken*.

I read, too, about a man called John le Fucker [note to editors: this is really his name, so please don't amputate the word], who lived in 13th-century Britain and whose name might be the earliest recorded instance in English of the word f---. That's according to John Ayto, chief etymologist for the *Bloomsbury English Dictionary*, although historical linguist Dr Kate Wiles claims that, while the name is “excellent”, it is probably apocryphal. So, too, the proposition that f--- might have emerged as an acronym born from the very British royal permission to have sex, i.e. Fornication Under Consent of the King.

Our own *Macquarie Dictionary* refers to *fuk*, *fokken*, *fukka*, *fokka* and *ficken* as possible origins of f---, although our national dictionary has no problem spelling out the word, while giving full rein to its variety of usages.

In the first instance, f--- is a colloquial verb which means 1. “to have sexual intercourse with” or 2. “to make a sexual thrust as with the penis.”

But then our national dictionary runs rampant with other opportunities for self-expression: You can be a f--- up. You can be a f---wit. You can f--- around. You can f--- someone off and you can certainly f--- someone over. You can also f--- off or go f--- yourself, or – as the case may be – not give a flying f---.

You can also be a f---er [big, little or attached to a “mother”]. You can be a f---head, a f---face, a f---knuckle, a f---up and a f---nose. At the same time, you can also get into a f---load of trouble by saying as much, depending on the tone and context in which you use f---.

Apparently, when the crime comedy *The Big Lebowski* was first broadcast on American television in 2000, the censors saw fit to change the words of John Goodman's character Walter Sobchak from, “This is what happens when you f--- a stranger in the ass” to, “This is what happens when you find a stranger in the Alps.”

I mean, seriously? What kind of linguistic f---ery is that?

WE HAVE left the Victorian era. We have gone from Newtonian physics to quantum physics. We have sent space probes to Mars, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn. We have seen languages become endangered, flame out, get reborn, because that's the thing about languages. They never stand still. They change as we change.

We now google, blog, text and DM; we use abbreviations like “u” for “you”, “gr8” for “great”, “IMHO” for “in my humble opinion” [I just read that in David Crystal's *A Little Book of Language*.] We refer to unwanted junk email as spam even though spam was once execrable, tinned meat. We think of a “villain” in today's world as a scoundrel when it used to refer to a “peasant” or “farmhand.”

So it is with f---. Far from it being a uniformly offensive word, it is often a fabulous word that – like other words – goes through a natural evolution. One moment these four letters constitute a profanity, another moment they are in service to something else. From slang to colloquial to everyday usage, the word passes through time and fashion, depending on how it's used.

Look at this sentence from a trucker. Four of the six words he employs have f--- in it, as in: “F---, the f---ing f---er is f---ed.”

I love that. Only today I got a \$320 parking ticket for parking in my street across a driveway that seems to be unused, save for the garbage bins that are wheeled out once a week. I found the council fine on my windscreen, along with a note saying, “Please don't park across my driveway. I use it.” Which must mean my neighbour dished me in to the council.

When I saw the fine and the note I didn't say to myself, “Oh gosh, I seem to have a flipping ticket, one that's frigging expensive, too.” No, I channelled Eddie Murphy and said, “What kind of motherf---er would f--- his neighbour over like this with such an act of f---ery. OK, I shouldn't have parked across his driveway, but that is so f---ed up. Three hundred and twenty f---ing dollars.”

Then I screamed, “F--- you!” ...and that really got it off my chest. ■