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# SMIDGENS, SPECKS, AND SMITHEREENS:

A Pictorial Guide to Words That Describe Things That Are  
Small, Brief, Faint, or Otherwise Insignificant

◆ Ralph Protsik ◆

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## Preface

My love affair with “tiny words” began with *smidgen* and *iota*. Something about their contours resonated—not only were they fun to say, but they also carried with them an element of surprise and fancy. What exactly *is* a smidgen? Is it the same as a bit? A skosh? An iota? The more I thought about it, the more interested I became in words like these and others that describe things that are small, few, brief, faint, or dismissive. In other words, tiny.

The key, I think, lies in four features that define such words: their **familiarity** (they’re all around us), their **specificity** (each one is slightly different from any other), their **antiquity** (these are some of the oldest words in the English language), and, for many, their **absurdity** (how else to describe terms like *bupkes* and *schtickel*?) As an illustration, consider the following fanciful passage:

*I stopped for a moment, sampling a waft of air and sniffing in it the barest touch of early autumn. Suddenly my tiny world was smashed to smithereens, as an almost illusory band of scantily attired Lilliputians began spattering paint, one dribblet at a time, onto a dimly lit wall, before disappearing lickity-split into a dinky car. Any modicum of*

*reality I might have salvaged vanished in a blink. I realized my life mattered bupkes—a hill of beans, diddly-squat, hardly worth a fig or a hoot. I knew at once that only one insignificant and meager thing could save me—a dram of scotch with a shaving of ice, a splash of bitters, and a morsel of cheese.*

*In a heartbeat and with a soupçon of anticipation, I made a dash for the pub. “You’re a tad late, son, for I haven’t a lick of scotch, a shard of ice, a drop of bitters, or a nubbin of cheese. Would you settle for a smidgen of bourbon and a sliver of prosciutto?” “Only if you can add an ounce of rum to the bourbon,” said I, “and throw in a skosh of hummus and a scruple of anchovies with the cheese.” “That’s barely a flyspeck,” replied the pubmeister. “Let me add a kicker of olives and a dollop of lox to the dish.” “If you must,” said I. “Only hold the olives and throw in a chicken nugget if you can.” “Done,” replied the bartender as he added these few side dishes to my paltry tab. My day had pivoted from piddling to glimmering in a mere instant, a bare snap of the fingers.*

The English language contains more than five hundred words that describe things that are tiny—that are **small in size** (*dwarf, speck, drib*) or **quantity** (*dash, drop, splash*), **few in number** (*scant, scintilla, rare*), **brief in duration or impact** (*spark, flash, snap*), **descriptive in feature** (*freckle, smudge, dimple*), or **faint in perception** (*whiff, sniff, hint*). Some such words **qualify and diminish** (*hardly, barely, sparse*). Their actions also can be **sudden and violent** (*smack, slap, blast*) or **subtle and sublime** (*shadow, breath, whimper*).

These expressions are ubiquitous in our speech; indeed, it would be hard to imagine language without them. We see them in the Bible (“For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one *jot* or one *tittle* shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”) and the Quran (“Everyone shall *taste* death.”); in the *Bhagavad Gita* (“Breathing from His perfect presence *breaths* of every *subtle* essence, of all heavenly odours ...”) and the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (“... when Time lets slip a *little* perfect hour, O take it—for it will not come again.”); in Shakespeare (“When that I was and a little *tiny* boy, With hey, ho, the wind and the rain ...”) and Donne (“One *short* sleep past, we wake eternally, and Death shall be no more . . . ”); and in Bob Dylan (“Every pleasure’s got an *edge* of pain, pay your ticket and don’t complain.”) and Elton John (“... mongrels who ain’t got a penny *sniffing* for *tidbits* like you on the ground”). They abound in thousands of ads, movie reviews, newspaper articles, poems, plays, and album liner notes, where they measure food (*morsel, crumb, nubbin*) and booze (*dram, splash, shot*), spice (*dash, pinch, smidgen*) and ice (*shaving, chip, shard*), air (*whiff, waft, sniff*) and dirt (*spot, speck, mote*), and all manner of life’s shortcomings (*meager, mere, barely*). They show up in the way we speak (*murmur, mutter*), see (*glance, wink*), taste (*hint, touch*), feel (*graze, stab*), walk (*amble, shamble*), and run (*dash, dart*).

They also tend to be among the oldest words in our lexicon, many having originated before the 14th century and some dating to the unrecorded language from which all Indo-European tongues are thought to derive. And they are wonderful sounding, some imitative



(*dab, smack, scintilla*) and others just fun to pronounce (*smithereen, smattering, nip, itsy-bitsy*). Most are adjectives or nouns, but a few, such as the aforementioned *barely*, are adverbs. Like *hint* and *shadow*, some are both nouns and verbs.

Then we have those tiny words that play well with prepositions to form prepositional phrases —“in a *pinch*,” “*nick* of time,” “*lick* of sense,” “in a *heartbeat*,” “by a *hair*,” “*glimmer* of hope,” “*ghost* of a chance,” “*slap* on the wrist,” “with a *grain* of salt”; those that combine with other words to create idioms—“give a *hoot*,” “drop a *hint*,” “*jump* the gun,” “don’t know *diddly-squat* (or *beans* or *jack*)”; those that form so-called tiny idioms out of other words —“rat’s ass,” “jack shit,” “scrape the barrel,” “ace up your sleeve,” “skin of your teeth,” “at the 11th hour,” “snowball’s chance in hell,” “spit into the wind,” “dead of winter,” “lame excuse,” “back to square one,” “plugged nickel”; and those many that connote diminished size, length, or perception.

What a diminished world it would be without these delineations of the little things in life! If we added words that mean *nothing* or *no* (*cipher, zilch, zero, nil*, and the like), the list would be longer by dozens and far exceed the scope of this book.

But why this preoccupation with investigating words that describe things that are small? The short of it is simply because we can. Our language is rich and constantly evolving; we love creating new words, and we love creating and using words and phrases that are imaginative. Take for example a horse race. You’ve gone to the track and bet on Old Stewball to win. And he loses. But he doesn’t just lose,

he's "*nosed* (or *edged*) out" or he "lost by a *hair* (or *nose*)" or he "*faded* in the stretch." Or look at life's brief but notable perceptions—the *crack* of dawn, the *edge* of night, a *touch* of autumn, a *hint* of spring in the air. Or at our own body's fleeting sensations—"in the *blink* of an eye," "a *stabbing* pain," "a *gentle* touch," "the *taste* of honey."

Look further to see what we can do to dismantle an ice cube, a piece of glass, a chunk of beef, or a loaf of bread. Out of them we create *shards*, *shavings*, *chips*, *shreds*, *slivers*, *parings*, *fragments*, *slices*, *wedges*, *nubbins*, *morsels*, *tidbits*, *nuggets*, *scraps*, *crumbs*, *bits*, and *scrapings*. And that's just *skimming* the surface.

Something there is that doesn't love yet another adjective, especially one that sounds sweet (or shocking) to the ear. No surprise that so many of these "brief but spectacular words" are imitative of nature's sound track. You hear the word *dab* and you hear a dab; a *spattering* and you imagine grease all over the stove. We enjoy being surprised and tickled; tiny words so often tickle us.

When you examine these words, however, you see something else that helps explain their ubiquity. A preponderance of tiny words derive from the tools and accoutrements of life in the Middle Ages or earlier—*bit* from a horse's mouth, *bupkes* from goat droppings, *nick* from the notches on a stick used to tell time. Words tend to pop up or be repurposed when humans see analogies between one aspect of the physical world (the *bit* in a horse's mouth) and another (the *bit* of toast on your plate). The transition is rarely that clear and clean, of course: the original term usually goes through various iterations before

settling into its modern usage. Thus the link between a horse's *bit* and a computer *bit* is tenuous at best.

Perhaps the most important explanation for the diversity of “tiny words” is the English language itself—a stew of modern and proto-languages that includes Old English, Old Germanic, Old French, Classic Latin, Slavic, Modern Romance, Yiddish, and other tongues derived in part from the “Ur” Proto-Indo-European (PIE) language of ancient history. Many of our tiny words trace their origins back thousands of years and to professions (especially farming), human features, plants and animals, and physical phenomena that have existed long before the words themselves were used. Latin at the time of the Roman emperors and Greek during the Hellenic period were laden with the types of tiny words we still encounter; many survive in anglicized form today.

Speaking of today, tiny words keep arriving. African American, Native American, Hispanic, Creole, and other ethnic groups have contributed their share, including many slang expressions (*baby, dinky*), as has the world of technology, with such terms as *bit, byte, cookie, plug-in, emoticon, and virus*. As the world grows smaller, so do the terms that describe it.

Finally, it must be admitted that this compendium of tiny words includes a fair number that are pejorative, especially given today's backdrop of political correctness. Words such as *midget, pygmy, peewee, pipsqueak, and dwarf*, and even *runt* and *puny*, can be read as demeaning. Others, such as *nebbish, nerd, and twerp*, while demeaning,

seem more acceptable, perhaps because they reflect behaviors rather than physical attributes. Another set of words denote brief but violent acts—*strike, smack, slam*—that apply to both objects and humans or animals. A great many such words were spawned in the time of Shakespeare, or even before then, and grew up in a world of poverty, violence, and early mortality. Finally, as this book’s section on words that are “diminishing in nature” illustrates, words such as *bare, meager, paltry, paucity, spare, and insignificant* can illuminate the human condition in ways that other words cannot. As George Sand noted, nature distributes her favors unequally.

So let’s look at dozens of these “tiny words.” Each will be accompanied by a drawing, a quatrain (four-line poem), three or more quotations that illustrate the term in action, and a derivation. There are certainly more tiny words, but we’re off to a good start. As you savor this sampling, feel free to come up with your own small contribution.

# LIST OF “TINY WORDS” BY CATEGORY

## *Small in Size (p. 8)*

APERTURE

ATOM

BARB

BIT

CHIP

CLIPPING / CLIPS

CRANNY

CREVICE

CRUX

FISSURE

FLECK

FLYSPECK

FRAGMENT

FRINGE

GAP

GRAIN

GROOVE

HAIR

HAIRBREADTH

HOLLOW

INCH

INFINITESIMAL

ITSY-BITSY / ITTY-BITTY

LITTLE

MICROSCOPIC

MINI

MINIATURE

MINUTE / MINUTES

MINUTIA(E)

MITE

MOLECULE

MOTE

NICKNAME

NIT-PICK

NOOK

NOSE

NOTCH

PARTICLE

PARTICULATE

PEANUTS

PINPOINT

PIP

SCRATCH

SCUFF

SKIMPY

SLIT

SMALL / SMALLEST

SNIPPET

SPANGLE

SPECK

SPIKE

SPLINTER

SPOT

SPUR

STREAK

TEEN(S)Y-WEEN(S)Y

TIDBIT

TIDDLY

TINY / TINIEST

TIP

TITTLE

WHISKER

WHIT

*Small in Stature (p. 71)*

BABY  
CALF  
CUB  
DIMINUTIVE  
DINKY  
DWARF  
FAWN  
FOAL  
JOEY  
KITTEN  
LAMB  
LEAN  
LILLIPUTIAN  
MIDGET  
PEANUT  
PETITE  
PIPSQUEAK  
POCKET / POCKET-SIZED  
PUNY  
PYGMY  
RUNT  
SHRIMP  
SLIM  
THIN  
TOT  
TOY  
TWERP  
WEE

*Small in Significance (p. 101)*

DIDDLY-SQUAT / SQUAT  
FIG  
HOOT  
JACK

JERKWATER  
JOT  
PICAYUNE  
RAP  
TRIFLE  
TRIVIA / TRIVIAL

*Small in Amount (p. 112)*

BEAD  
BEANS  
CHICKENFEED  
CRUMB  
DAB  
DASH  
DAUB  
DRAM  
DREGS  
DRIBBLE  
DRIBLET  
DROP  
DROUGHT  
DUSTING  
GIST  
GLOBULE  
HANDFUL  
IOTA  
KICKER  
LEFTOVER  
LICK  
MODICUM  
MORSEL  
NIBBLE  
NIP  
NUBBIN / NUB  
NUGGET  
OUNCE

PAT  
PEPPER  
PIECE  
PINCH  
SAMPLE  
SCHTICKLE / SHTICKLE  
SCRAP  
SHARD  
SHAVING  
SHOT  
SHRED  
SIP  
SKIM  
SKOSH  
SLIVER  
SMATTERING  
SMIDGEN / SMIDGE  
SMITHEREENS  
SOUPÇON  
SPATTER  
SPLASH  
SPRINKLE / SPRINKLING  
SPRITZ  
SQUIRT  
SWIG  
TAD  
TIDBIT  
TRICKLE  
WAD

*Few in Number (p. 173)*

ALONE  
BUBKES / BUPKIS  
DEARTH  
DRIBS AND DRABS  
FEW

FLURRY  
FRACTION  
LONE  
MINIMUM  
ODD  
PAUCITY  
PITTANCE  
RARE  
SINGULAR / SINGULARITY  
SOLITARY  
SOME  
UNIQUE

*Small in Feature (p. 190)*

BLEMISH  
BLOTCH  
BULGE  
CLEFT  
DIMPLE  
FLAW  
FRECKLE  
FURROW  
MOLE  
POCK / POCKMARK  
SCAR  
SLIP (1)  
SMIRK  
SMUDGE  
SPECKLE  
SPLOTCH  
STIPPLE  
TIC  
WRINKLE

*Brief in Duration or Impact*  
*(p. 210)*

BANG  
BARK  
BASH  
BEEP  
BELT  
BLAST  
BLEEP  
BLINK  
BREATH  
BRIEF  
BRISTLE  
BUMP  
BURST  
BUZZ  
CHIME  
CHIRP  
CLING  
CLINK  
CLOCK  
CLUNK / CLONK  
CRACK  
CRASH  
CRUNCH  
CUFF  
CURSORY  
CURT  
DABBLE  
DART  
DING  
EBB  
EDGE  
FALL  
FLAP  
FLARE

FLEETING  
FLICK  
FLIP  
FLIT  
FLOP  
GASP  
GLIMPSE  
GLITCH  
GRUNT  
GULP  
HEARTBEAT  
ILLUSORY  
IMPULSE  
INSTANT  
JIFFY / JIFF  
KNOCK  
LACKLUSTER  
LICKETY-SPLIT  
MOMENTARY  
NICK  
PANT  
PAT  
PECK  
PING  
PLOP  
POKE  
POOF  
POP  
PUFF  
QUICK  
RATTLE  
RIFF  
RIFFLE  
SCAMPER  
SCOOT  
SHAKE  
SHORT-LIVED



SLAM  
SLASH  
SLIP (2)  
SLURP  
SMASH  
SNAP  
SNATCH  
SNIP  
SNUB  
SNORT  
SPARK  
SPRING  
STRIKE  
STROKE  
STROLL  
STUMBLE  
SWOOP  
TERSE  
THUD  
THUMP  
THWACK  
TICK  
TOKEN  
TRANSIENT  
TRICE  
TRIP  
TWITCH  
WANING  
WHOOOP  
YANK  
YIP  
ZAP  
ZING

*Faint in Perception (p. 315)*

APPARITION

BENT  
BLUR  
BROWSE  
BRUSH  
CRAWL  
CREEP  
DAPPLED  
DAYDREAM  
DIM  
EPHEMERAL  
ESSENCE  
FAINT  
FANCY  
FIGMENT  
FIZZLE  
FLICKER  
FLIGHTY  
FLIMSY  
FLURRY  
GHOST  
GLANCE  
GLEAM  
GLIMMER  
GLINT  
GLISTEN  
GRAZE  
HAZE / HAZY  
HINT  
HISS  
IMPRESSION  
INCLINATION  
INTIMATION  
LONE  
MIST  
MOTTLED  
MUMBLE  
MURMUR

MUTTER  
NOTION  
NUDGE  
OUTLINE  
PALL  
PASSING  
PERIPHERAL  
PERUSE  
PHANTOM  
PURR  
RIPPLE  
SCAN  
SCINTILLA  
SHADOW  
SHIMMER  
SHUSH  
SILHOUETTE  
SKETCH  
SNIFF  
SNOOP  
SOLITUDE  
SPECTER  
SPIRIT  
SUBTLE  
TASTE  
TENUOUS  
TINGE  
TINKLE / TINKLING  
TIPTOE  
TITCH / TITCHY  
TOUCH  
TRACE  
TWEAK  
TWINKLE / TWINKLING  
VAGUE  
VAPOR

VESTIGE  
WAFT  
WHEEZE  
WHIFF  
WHIM  
WHIMPER  
WHIR  
WHISPER  
WRAITH  
YEARNING

*Diminishing in Character*  
*(p. 396)*

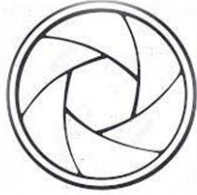
AMATEUR  
AMBLE  
ANEMIC  
APATHETIC  
AUSTERE  
BARELY  
BARREN  
BRITTLE  
DABBLE / DABBLER  
DEBASED  
DEGENERATE  
DEGRADED  
DEPLETED  
DEPRAVED  
DEVOID  
FEEBLE  
FRAGILE / FRAGILITY  
FRAIL / FRAILTY  
FRUGAL  
GROUSE  
HAREBRAINED  
IMPOVERISHED  
INSIGNIFICANT

ISOLATED  
JUST  
LACK  
LACKLUSTER  
LAMENT  
LEAST  
LIMITED  
MARGINAL  
MEAGER  
MEASLY  
MEEK  
MERE / MERELY  
MISERLY  
NEBBISH  
NEGLIGIBLE  
NIGGARDLY  
NIGGLING  
PALTRY  
PARSIMONIOUS  
PARTIAL  
PATHETIC  
PETTY  
PIDDLING  
PIFFLING  
PLAIN  
RESTRICT(ED)  
SCANTY / SCANTILY  
SCRAWNY  
SCRIMP  
SHABBY  
SHAKY  
SHAMBLE  
SHODDY  
SHRIVEL(ED)  
SHUFFLE  
SKELETAL  
SKIMP

SLAPDASH  
SLIGHT / SLIGHTLY  
SLINK  
SNIVEL / SNIVELLING  
SPARE  
SPARSE  
SPARTAN  
STINGY  
STINT  
TARNISHED  
WEAK / WEAKEN  
WIZENED  
WRETCHED

## *SMALL IN SIZE*

# APERTURE



*Apertures* are passages  
From one world to another  
The umbilicus that links  
A fetus to its mother

*Examples:*

"Fancy restrained may be compared to a fountain, which plays highest by diminishing the *aperture*." — Oliver Goldsmith

"There are many hypotheses in science that are wrong. That's perfectly alright; it's the *aperture* to finding out what's right. Science is a self-correcting process. To be accepted, new ideas must survive the most rigorous standards of evidence and scrutiny." — Carl Sagan

"In each studio there is a human being dressed in the full regalia of his myth fearing to explore a vulnerable opening, spreading not his charms but his defences, plotting to disrobe, somewhere along the night—his body without the *aperture* of the heart or his heart with a door closed to his body. thus keeping one compartment for refuge, one uninvaded cell." — Anais Nin

*Derivation:* early 15c., "an opening, hole, orifice," from Latin *apertura* "an opening"

# ATOM



Eve is nice  
My darling *Atom*  
But I'd prefer  
You call me Madam

*Examples:*

"History is the short trudge from Adam to *atom*." — Leonard Levinson

"I would rather be a superb meteor, every *atom* of me in magnificent glow, than a sleepy and permanent planet." — Jack London

"It is harder to crack prejudice than an *atom*." — Albert Einstein

*Derivation:* late 15c., as a hypothetical indivisible, extremely minute body, the building block of the universe, from Latin *atomus* "indivisible particle," from Greek *atomos* "uncut, unhewn; indivisible," from *a-* "not" + *-tomos* "a cutting," from *temnein* "to cut" (from PIE root *tem-* "to cut")

# BARB



*Barbs of steel*  
May pierce and sting  
More so the lips  
From which they spring

*Examples:*

“There is no more steely *barb* than that of the Infinite.”  
— Charles Baudelaire

“Since my earliest childhood a *barb* of sorrow has lodged in my heart. As long as it stays  
I am ironic—if it is pulled out I shall die.”  
— Soren Kierkegaard

“The *barb* in the arrow of childhood's suffering is this: its intense loneliness, its intense  
ignorance.” — Olive Schreiner

“There's no possibility of being witty without a little ill-nature—the malice of a good  
thing is the *barb* that makes it stick.”  
— Richard Brinsley Sheridan

*Derivation:* late 14c., “barb of an arrow,” from Old French *barbe* “beard, beard-like  
appendage” (11c.), from a common PIE root *bhardhā* “beard”

# BIT



**He didn't mean  
To wreck the car  
Just off a *bit*  
This movie star**

*Examples:*

"You might be a redneck if the stock market crashes and it doesn't affect you one *bit*."

— Jeff Foxworthy

"I do quite naughty things now. I do like to be a *bit* sexy."

— Kylie Minogue

"A soldier will fight long and hard for a *bit* of colored ribbon."

— Napoleon Bonaparte

*Derivation:* "small piece," c. 1200; related Old English *bite* "act of biting" and *bita* "piece bitten off," which probably are the source of the modern words meaning "boring-piece of a drill" (the "biting" part, 1590s), "mouthpiece of a horse's bridle" (mid-14c.), and "a piece (of food) bitten off, morsel" (c. 1000)



# CHIP



**Not just a *chip*  
Off the old stone block  
But the block itself  
This mighty jock**

*Examples:*

"I say let me never be complete, I say may I never be content, I say deliver me from Swedish furniture, I say deliver me from clever arts, I say deliver me from clear skin and perfect teeth, I say you have to give up! I say evolve, and let the *chips* fall where they may!"

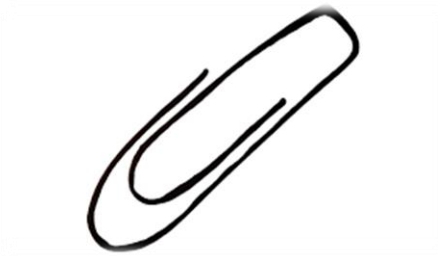
— Chuck Palahniuk, from *Fight Club*

"Remember, a *chip* on the shoulder is a sure sign of wood higher up." — Brigham Young

"Whatever it is that's bothering me—interacting with an annoying guy at a restaurant, contemplating my age, or losing friends to illness—I'll start to *chip* away at it. — Billy Crystal

*Derivation:* early 15c., "to break off in small pieces"; from Old English *forcippian*, "to pare away by cutting, cut off," verbal form of *cipp*, "a small piece of wood"

# CLIPPING / CLIPS



**Nails, papers, hair  
All yield to *clippings*  
Detritus of our daily lives  
The silent drippings**

*Examples:*

“As I enter on the path of happiness, I scatter the dregs and shreds and *clippings* of the past behind me. I divest myself of all the capulous years.” — John Locke

“I have a small tattered *clipping* that I sometimes carry with me and pull out for purposes of private amusement. It’s a weather forecast from the *Western Daily Mail* and it says, in toto: ‘Outlook: Dry and warm, but cooler with some rain.’” — Bill Bryson

“The average TV commercial of sixty seconds has one hundred and twenty half-second *clips* in it, or one-third of a second. We bombard people with sensation. That substitutes for thinking.” — Ray Bradbury

*Derivation:* early 13c., "a clasping, an embracing," verbal noun from *clip*

# CRANNY



*A cranny*  
**Without a nook**  
**Is like a cover**  
**Without a book**

*Examples:*

“For 'tis a truth well known to most, / That whatsoever thing is lost, / We seek it, ere it comes to light, / In every *cranny* but the right.”

— William Cowper

“The province of the soul is large enough to fill up every *cranny* of your time, and leave you much to answer for if one wretch be damned by your neglect.” — John Dryden

“At no time are we ever in such complete possession of a journey, down to its last nook and *cranny*, as when we are busy with preparations for it. After that, there remains only the journey itself, which is nothing but the process through which we lose our ownership of it.” — Yukio Mishima

*Derivation:* "small, narrow opening, crevice," mid-15c., possibly from a diminutive of Old French *cran*, *cren* "a notch, a hole, a cut, fissure" (14c.), from *crener* "to notch, split," from PIE root *krei* "to sieve"

# CREVICE



Let us not confuse  
A *crevice* with *crevasse*  
The one will pinch your finger  
The other bust your ass

*Examples:*

"To fill the hour; that is happiness to fill the hour, and leave no *crevice* for a repentance or an approval." — Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Know from the rivers in clefts and in *crevices*: those in small channels flow noisily, the great flow silent. Whatever's not full makes noise. Whatever is full is quiet." —  
Gautama Buddha

"For the night-wind has a dismal trick of wandering round and round a building of that sort, and moaning as it goes; and of trying, with its unseen hand, the windows and the doors; and seeking out some *crevices* by which to enter." — Charles Dickens

*Derivation:* "a crack, a cleft, a fissure," mid-14c., *crevace*," from Old French *crever* "to break or burst," also the source of *cravasse*, a deep hole or fissure in a glacier or in the earth

# CRUX



**The *crux* the *crux*!  
I'd scream and shout  
If only I knew  
What it's all about**

*Examples:*

"The control of knowledge is the *crux* of tomorrow's worldwide struggle for power in every human institution." — Alvin Toffler

"The fear of death is for all of us everywhere, but for the great intelligence of the opium eater it is beautifully narrowed into the *crux* of drugs." — John Cheever

"Money was the *crux*. Raising money to pay the cost of war was to cause more damage to 14th century society than the physical destruction of war itself." — Barbara Tuchman

*Derivation:* the figurative use for "a central difficulty" (1718) is older in English than the literal sense; perhaps it is from Latin *crux interpretum* "a point in a text that is impossible to interpret," the literal meaning of which is something like "crossroads of interpreters"; extended sense of "central point" is attested by 1888

# FISSURE



A groove a fault  
A gash a tatter  
A fissure's none  
But does it matter?

*Examples:*

“Would you have any objection to my running my finger along your parietal *fissure*? A cast of your skull, sir, until the original is available, would be an ornament to any anthropological museum.”

— Arthur Conan Doyle

“The pain over my heart returns, and from it I imagine tiny *fissures* spreading out into my body. Through my torso, down my arms and legs, over my face, leaving it crisscrossed with cracks. One good jolt . . . and I could shatter into strange razor-sharp shards.”

— Suzanne Collins

“It was the first rent in the holy image of my father, it was the first *fissure* in the columns that had upheld my childhood, which every individual must destroy before he can become himself.”

— Hermann Hesse

*Derivation:* 1400, from Old French *fissure* (13c.) and directly from Latin *fissura* "a cleft," from PIE *bhind-*, nasalized form of root *bheid-* "to split"

# FLECK



**A *fleck* of dirt  
If on a plate  
Is not so small  
If you just ate**

*Examples:*

“All busy in the sunlight the *flecks* did float and dance, / and I was tumbled up with them in formless circumstance.” — Leonard Cohen

“Wonder is the heaviest element on the periodic table. Even a tiny *fleck* of it stops time.”  
— Diane Ackerman

“All men even, I have written, Jesus Christ began as *flecks* of tissue inside a woman’s womb. Every boy must stagger out of the shadow of a mother goddess, whom he never fully escapes.” — Camille Paglia

*Derivation:* 1590s, "a mark on skin, a freckle," of uncertain origin; perhaps from *fleck* (v.) or else from a related word elsewhere in Germanic, such as Middle Dutch *vlecke* or Old Norse *flekk* "a fleck, spot"; from 1750 as "small particle," 1804 as "a patch, a spot" of any kind

# FLYSPECK



To a fly  
It's shmeck  
To us  
A *speck*

*Examples:*

"I like commas. I detest semi-colons—I don't think they belong in a story. And I gave up quotation marks long ago. I found I didn't need them, they were *flyspecks* on the page." — E. L. Doctorow

"Oh these mathematicians make me tired! When you ask them to work out a sum they take a piece of paper, cover it with rows of A's, B's, and X's and Y's . . . scatter a mess of *flyspecks* over them, and then give you an answer that's all wrong!" — Thomas A. Edison

"This is who I am: a *flyspeck* of human vanity in a trillion miles of stone-dead interstellar space . . ." — S. C. Gwynne

*Derivation:* 1723, in meaning of *speck*



# FRAGMENT



**The *fragment* lodged  
Not deep but well  
The soldier bid  
A sad farewell**

*Examples:*

“the conch exploded into a thousand white *fragments* and ceased to exist.” — William Golding

“The superstition that the hounds of truth will rout the vermin of error seems, like a *fragment* of Victorian lace, quaint, but too brittle to be lifted out of the showcase. — William F. Buckley, Jr.

“A composer’s job involves the decoration of *fragments* of time.”  
— Frank Zappa

“the moon rattles like a *fragment* of angry candy” — e. e. cummings

*Derivation:* early 15c., "small piece or part," from Latin *fragmentum* "a fragment, remnant," literally "a piece broken off," from base of *frangere* "to break" (from PIE root *bhreg-* "to break")

# FRINGE



**I don't mind if you're out there  
On the *fringe*  
Just don't let your beliefs on  
Mine impinge**

*Examples:*

"The *fringed* curtains of thine eye advance, / And say what thou seest yond." — William Shakespeare

"Sometimes I wore a *fringe* so deep it obscured the way ahead. This hardly mattered. There were always others to look where I was going." — Quentin Crisp

"There is in youth a purity of character which, when once touched and defiled, can never be restored; a *fringe* more delicate than frost-work, and which, when torn and broken, can never be re-embroidered."

— Henry Ward Beecher

*Derivation:* early 14c., "ornamental bordering; material for a fringe," from Old French *frenge* "thread, strand, fringe, hem, border" (early 14c.); meaning "a border, edge" is from 1640s; figurative sense of "outer edge, margin," is first recorded 1894

# GAP



**Art is not  
In what is seen  
But in the *gaps*  
That lie between**

*Examples:*

“The big *gap* between the ability of actors is confidence.”

— Kathleen Turner

“Mind the *gap*—it's the distance between life as you dream it and life as it is.” — Cate Blanchett

“The *gap* between those who worship different gods is not so wide as the *gap* between those who worship and those who don't.”

— C. S. Lewis

“Creationists eagerly seek a *gap* in present-day knowledge or understanding. If an apparent *gap* is found, it is assumed that God, by default, must fill it.” — Richard Dawkins

*Derivation:* early 14c., "an opening in a wall or hedge; a break, a breach," mid-13c. in place names, from Old Norse *gap* "chasm, empty space," from PIE root *ghieh-* "to yawn, gape, be wide open"; sense of "unfilled space or interval, any hiatus or interruption" is from c. 1600

# GRAIN



**A *grain* of truth  
Nothing but  
Anything less  
The mind is shut**

*Examples:*

“for every *grain* of enjoyment you sow in the bosom of another, you shall find a harvest in your own bosom” — Jeremy Bentham

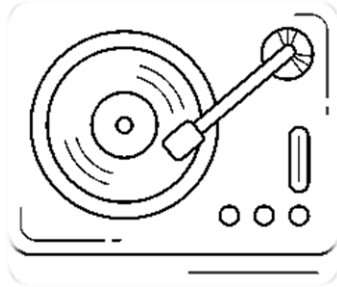
“From a *grain* of sand in, the Pearl comes.” — Confucius

“A wise woman puts a grain of sugar into everything she says to a man, and takes a *grain* of salt with everything he says to her.”

— Helen Rowland

*Derivation:* from Old French *grain, grein* (12c.) "seed, grain; particle, drop; berry; grain as a unit of weight," from Latin *granum* "seed, a grain, small kernel," from PIE root *gre-no-* "grain; figuratively, "the smallest possible quantity," from late 14c.

# GROOVE



**Get up on your feet boy  
You got a lot to prove  
Let me see you dancin'  
Get into the *groove***

*Examples:*

"You can always pick up your needle and move to another *groove*.  
—Timothy Leary

"She got the way to move me, Cherry, she got the way to *groove* me." — Neil Diamond

"The evolution of a highly destined society must be moral; it must run in the *grooves* of the celestial wheels." — Ralph Waldo Emerson

"The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails whereon my soul is *grooved* to run." — Herman Melville

*Derivation:* c. 1400, "cave; mine; pit dug in the earth" (late 13c. in place names), from a Scandinavian source such as Old Norse *grod* "pit"; meaning "spiral cut in a phonograph record" is from 1902

# HAIR



**Missed my plane  
By a *hair*  
Should I drive?  
Wouldn't dare**

*Examples:*

"The Wolf stands at the door of the third little pig's house and says, 'Little pig, little pig, let me come in.' The little pig answers, 'Not by the *hair* of my chinny chin chin.'" —  
from *Three Little Pigs* (traditional)

"A motorcyclist escaped death by a *hair's* breadth when he came off his bike on a level crossing as a high-speed train thundered past."  
— *Metro*

One does not miss heaven by a *hair*, but by constant effort to avoid and escape God." —  
Dallas Willard

*Derivation:* Old English *hær* "hair, a hair," from Proto-Germanic *hēran*, perhaps from PIE *ghers-* "to stand out, to bristle, rise to a point"

# HAIRBREADTH



**The size of hair, its *hairbreadth*  
May seem a bit too small  
But in its place this tiny hair  
Is thicker than a wall**

## *Examples*

"It was a strange way of killing, not by inches, but by fractions of *hairbreadths*, to beguile me with the spectre of a hope, through eighteen years!" — Emily Brontë

Make a *hairbreadth* difference and heaven and earth are set apart; if you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between "for" and "against" is the mind's worst disease."  
— Bruce Lee

"Chateau and hut, stone face and dangling figure, the red stain on the stone floor, and the pure water in the village well—thousands of acres of land—a whole province of France—all France itself—lay under the night sky, concentrated into a faint *hairbreadth* line. — Charles Dickens

*Derivation:* from late 15c. as a measure of minute exactness; said to once have been a formal unit of measure equal to one-forty-eighth of an inch; from *hair* + *breadth*

# HOLLOW



Pleasure is *hollow*  
Without savor  
As passion is if  
As a favor

*Examples:*

“Painting is the art of *hollowing* a surface.” — Georges Seurat

“Beware of jokes from which we go away *hollow* and ashamed.”  
— Ralph Waldo Emerson

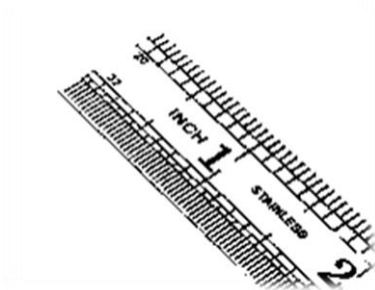
“Give me again my *hollow* tree / A crust of bread, and liberty!”  
— Alexander Pope

“Deep in December it's nice to remember / Without a hurt the heart is *hollow*.” — Tom  
Jones

*Derivation:* c. 1200, adjective developed from Old English *holh* (n.) "hollow place, hole," from PIE root *kel-* "to cover, conceal, save"; the figurative sense of "insincere" is attested from 1520s



# INCH / INCHEd



**A ruler is to  
An inch  
As pepper is to  
A pinch**

*Examples:*

"He *inched* his way up the corridor as if he would rather be yarding his way down it, which was true." — Douglas Adams

"As I *inched* sluggishly along the treadmill of the Maycomb County school system, I could not help receiving the impression that I was being cheated out of something. Out of what I knew not, yet I did not believe that twelve years of unrelieved boredom was exactly what the state had in mind for me." — Harper Lee

"I did the only really brave thing I have ever done in my life: I *inched* forward." — Robert A. Heinlein

*Derivation:* "linear measure, one-twelfth of a foot," late Old English *ynce*, Middle English *unche*, c. 1300, from Latin *uncia* "a twelfth part," from *unus* "one," from PIE root *oi-no-* "one, unique"; figurative sense of "a very small amount, small quantity" is attested from mid-14c.

# INFINITESIMAL



**Is that all there is  
Just empty air?  
Nothing smaller?  
Little there?**

*Examples:*

“The God of the infinite is the God of the *infinitesimal*.” — Blaise Pascal

“My faith in the people governing is, on the whole, *infinitesimal*; my faith in the people governed is, on the whole, illimitable.”

— Charles Dickens

“Our world hangs like a magnificent jewel in the vastness of space. Every one of us is a part of that jewel. A facet of that jewel. And in the perspective of infinity, our differences are *infinitesimal*.” — Fred Rogers

*Derivation:* 1710 (1650s as a noun), “infinitely small, less than any assignable quantity,” from Modern Latin *infinitesimus*, from Latin *infinitus* “infinite”

# ITSY-BITSY / ITTY-BITTY



**The *itsy-bitsy* spider  
Crawled up the water spout  
Down came the rain  
And washed the spider out**

*Examples:*

*“Out came the sun / And dried up all the rain. / Then the itsy-bitsy spider / Went up the spout again.”* — Traditional

*“It was an itsy bitsy teenie weenie yellow polka-dot bikini that she wore for the first time today . . . .”* — Paul Vance and Lee Pockriss

*“There is always a temptation to diddle around in the contemplative life, making itsy-bitsy statues.”* — Thomas Merton

*Derivation:* "charmingly small," 1882, from *itty* (baby-talk form of little) and/or *bitsy*; *bitsy-itsy* is recorded from 1875, *itty-bitty* from 1849, *tiddy-itty* from 1852

# LITTLE



Thy fate  
Is the common fate of all  
Into every life  
A *little* rain must fall

— Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

*Examples:*

“Ability is of little account without opportunity.”

— Napoleon Bonaparte

“Clothes make the man. Naked people have little or no influence on society.” — Mark Twain

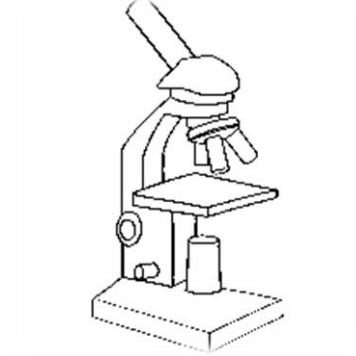
“I have nothing but confidence in you. And very little of that.”

— Groucho Marx

“Little strokes fell great oaks.” — Benjamin Franklin

*Derivation:* Old English *lytel* "not large, not much, small in size or number; short in distance or time; unimportant"; often synonymous with *small*, but capable of emotional implications which *small* is not

# MICROSCOPIC



Why has man  
Not a *microscopic* eye  
**For to see a speck**  
**If not the sky?**

*Examples:*

“Scan not a friend with a *microscopic* glass, / You know his faults, now let the foibles pass.” — George Harrison

“I didn’t know then what a sperm was, and so wouldn’t understand his answer for several years. ‘My boy,’ he said, ‘you are descended from a long line of determined, resourceful, *microscopic* tadpoles—champions every one.’” — Kurt Vonnegut

“Whatsoever life we meet [in other worlds] will be as strange and alien as the nightmare creatures of the ocean abyss, or of the insect empire whose horrors are normally hidden from us by their *microscopic* scale.” — Arthur C. Clarke

*Derivation:* 1732, “pertaining to or functioning as a microscope” meaning “of minute size” is from 1742

# MINI



**To wear one**  
**Be skinny**  
**If chubby**  
**No *mini***

*Examples:*

“Every time somebody makes an Indian movie . . . Cher on a horse with a headdress and a *miniskirt* . . . the fashion industry cashes in.”

— Buffy Sainte-Marie

“when you put on your shortest dress, please leave some mystery in it. . . . A *miniskirt* shows just enough to cause some mystery . . . .”

— Tyler Perry

“Hmm . . . Death by *mini* bar, how glamorous.” — Rupert Everett

*Derivation:* word-forming element meaning "miniature, minor," abstracted from *miniature*, perhaps influenced by *minimum*; *mini-* as a prefix dates from c. 1960; *minicam* for "miniature camera" (1937) is an early use; abbreviation of *mini-car*, a small car (1961); as an abbreviation of *miniskirt* is attested from 1966, "skirt with a hem-line well above the knee," reputedly the invention of French fashion designer André Courrèges

# MINIATURE



**A kid at one  
Is a *miniature* drunk  
Bumping things  
Hurling gunk**

*Examples:*

“Chess is life in *miniature*. Chess is struggle, chess is battles.”

— Garry Kasparov

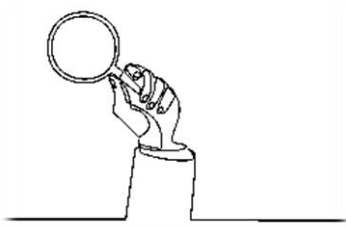
“Each of his phrases was rather like a little ancient island, inundated by a *miniature* sea of whiskey.” — J. D. Salinger

“Love is a perky elf dancing a merry little jig and then suddenly he turns on you with a *miniature* machine gun.” — Matt Groening

“You know you’ve made it when you’ve been moulded in *miniature* plastic. But you know what children do with Barbie dolls—it’s a bit scary, actually.” — Cate Blanchett

*Derivation:* “on a small scale, much reduced from natural size,” 1714, from *miniature* (n.)

# MINUTE / MINUTEST



**Good enough is only good  
Not good enough  
The *minute* details:  
They make it tough**

*Examples:*

“Not only do words infect, egotize, narcotize, and paralyze, but they enter into and colour the *minutest* cells of the brain ...”

— Rudyard Kipling

“It is difficult to imagine anyone having any real hopes for the human race in the face of the fact that the great majority of men still believe that the universe is run by a gaseous vertebrate of astronomical heft and girth, who is nevertheless interested in the *minutest* details of the private conduct of even the meanest man.” — H. L. Mencken

“The heart should have fed upon the truth, as insects on a leaf, till it be tinged with the color, and show its food in every . . . *minutest* fiber.”

— Samuel Taylor Coleridge

*Derivation:* mid-15c., "chopped small," from Latin *minutus* "little, small, minute," past participle of *minuere* "to lessen, diminish" (from PIE root *mei-* "small"); meaning "very small in size or degree, diminutive or limited, petty" is attested from late 15c.



# MINUTIA(E)



**Around the table  
Lawyers huddled  
They conspiring  
We befuddled**

*Examples:*

“Like most women, I remember my first drink in tender *minutiae*.”

— Koren Zailckas

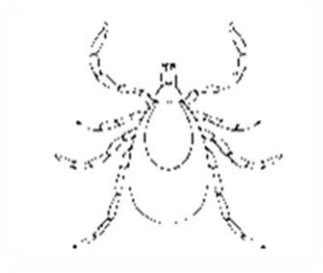
“I don’t really ever think about whether or not I like the characters I’m playing. I’m more into the *minutiae* of their behavior or what they’re doing in a certain scene.” —

Mary-Louise Parker

“Sadly, I do my homework. I’ve a soft spot for the boring *minutiae*. I read the Charter of the United Nations before meeting with Kofi Annan. I read the Meltzer report, and then I’ll read C. Fred Bergsten’s defense of institutions like the World Bank and the I.M.F. It’s embarrassing to admit.” — Bono

*Derivation:* "a small particular or detail, a trivial fact," 1751, usually in plural *minutiae*; from Latin *minutia* "smallness" (plural *minutiae*, in Late Latin "trifles")

# MITE



**A mite  
Is *mite*  
But not  
Its bite**

*Examples:*

“The thinnest yellow light of November is more warming and exhilarating than any wine they tell of. The *mite* which November contributes becomes equal in value to the bounty of July.”

— Henry David Thoreau

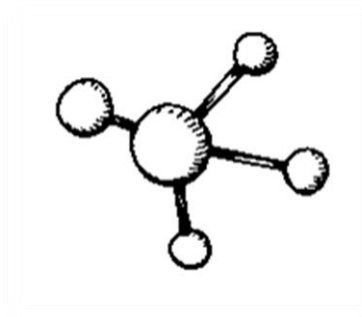
“I’ve never been lost, but I’ve been a *mite* bewildered for a few days.” — Daniel Boone

“It takes a thousand men to invent a telegraph, or a steam engine, or a phonograph, or a photograph, or a telephone or any other important thing—and the last man gets the credit and we forget the others. He added his little *mite*—that is all he did.” — Mark

Twain

*Derivation:* "little bit," mid-14c., from Middle Dutch or Middle Low German *mite* "tiny animal"

# MOLECULE



**Atoms are tiny**  
**Molecules bigger**  
**Why this is so**  
**Go figger**

*Examples:*

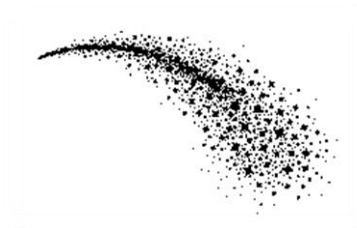
“There are as many atoms in one *molecule* of DNA as there are stars in a typical galaxy.”  
— Carl Sagan

“I will never use a substitute for butter; margarine is one *molecule* away from eating plastic.” — Paula Deen

“There’s a joy in having the *molecule* of an idea, then testing it in front of audiences at secret shows that people only know about the night before.” — Mike Myers

*Derivation:* 1794, "extremely minute particle," from French *molécule* (1670s), from Modern Latin *molecula*, diminutive of Latin *moles* "mass, barrier"; first used of Modern Latin *molecula* in modern scientific sense ("smallest part into which a substance can be divided without destroying its chemical character") is by Amedeo Avogadro (1811)

# MOTE



**For emoting**  
**Demoted**  
**A mote wiser**  
**Promoted**

*Examples:*

"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives there—on a *mote* of dust suspended in a sunbeam." — Carl Sagan

"The Soul rules over matter; matter may pass away like a *mote* in the sunbeam, may be absorbed into the immensity of God, as a mist is absorbed into the heat of the Sun—but the soul is the kingdom of God, the abode of love, of truth, of virtue." — Ralph Waldo Emerson

"Funny, but despite her slovenly appearance there was not a *mote* of dust in her house."  
— Anon.

*Derivation:* "small particle, as of dust visible in a ray of sunlight," Old English *mot*, of unknown origin; perhaps related to Dutch *mot* "dust from turf, sawdust, grit," Norwegian *mutt* "speck, mote, splinter, chip," hence, anything very small; many references are to Matthew vii. 3

# NICKNAME



**You knew he's hoist  
With his own petard  
By the *nickname* on  
His business card**

*Examples:*

"Titles are but *nicknames*, and every *nickname* is a title. — Thomas Paine

"*Nicknames* are fond names. We do not give them to people we dislike." — Edna Ferber

"You're not allowed to give yourself a *nickname*. This holds true in life as well as in poker." — Richard Roeper

"John Legend is a *nickname* that some friends started calling me, and it kind of grew into my stage name." — John Legend

*Derivation:* mid-15c., *neke* name, a misdivision of *ekename* (c. 1300), an *eke* name, "a familiar or diminutive name," especially one given in derision or reproach, literally "an additional name," from Old English *eaca*

# NIT / NIT-PICK



**A little nag  
A tiny *nit*  
Can bug you more than  
Just a bit**

*Examples:*

"Anyone *nit-picking* enough to write a letter of correction to an editor doubtless deserves the error that provoked it." — Alvin Toffler

"We're all a little *nit* autistic." — Dustin Hoffman

"Experts and specialists lead you quickly into chaos. They are a source of useless *nit-picking*, the ferocious quibble over a comma."  
— Frank Herbert

"When being vulnerable is too painful, people might *nitpick* and criticize to keep others at a distance." — Gail Cornwall, *The Atlantic*

*Derivation: nitpicker* "pedantic critic," by 1951, perhaps 1946, a figurative use, said to be originally military jargon; see *nit* (n.) + *pick* (v.)

# NOOK



**Give me a room  
Whose every *nook*  
Is furnished by  
A learned book**

– from Robert Southey

*Examples:*

“In this sequestered *nook* how sweet / To sit upon my orchard seat / And birds and  
flowers once more to greet . . . .”

– William Wordsworth

“I give the fight up: let there be an end, a privacy, an obscure *nook* for me. I want to be  
forgotten even by God.” – Robert Browning

“I am simply an agnostic. I haven't yet had time or opportunity to explore the universe,  
and I don't know what I might run on to in some *nook* or corner.” – Clarence Darrow

*Derivation:* c. 1300, *nokke*, “angle formed by the meeting of two lines; a corner of a room,”  
a word of unknown origin; possibly from Old Norse *nokke* “hook, bent figure,” or from  
Old English *hnecca* “neck”

# NOSE(D)



The horse dashed to the finish line  
His spirits quickly rose  
He made one final daring lunge  
And triumphed by a *nose*

### *Examples:*

"Mrs Weaver *nosed* among the books, too dim-witted to grasp that they were in alphabetical order." — George Orwell

"As an actor I've always *nosed* around apologetically about: 'Oh, wouldn't it be interesting if I could do that?' I can't imagine not wanting to do this every day." — Jason Bateman

"Your rights end where my *nose* begins." — Abraham Lincoln

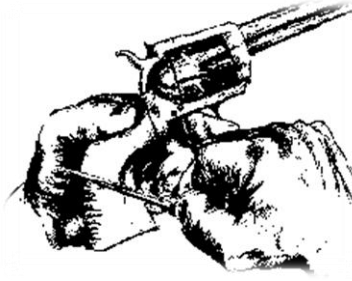
"The *nose* of a mob is its imagination. By this, at any time, it can be quietly led." — Edgar Allan Poe

"Bah! The thing is not a *nose* at all, but a bit of primordial chaos clapped on to my face." — H. G. Wells

*Derivation:* Middle English *nose*, from Old English *nosu* "the nose of the human head, the special organ of breathing and smelling," from PIE root *nas-* "nose"



# NOTCH



**Another *notch*  
On his trusty gun  
Who ever thought killing  
Could be so much fun?**

*Examples:*

“Before I put another *notch* in my lipstick case / you better make sure you put me in my place.” — Pat Benatar

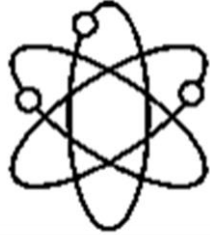
“Wouldn’t it be nice to be like men and get *notches* in your belt . . . and not get emotionally involved?” — Marilyn Monroe

“We stand against fate, as children stand up against the wall in their father’s house, and *notch* their height from year to year. But when the boy grows to a man, and is master of the house, he pulls down that wall and builds it new and bigger.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

“Man is a unique individual. He can never be put in a system where he becomes just another *notch*. Another nail.” — Frank Capra

*Derivation:* “a v-shaped nick or indentation,” 1570s, probably a misdivision of an *otch*, from French *oche* “notch,” from Old French *ochier* “to notch,” a word of unknown origin

# PARTICLE



I saw it written  
In an article  
Our galaxy  
Is but a *particle*

*Examples:*

"I haven't a *particle* of confidence in a man who has no redeeming petty vices whatsoever." — Mark Twain

"For five hundred dollars, I'll name a subatomic *particle* after you. Some of my satisfied customers include Arthur C. Quark and George Meson." — Scott Adams

"You think we're a family ... You think we're some jolly, situation-comedy family when we're in *particles*, torn apart, torn all over the place, and our mother was a witch." — Anne Tyler

*Derivation:* late 14c., "a bit or fragment, small part or division of a whole, minute portion of matter," from Latin *particula* "little bit or part, grain, jot," diminutive of *pars* "a part, piece, division"

# PARTICULATE



**One may ignore  
A spatter  
But *particulates*:  
They matter**

o

*Examples:*

“In the United States, the most important environmental indicator, *particulate* air pollution, has been cut by more than half since 1955 ...”

— Bjorn Lomborg

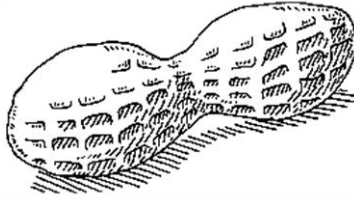
“My Turn is the distilled bathwater of Mrs. Reagan’s life. It is for the most part sweetish, with a tart edge of rebuke, but disappointingly free of dirt or *particulate* matter of any kind.” — Barbara Ehrenreich

“Cocoa-battered girls were stretched out on the public beach in apparently random alignments, but maybe if a weather satellite zoomed in on one of those bodies and then zoomed back out, the photos would show the curving beach itself was another woman, a fractal image made up of the *particulate* sunbathers.”

— Bonnie Jo Campbell

*Derivation:* "having the form of a small particle, taking the form of particles," 1871, from Latin *particula* "little bit or part, grain, jot"; as a noun, "a particulate substance," from 1960

# PEANUTS



Small change, a trifle  
*Peanuts*, a penny  
Except when one's not  
Got so many

*Examples:*

"If you pay *peanuts*, you wind up hiring monkeys." — Hannibal

"I literally went from being unable to pay my rent to being on a plane the next day, being paid *peanuts*." — Johnny Depp

"I will tell you, running for President, the money I spent is *peanuts* compared to the money I won't make." — Donald Trump

"Space is big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is. I mean, you may think it's a long way down the road to the drug store, but that's just *peanuts* to space."  
— Douglas Adams

**Derivation:** *pea* + *nut* (1807); earlier, and still commonly in England, *ground nut*, *ground pea* (1769); *peanut* for "small or unimportant person" is by 1942

# PINPOINT



**How many angels  
Could dance upon  
A *pinpoint*, really?  
I mean, c'mon!**

*Examples:*

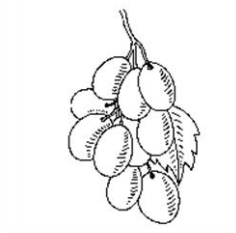
"I'm proud, and Islam did it. And after these things that I heard in church, a preacher and watching this and that, I knew something was wrong but I couldn't *pinpoint* it." — Muhammad Ali

"Someone called all the newspapers in New York and told them I'd died. I've been told by almost everyone it was an ex-wife—I've had a few so it's hard to *pinpoint* which one—but who knows for sure?"  
— Richard Pryor

"There are nineteen words in Yiddish that convey gradations of disparagement, from a mild, fluttery helplessness to a state of downright, irreconcilable brutishness. All of them can be usefully employed to *pinpoint* the kind of individuals I write about."  
— S. J. Perelman

*Derivation:* "the point of a pin," from *pin* (n.) + *point* (n.); taken into aeronautics in a sense of "place identified from the air" (used to ascertain the position of the aircraft), hence the verb meaning "locate precisely" (1917)

# PIP



**Grapes are sweet but  
Full of *pips*  
Though none will ever  
Pass my lips**

*Examples:*

“Squeeze the rich until the *pips* squeak.” — Denis Healey

“Life . . . is like a grapefruit. It’s orange and squishy, and has a few *pips* in it, and some folks have half a one for breakfast.” — Douglas Adams

“All Englishmen talk as if they’ve got a bushel of plums stuck in their throats, and then after swallowing them get constipated from the *pips*.” — W. C. Fields

“What children learns from children, is that there’s no sense grabbin’ at th’ whole orange-peel an’ all. If you do you’ll likely not get even th’ *pips*, an’ them’s too bitter to eat.” — Frances Hodgson Burnett

*Derivation:* 1797, "seed of an apple (or orange)," a shortened form of *pipin* "seed of a fleshy fruit" (early 14c.), from Old French *pepin* (13c.), probably from a root *pipp-*, expressing smallness

# SCRATCH



**If you have a *scratch*  
For every itch  
You'll end up happy  
And seldom bitch**

*Examples:*

"A timid mind is apt to mistake every *scratch* for a mortal wound." — Lord Byron

"*Scratch* a socialist and you find a snob." — Mary McCarthy

"Engraving then, is, in brief terms, the Art of *Scratch*." — John Ruskin

"Fatherhood is great because you can ruin someone from *scratch*." — Jon Stewart

*Derivation:* c. 1400, *scracchen*, "mark or wound slightly on the surface by a scraping or tearing action with something rough, sharp, or pointed," probably a fusion of Middle English *scratten* and *crachen*, both meaning "to scratch"; the noun *scratch* is from 1580s, "a slight wound or laceration, slight tear in a skin or surface produced by something sharp or rough"

# SCUFF



The shoes were perfect  
Nary a *scuff*  
Lying neatly below  
An immaculate cuff

### *Examples:*

“The girls just like to be in the shoes. They like to *scuff* up the floors and walk around in high-heeled shoes that are too big for them, all over the house.” — Erykah Badu

“Every believer is an anarchist at heart. True believers would rather see governments topple and history rewritten than *scuff* the cover of their faith.” — Jeanette Winterson

“Work is a rubber ball. If you drop it, it will bounce back. The other four balls—family, health, friends, integrity—are made of glass. If you drop one of these, it will be irrevocably *scuffed*, nicked, perhaps even shattered.” — Gary W. Keller

*Derivation:* 1768, "to walk (through or over something) without raising the feet," originally Scottish, a word "of uncertain and possibly mixed origin" [OED], probably from a Scandinavian source related to Old Norse *skufa*, *skyfa* "to shove, push aside," from PIE *skeubh-* "to shove"; meaning "injure the surface of by hard usage or grazing with something rough" is by 1879



# SKIMPY



*Skimpy* has its place  
Though not in church  
It stands out like a beacon  
From the altar's perch

### *Examples:*

"Especially in the world of fantasy and superheroes, it's great to have role models that aren't in *skimpy* little outfits, in impossible poses. That's so important for young women." — Kelley Armstrong

"I began reading Harper Lee's novel in the *skimpy* shade of a pine outside my grandmother's house, fat beagles pressing against me, begging for attention, ignored." — Rick Bragg

"I do very, very, very simple, *skimpy* doodles, nothing too committed. Because people tend to fall in love if they like it—if you color it in and they like it, then they want exactly those colors, even if they were just indications." — Dave McKean

*Derivation:* 1842, from *skimp* (adj.) "scanty" (1775), which perhaps ultimately is from an early 18c. alteration of *scrimp* or a variant of *scamp*

# SLIT



Careful now  
You move a bit  
That tiny nick  
Becomes a *slit*

*Examples:*

“*Slits* in nothingness are not very easy to paint.” — Georgia O’Keeffe

“We had the skirts with the *slits* up the side, sort of tough, sort of Spanish Harlem cool, but sweet too.” — Ronnie Spector

“Every normal man must be tempted, at times, to spit on his hands, hoist the black flag, and begin *slitting* throats.” — H. L. Mencken

“When Yoko [Ono] and I got married, we got terrible racist letters—you know, warning me that she would *slit* my throat. Those mainly came from Army people living in Aldershot. Officers.” — John Lennon

*Derivation:* c. 1200, from or related to Old English *slitan* "to slit, tear, split, rend to pieces"; *slit* (noun) mid-13c., "long cut or rent (in clothes), incision"

# SMALL / SMALLEST



**Take all the things  
That are really *small*  
You've not the time  
To count them all**

*Examples:*

"The *smallest* feline is a masterpiece." — Leonardo da Vinci

"The *smallest* good deed is better than the grandest intention."  
— Proverb

"All that is not perfect down to the *smallest* detail is doomed to perish." — Gustav Mahler

"*Small* things amuse *small* minds." — Doris Lessing

"Never do an enemy a *small* injury." — Niccolo Machiavelli

*Derivation:* Old English *smæl* "thin, slender, narrow, fine," from Proto-Germanic *smal* "small animal"; sense of "not large, of little size" developed in Old English; of children, "young," from mid-13c.; meaning "inferior in degree or amount" is from late 13c.; meaning "trivial, unimportant" is from mid-14c.

# SNIPPET



Some things are best tried  
In a *snippet*  
Any more, you'll  
Want to skip it

*Examples:*

"It's good to experience Hollywood in short bursts, I guess. Little *snippets*. I don't think I can handle being here all the time, it's pretty nutty." — Johnny Depp

"The lesson that I'm learning is that I've got to be careful of being pigeonholed because people can take a piece of tape and edit out the first half and only pull out one *snippet* that could start a firestorm."

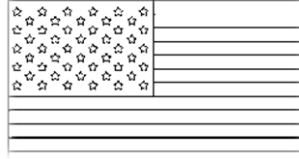
— Herman Cain

"Twitter allowed me to talk about parenting in short *snippets* and find out what I really wanted to say about it, which is that I'm a dad who had no idea what he's doing." —

Jim Gaffigan

*Derivation:* 1660s, from *snip* (n.) + diminutive suffix *-et*

# SPANGLE



And the star-*spangled* banner  
In triumph shall wave  
O'er the land of the free  
And the home of the brave

— from Francis Scott Key

### *Examples:*

"I don't give a damn about 'The Missouri Waltz' but I can't say it out loud because it's the song of Missouri. It's as bad as 'The Star-*Spangled* Banner' so far as music is concerned." — Har S. Truman

"The spacious firmament on high, / And all the blue ethereal sky, / And *spangled* heavens, a shining frame, / Their great Original proclaim." — Joseph Addison

"The last ever dolphin message was misinterpreted as a surprisingly sophisticated attempt to do a double-backwards somersault through a hoop whilst whistling the 'Star *Spangled* Banner,' but in fact the message was this: So long and thanks for all the fish."  
— Douglas Adams

*Derivation:* early 15c., "small piece of glittering metal," diminutive of *spang* "glittering ornament, spangle," probably from Middle Dutch *spange* "brooch, clasp," from an extended form of PIE root *(s)pen-* "to draw, stretch, spin"

# SPECK



**A *speck* is cousin to  
A mote  
Not kissing, mind you  
More remote**

*Examples:*

"We are just a *speck*, on a *speck*, orbiting a *speck*, in the corner of a *speck*, in the middle of nowhere." — Bill Nye (the "Science Guy")

"Our lives are but *specks* of dust falling through the fingers of time. Like sands of the hourglass, so are the days of our lives." — Socrates

"In other men we faults can spy / And blame the mote that dims their eye / Each little *speck* and blemish find / To our own stronger errors blind." — Benjamin Franklin

"I am no longer a shuddering *speck* of existence, alone in the darkness; I belong to them and they to me; we all share the same fear and the same life . . . ." — Erich Maria Remarque

*Derivation:* Old English *specca* "small spot, stain," of unknown origin; probably related to Dutch *speckel* "speck, speckle"; meaning "tiny bit" developed c. 1400

# SPIKE



**A *spike* may be on a running shoe  
In a plank of wood or tree  
But one that measures rates of death  
Is one I'm loath to see**

*Examples:*

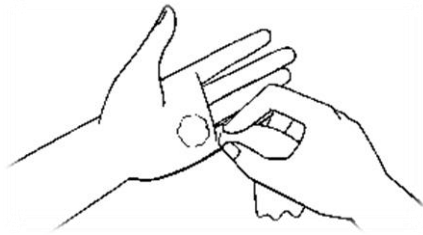
"This is the weather the cuckoo likes, / And so do I; / When showers betumble the chestnut *spikes*, / And nestlings fly . . . ." — Thomas Hardy

"I have never doped—I have competed as an endurance athlete for 25 years with no *spike* in performance, passed more than 500 drug tests and never failed one." — Lance Armstrong

"By the time I was fourteen the nail in my wall would no longer support the weight of the rejection slips impaled upon it. I replaced the nail with a *spike* and went on writing."  
— Stephen King

*Derivation:* "large nail," mid-14c., perhaps from or related to a Scandinavian word, such as Old Norse *spik* "splinter," from PIE root *spei-* "sharp point"

# SPLINTER



**Damn that hurts  
That little stick  
Slid in easy  
Hard to pick**

*Examples:*

“You can’t go against the grain of the universe and not expect to get *splinters*.” — C. S. Lewis

“You have trust in what you think. If you *splinter* yourself and try to please everyone, you can’t.” — Annie Leibovitz

“Vegetarians, and their Hezbollah-like *splinter* faction, the vegans . . . are the enemy of everything good and decent in the human spirit.” — Anthony Bourdain

“He was a clot looking for a place to happen, a *splinter* of bone hunting a soft organ to puncture, a lonely lunatic cell looking for a mate . . .” — Stephen King

*Derivation:* early 14c., from Middle Dutch *splinter*, *splenter* "a splinter," related to *splinte* ("splint")



# SPOT



**How civilized**  
**A spot of tea**  
**Rebuke to life's**  
**Cacophony**

*Examples:*

"Kids can *spot* a phony a mile away." — Fred Rogers

"The leopard does not change his *spots*." — William Shakespeare

"I was born modest; not all over, but in *spots*." — Mark Twain

"Clean your finger before you point at my *spots*." — Benjamin Franklin

*Derivation:* c. 1200, "moral stain," probably from Old English *splott* "a spot, blot, patch (of land)," and partly from or related to Middle Dutch *spotte* "spot, speck"; meaning "speck, stain" is from mid-14c.; the sense of "particular place, small extent of space" is from c.

1300

# SPUR



Slow in motion and shadowless  
The switch and the *spurs*  
Every living thing, with a fatal sting  
Bark and rattle this curse  
– John White Anthony and Brendan Benson

*Examples:*

“Don’t squat with your *spurs* on.” – Will Rogers

“Fight, gentlemen of England! fight, bold yeomen! / Draw, archers, draw your arrows to  
the head! / *Spur* your proud horses hard, and ride in blood; / Amaze the welkin with  
your broken staves!”  
– William Shakespeare

“I’m not lazy, but I don’t have that *spur* on my ass that most people have, like, ‘Oh, god.  
I have to get something out or else my career will be over!’ I don’t really care if my  
career is over.” – Fiona Apple

*Derivation:* Old English *spura, spora* "metal implement worn on the heel to goad a horse"  
(related to *spurnan* "to kick"), from PIE *spere-* "ankle"; generalized sense of "anything  
that urges on, stimulus," is from late 14c.

# STREAK



**Who knew he had  
That hidden *streak*  
Cruelty lurks  
Within the meek**

*Examples:*

“There is a great *streak* of violence in every human being. If it is not channeled and understood, it will break out in war or in madness.”

— Sam Peckinpah

“If there is a *streak* of ham anywhere in an actor, Shakespeare will bring it out.” —

Robert Benchley

“If a woman hasn’t got a tiny *streak* of harlot in her, she’s a dry stick as a rule.” — D. H.

Lawrence

“I applied *streaks* and blobs of colors onto the canvas with a palette knife, and I made them sing with all the intensity I could . . . .”

— Wassily Kandinsky

*Derivation:* Old English *strica* "line of motion, stroke of a pen" from Proto-Germanic *strikon-*; sense of "long, thin mark" is first found 1560s; meaning "a temporary run (of luck)" is from 1843

# TEEN(S)Y-WEEN(S)Y



**So which is smaller  
Teensy or itsy?  
I think the latter  
By only a bitsy**

*Examples:*

“‘Victoria?’ she hissed. ‘Laurent?’ I nodded, a *teensy* bit alarmed by the expression in her black eyes.” — Stephenie Meyer

“Meg, Meg, Meg, my sweet deluded little mignon. Aren’t we forgetting one *teensy-weensy*, but ever so crucial little, tiny detail? I own you!” — from *Hercules*

“Kimmy: ‘Yeah, I mean, all those stories that Michael told me were hilarious. But, I mean, all those broken relationships, all those men, it must have hurt going through so many guys and never finding the right one.’ George: ‘Hurt? She couldn’t sit down for seven years, until she met *teensy-weensy* little me.’” — from *My Best Friend’s Wedding*

*Derivation:* according to the *OED*, the evolution for "teensy" is as follows: *tiny* > *teeny* > *teensy*

# TIDDLY



**She laughed  
Quite giddily  
Not lustily  
More *tiddly***

*Examples:*

“‘That’s right,’ said Eeyore. ‘Sing. Umty-*tiddly*, umty-too. Here we go gathering Nuts and May. Enjoy yourself.’ ‘I am,’ said Pooh.”

— A. A. Milne

“All you ate was a *tiddly* little piece of cake.” — *Dictionary.com*

“Compared with Superior, Lake Erie is a *tiddly* little pool.”

— Jack Gordon

“Keep a demon busy, I thought. Right; maybe he fancies a game of *Tiddlywinks*.” — Rick Riordan

*Derivation: tiddly* alteration of *little*; *tiddlywinks* (children’s tile-flipping game), 1857, probably an arbitrary formation from baby talk, but perhaps from slang *Tiddly-wink* “unlicensed drink shop” (1844), from slang *tiddly* “a drink, drunk”

# TINY / TINIEST



**Does anything else  
Bring greater cheer  
Than a miniature sleigh  
And eight *tiny* reindeer?**

*Examples:*

“Every Joke is a *Tiny* Revolution” — George Orwell

“A mighty flame followeth a *tiny* spark.” — Dante Alighieri

“Sand is overrated. It’s just *tiny* little rocks.” — Charlie Kaufman

“A *tiny* fly can choke a big man.” — Solomon Ibn Gabirol

*Derivation:* 1590s, from *tyne* "very small" (c. 1400, maybe from *tine* + *-y*)

# TIP



**Icebergs, noses  
Tongues and spears  
All have *tips*  
So it appears**

*Examples:*

“The source known as Deep Throat provided a kind of road map through the scandal. His one consistent message was that the Watergate burglary was just the *tip* of the iceberg.” — Bob Woodward

“Men and women alike, if you think that altering the *tip* of your nose with surgery will make you happier, I would suggest you alter something much more malleable than your flesh, like your priorities, or your friends.” — Nick Offerman

*Derivation:* c. 1400, "extreme end of something, top of something round or pointed, metal attachment to the end of something," from Middle Low German or Middle Dutch *tip* "utmost point, extremity, tip"

# TITTLE

ñ

**A *tittle* is a tiny mark  
A dash or dot or scruple  
And it would still be tiny if  
Its size were to quadruple**

*Examples:*

“For verily I say unto you, till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one *tittle* shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”

— The Bible

“I have always maintained that translation is essentially the closest reading one can possibly give a text. The translator cannot ignore "lesser" words, but must consider every jot and *tittle*.”

— Gregory Rabassa

“And as for times, altho’ ‘tis said by many / The ‘good old times’ were far the worst of any, / Of which sound Doctrine I believe each *tittle* / Yet still I think these worst a little.”

— Edgar Allan Poe

*Derivation:* "small stroke or point in writing," late 14c., translating *apex* in Late Latin sense of "accent mark over a vowel," which itself translates Greek *keraiā* (literally "a little horn"), used of the little lines and projections by which the Hebrew letters of similar form differ from one another; related to Spanish *tilda*



# WHISKER



**By a *whisker*  
Still a win  
Unless you bring  
Deniers in**

*Examples:*

*"Whiskers of the cat, / Webbed toes on my swimming dog; / God is in the details." — Dean Koontz*

*"We were greeted by the minister whose inclusive, non-judgmental smile was no more than a *whisker* away from a smirk." — Jenny Diski*

*"This is a fierce bad rabbit; look at his savage *whiskers*, and his claws and his turned-up tail." — Beatrix Potter*

*"The United States came within a *whisker* of invading Utah in 1858 and starting a civil war three years before the Civil War. Because the conflict ended up fizzling out, it's not the most dramatic story about the West." — David Roberts*

*Derivation: "hair of a man's face." c. 1600, originally a playful formation, from Middle English *wisker* "anything that whisks or sweeps" (early 15c.)*

# WHIT



**I care  
Not a *whit*  
For my  
Obit**

*Examples:*

“To my mind, to kill in war is not a *whit* better than to commit ordinary murder.” —  
Albert Einstein

“Law never made man a *whit* more just; and by means of their respect for it, even the  
well disposed are daily made agents of injustice.”  
— Henry David Thoreau

“Civilization has been thrust upon me . . . and it has not added one *whit* to my love for  
truth, honesty, and generosity.”  
— **Luther Standing Bear**

**Derivation:** "smallest particle," 1520s, from *na whit* "no amount" (c. 1200), from Old  
English *nan wiht*, from *wiht* "amount," originally "person, human being"