

Jasper



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Word of the day:

WRONG

“That’s just WRONG,” said the boy, as he watched his friend put ketchup on his ice cream.

“Don’t you like ketchup on your ice cream?”

“It’s WRONG. Now if it was mustard, that would be different.”

Did you ever wonder why in English we have words like WRONG, that begin with WR, but you don’t say the W? Was that the idea of some evil teacher a thousand years ago, who wanted his schoolboys to WRITE WRONG RONG, which would be WRONG, so that he could smack them on the WRIST with his WRENCH? Because, as you know, teachers used to carry WRENCHES around with them, to twist boys’ noses with.

No, it wasn’t that. Whenever you see a silent letter in an English word, you should take for granted that people really did pronounce it, back in the misty days of our past. They did pronounce the W in WR.



Try it. Round your lips and say OO. Harden it into a W, and hold it there: WWWWW. Now put the tip of your tongue forward a little, and pronounce an R. It’s easier if you trill it a little. There you go, WR. Now say the Old English word, to WRITE: WRITAN, pronounced WREE-tahn. Fancy stuff. Make sure you say the W! Now try

WRONG: say it as WROHNG. If you say it as RONG, that’s WRONG. If you say it as WRONG, that’s RIGHT. It isn’t WRIGHT, which is a completely different word.

Now then, a lot of English words that begin with WR have to do with TURNING, TWISTING, or being CROOKED. That is because they are all fifth cousins five times removed of a very old word spoken by our ancestors when they lived in the middle of what is now Russia. The

root of that word was WER-, and it meant to TURN. So a little kid who has too much energy is WRIGGLING. Two boys grappling with each other on the floor are WRESTLING. Your hands can go in all

kinds of directions because they're attached to your WRIST. When you wind something round and round in cloth or paper you are WRAPPING it. The twisted branches of fir or holly that you hang on your door in the winter is a WREATH. You can probably think of seven or eight more words like that. Some of them have a vowel between the W and the R: WIRE. You get a WIRE by twisting together long strings of metal. You WORRY, too, when things are going WRONG, and it makes your face twist a lot. Pretend that you are WORRYING and look at yourself in the mirror. WRINKLED, isn't it?

So the idea behind the word WRONG is that it's not STRAIGHT. It is bent out of shape. It doesn't hang right. It's twisted. It's crooked. It's WRONG. We can find this idea everywhere in the world, not just among people speaking English. If you are building a house and your walls are not true – if they lean a little this way or that, your angles will be WRONG and your house will start to cave in. If you are sailing for home

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and you miss the straight way, you may end up in Iceland instead of Ireland, and then think how sorry you will be! If you need good advice out of somebody and he tells you a lie, saying something that would be good for him and not for you, he will be steering you WRONG. A CROOK, in carpentry, is a board that isn't straight, so you have either to toss it away or force it into place by main strength. A CROOK in politics is a person who isn't straight, and has to be tossed away, or put in jail where he belongs.

The authors of the Bible weren't fond of what's crooked. “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight His paths,” cries the prophet Isaiah. “Let your yes be yes and your no be no,” says Jesus, telling us to speak straight truths, and not to turn a little here or a little there. That turning would be WRONG.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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