



“Columbia”: A World of Meaning in a Word

It's a space shuttle... a Latin American nation... the name of our capitol city... and a globe-trotting doll. Where did the word Columbia come from, anyway?

Objective: Students build vocabulary, spelling, and research skills by learning the derivations of some common words.

Background

We use words all the time without thinking about where they came from. But learning the derivations of common words can be a fascinating exercise, and one that can build word-recognition and other language arts skills. The word “Columbia” is a good example. All of its uses in the Western World derive from (as you might have guessed) Christopher Columbus. It has proved to be one of the most popular of all place-names in English — and a popular name or title for products, projects, and all manner of other items as well. (See Box on page 111.)

Languages are always changing, as words fall out of use or are invented and added to the common vocabulary. Words are added to the dictionary every year. Many recent additions to the dictionary have origins in technology: Internet, email, website. But others come from popular culture or are borrowed or adapted from other languages.

The study of the roots or derivations of words and phrases is *etymology*. Exploring how words are created and come into common usage can be a fascinating exercise, with surprises around every corner. Knowing the derivations of some words can help create a lifelong curiosity about words, languages, and cultures — especially the latter, because words know no political boundaries. Trace the roots of most any word in the English language and you will find ancestor words from a different language. There are not many better metaphors for the “global neighborhood” than that.



Materials

- ◆ Copies of the student handout entitled “Word Detectives!”



“COLUMBIA”: A WORLD OF MEANING IN A WORD

Getting Started

Ask your students to think about the word “Columbia” and to try to guess its derivation. Do they think “Miss Columbia” was a good name to be given to a globe trotting doll who was (and is) an international ambassador? Why or why not? Ask them to brainstorm as many uses of the word “Columbia” as they can. Explain what *Etymology* is and let them know that in this activity, they are going to become “word detectives,” searching for the secrets behind words they commonly use.

You can use this activity as a quick introduction to the mysteries of etymology or as a longer-term research exercise. If you elect to do the latter (with students in fourth grade or older), ask each team of students to research the words they are given by looking up the words in a good dictionary or by consulting one of the resources listed below.

Procedures

1. Divide the class into teams of three to four students each.
2. Distribute the “Word Detectives!” handout to each team. Ask each team to discuss each word and make their best guess as to the derivations of each word. They will probably not come close to success with any of the words (except maybe “strawberry”), but that’s the point; etymology at this level is a study in surprises.
3. When each team has completed its handout, have a student on each team report their results and compile them on a blackboard or easel pad. Then let students know the correct answers. After you do one or two “revealing,” consider having teams return to their guesses and try again, this time stretching their creativity to the limit.

A “Dictionary” Extension

Older students can extend the activity by playing a version of the game “Dictionary.” Using a good dictionary or one of the web-based resources listed below, have each team of students come up with a word and a description of its derivation, along with three other fictional descriptions of plausible (but completely made up) derivations. Other teams can try to guess which derivation is the correct one.

Vast resources on etymology can be found on the World Wide Web. Try (or have students check out) these websites:

- <http://www.westegg.com/etymology/> (interesting word derivations)
- <http://members.aol.com/MorelandC/Phrases.htm> (origins of phrases)
- <http://www.word-detective.com> (get answers to your own word puzzlers)



“Columbia”: Here, There, and Everywhere

Here are just some of the ways “Columbia” has been used as a name:

- ◆ Community in Maryland near Baltimore, population 75,000
- ◆ Community in central Missouri, home of the University of Missouri, population 69,000
- ◆ Capital city of South Carolina, population 100,000
- ◆ Community in Tennessee, population 28,000
- ◆ Nickname for the United States
- ◆ Major river in the American northwest and Canada
- ◆ (Columbium) Former name of an element now called “Niobium”
- ◆ U.S. space shuttle
- ◆ Columbia University in New York, NY
- ◆ District of Columbia
- ◆ “Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean” (patriotic song)
- ◆ (Colombia) Nation in South America

Answers

Chocolate: Comes originally from the Aztec word “tchocatl.” The Aztecs were the first to cultivate chocolate for use in drinks. The Spanish explorer Cortes encountered chocolate in 1519, loved the taste... and the rest is history.

Escape: In ancient Rome, people would avoid being captured by throwing off their capes while running away. The root of the word “escape” in Latin means “out of cape” — literally!

Jeans: Believe it or not, jeans are named after a city. That city is Genoa, Italy, which was called “Gene” in the 16th century. The people of Genoa were the first to make denim cloth that was used for pants.

Strawberry: This word derives from the English tradition of placing a layer of straw around delicious berry plants (particularly this one) to keep the fruit up and off of the soil. This was especially important in damp climates such as those found in Great Britain and Ireland.

Library: This word derives from the Latin word “Liber,” which means “to peel.” Early manuscripts were written on tree bark, and the “peeling” refers to getting to the inner bark of a tree, where good blank “pages” can be found.

Candy: Around 1000 years ago, right at the turn of the first millennium, the Arabs created the world’s first sugar refinery on the island of Crete, now part of Greece. They named the island Quandi, which in Arabic means “crystallized sugar.”



WORD DETECTIVES!

Word Detectives!

What are the roots of each of the words listed below? Try to guess — or find out.

Candy

Definition: _____

Country or Language of Origin: _____

The Story Behind the Word: _____

Jeans

Definition: _____

Country or Language of Origin: _____

The Story Behind the Word: _____

Chocolate

Definition: _____

Country or Language of Origin: _____

The Story Behind the Word: _____

Library

Definition: _____

Country or Language of Origin: _____

The Story Behind the Word: _____

Strawberry

Definition: _____

Country or Language of Origin: _____

The Story Behind the Word: _____

Escape

Definition: _____

Country or Language of Origin: _____

The Story Behind the Word: _____

