

COVID-19 dominates annual list of banished words, terms

31 December 2020



Kellie Johnson, a respiratory therapist, receives the Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine, one of the first five staff at the hospital, on Thursday, Dec. 17, 2020 at McLaren Flint Hospital in Flint. (Jake May/The Flint Journal via AP)

Even as vaccines are being rolled out to battle the coronavirus, wordsmiths at Lake Superior State University in Michigan's Upper Peninsula say they want to kick any trace of it from the English language.

"COVID-19" and "social distancing" are thrown in with "we're all in this together," "in an abundance of caution" and "in these uncertain times" on the school's light-hearted [list of banned words and phrases](#) for 2021.

Out of more than 1,450 nominations sent to the school, about 250 words and terms suggested for banishment due to overuse, misuse or uselessness had something to do with the virus.

Seven of the 10 selected are connected to the virus, with "COVID-19" leading the way. "Unprecedented," which was banished back in 2002, has been restored to the list.

"To be sure, COVID-19 is unprecedented in wreaking havoc and destroying lives," Banished Words List committee members said Thursday in a release. "But so is the overreliance on 'unprecedented' to frame things, so it has to go, too."

The school in Sault Ste. Marie has compiled the list each year since 1976 it says to "uphold, protect, and support excellence in language by encouraging avoidance of words and terms that are overworked, redundant, oxymoronic, clichéd, illogical, nonsensical—and otherwise ineffective, baffling, or irritating."

So far, more than 1,000 words or phrases have made the list. Nominations come from across the U.S. and a number of other countries.

Joining past inductees such as "absolutely," "BFF," "covfeffe," and "yuh know" are:

— COVID-19 (COVID, coronavirus, Rona). "A large number of nominators are clearly resentful of the virus and how it has overtaken our vocabulary," the committee wrote. "No matter how necessary or socially and medically useful these [words](#) are, the committee cannot help but wish we could banish them along with the virus itself."

— Social distancing. "This phrase is useful, as wearing a mask and keeping your distance have a massive effect on preventing the spread of infection," members said. "But we'd be lying if we said we weren't ready for this phrase to become 'useless.'"

— We're all in this together.

— In an abundance of caution (various phrasings).

— In these uncertain times (various phrasings).

— Pivot. "Reporters, commentators, talking heads,

and others from the media reference how everyone must adapt to the coronavirus through contactless delivery, virtual learning, curbside pickup, video conferencing, remote working, and other urgent readjustments," the committee wrote. "That's all true and vital. But basketball players pivot; let's keep it that way."

— Unprecedented.

— Karen. "What began as an anti-racist critique of the behavior of white women in response to Black and brown people has become a misogynist umbrella term for critiquing the perceived overemotional behavior of women," the committee said.

— Sus, short for "suspicious."

— I know, right?

"Real-world concerns preoccupied word watchdogs this year, first and foremost COVID-19, and that makes sense," Lake Superior State President Rodney Hanley said in the release. "In a small way, maybe this list will help 'flatten the curve,' which also was under consideration for banishment. We trust that your 'new normal'—another contender among nominations—for next year won't have to include that anymore."

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