

VILLAGE VIEW

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Light. We all know, don't we, what the word means? Sure, we do. But the other night, while reading, I ran across the term "livers and lights" and realized I hadn't the faintest notion what "lights" in that case meant, except that I assumed it must have something to do with entrails, coupled as it is with livers. So I got out my dictionary and, lo and behold, found "light" to be one of the most complicated words we use.

As a noun, it's something that makes vision possible; also a brightness or luminosity, an electromagnetic radiation in wavelength, and sunshine, dawn, moon and star shine; a candle, or an electric, gas or oil lamp, a spiritual illumination, or an ultimate truth.

Then again it's an opinion; or it's public knowledge; or it's how something appears to others, good or bad. Used with modifiers, it refers to sources of light, that is, a north or diffused light, and we also speak of firelight. By shedding light on a subject, we inform intellectually.

Further, windows or panes of glass are lights. And so are philosophies and personal standards. The light of your life is another person, a mate or perhaps a child. And the gleam in someone's eye is a light.

A signal or beacon we call a light; also, a traffic-control device. Think, as well, of the individual human character we sometimes hide beneath a bushel. Light, in some instances, is the opposite of shadow, but certainly not always; sometimes, it's the opposite of dark, sometimes of heavy.

Lacking a match, we ask for a light for a smoke. We stand under lights on a stage and before footlights; if fortune smiles, we see our name displayed on marquees...in lights. We use it in comparing both things and ideas; we weigh judgments in light of circumstances, and objects in relation to one another.

Light bears a measure of time, can be early, growing, full, fading, or half. Light also denotes intensity of colors or lack of it.

And then, for additional use, we have the word as a verb. Think of the ways a variety of things light up a room, a view, a mood, or on the other hand, the things we light, such as stoves, fires, lamps, candles, ovens or cigars. Each gives an entirely different interpretation to the action in lighting something.

Our faces light up when we are pleased. We light our way with torches of flashlights, and, of course, we illuminate various spaces with lights of all kinds. Lights cause things to brighten, add animation, and a smile lights our countenance when we meet a friend.

Differently still, we use the word as an adverb or as an adjective to indicate lack of weight. In this sense, it can describe a coat, a blanket, or a truck. Or indicate a thing or person that fails to measure up to an accepted standard. It means slight, or inconsiderable; it means gentle and without force; it means faint or indistinct; it means nimble and quick as well as free from care. It refers to reading or entertainment that requires little effort as well as to beverages with small alcoholic content. We use light to describe meals, the quality of breads, souffles, and omelets.

It describes how we are clad, equipped, burdened, or filled; also our movements, for some of us are light on our feet. We light, when we descend from anything higher than the ground or the floor; birds light upon a twig, branch, or at the bird-bath. Again, we could light upon something unexpectedly. And find in that a still different meaning.

Such is the complexity of our word light. How confusing it must be to a foreigner to encounter a single word in our language that carries so many different connotations. One of its antonyms, the word dark, is nearly as confusing. More confusing still is the fact that dark can't always be applied correctly as the opposite of light.

We speak easily of moonlight, but not of moondark; sunlight, but not sundark; starlight, but never stardark. We say a building is dark when no light burns inside; but we don't say it is light if a gleam shines from one or more windows. There are dark ages, but no light ages. Then we turn right around and speak of the light of day and the dark of night.

Never do we mean heaviness of weight when we speak of darkness; yet in talking of colors, light and dark are direct opposites. We light a lamp, yet never dark one; in fact, we use dark as a verb most infrequently.

While a light jacket is suitable for a cool day, it can be of any color; a dark jacket, on the other hand, might be of any weight, but would necessarily be of a deep hue. A dark person might be secretive and mysterious, or of swarthy complexion; but while a blond person might be called light, an open forthright person would not be. A light touch suggests one thing; a light rap, a different thing. Whoever heard of a dark rap? Or a footdark? Or darkhouses, traffic darks, or signal darks?

Then again, we do have light beer as well as dark, and light wines, but not dark wines.

We might eat a light meal, but not a dark one. A cat may always light on its feet, but doesn't dark on anything, ever. Nor does it heavy. But a meal can be heavy. We find ourselves in the dark before a solution comes to light. Such is the English language.

It's reasonable to believe a stranger to the English-speaking world would remain in the dark while struggling to understand the multitude of interpretations of the word light before the light dawned and he felt light-hearted about using light comfortably in his vocabulary.

As for me, once I'd digested all the definitions of light and dark, I settled myself to the task of shedding light on the extent we take for granted this multi-faceted word. But before I did, I found the definition of the word as it applies in "livers and lights."

It means lungs. So now we know.