

# NWL2020/NSWL2020 Final Report

*Revised 2020-09-30*

The NASPA Dictionary Committee (DC) has completed work on the final version of the NASPA Word List 2020 Edition (NWL2020) and the NASPA School Word List 2020 Edition (NSWL2020) and is proceeding with their adoption as presented below.

As directed by the NASPA Executive Committee (EC), NWL2020 will consist of those words found in NWL2018 that have not been identified as offensive slurs; NSWL2020 will have corresponding changes.

We are thankful to our fellow NASPA committees for their valuable advice, but both the EC and the DC take full responsibility for their respective decisions concerning these revised word lists. We thank NASPA members Steven Alexander, John Attamack, Dave Cameron, Jacob Cohen, Steve Goldberg, Vivian Minden, Wally Schultz, Joel Sherman, Linda Wancel, and John Wilder for their helpful contributions, as well as Izak Bulten, Ron McGill, and Rich Moyer for their timely and pertinent comments.

## Timeline

- 2020-06-11: NASPA member Jim Hughes proposes deleting some offensive slurs in a Facebook post by César Del Solar.
- 2020-07-06: EC agrees with Hasbro that all offensive slurs should be removed from NWL2020 to align with planned Hasbro SCRABBLE rule changes.
- 2020-08-20: The second draft of this document is published.
- 2020-08-29: Deadline for submitting any feedback to [info@scrabbleplayers.org](mailto:info@scrabbleplayers.org).
- 2020-09-01: Original target effective date of NWL2020.
- 2020-09-02: Planned publication date of final draft.
- 2020-09-30: The final draft of this document is published (delay due to DC member personal circumstances).
- 2020-10-08: Projected date of publication for NWL2020.
- 2020-10-15: NASPA Advisory Board to determine effective date of NWL2020.
- 2020-10-18: DC is to meet online to discuss resuming regular editorial work on other projects, including:
  - next edition code-named NWL202x, including 11-letter words from the Canadian Oxford Dictionary (2nd edition), any corrections identified in the interim, assessment of member suggestions
  - updating the online list of offensive slurs in response to new lexicographical research
  - adding and editing definitions for NWL entries

## Discussion

Our community has long recognized that dysphemisms and offensive terms of abuse (slurs), even when regarded merely as character strings for wordplay, cast undue negative light upon the SCRABBLE brand when used over the board. After consultation, NASPA and Hasbro agreed to modify their respective rules to ban the use of offensive slurs in licensed play.

The DC established guidelines to identify offensive slurs and applied those guidelines to the words identified as candidates. As is already done with special categories such as other offensive words, trademarks, implicit inflections, and typographical errors in source lexica, the Committee will update the NASPA Word Database to show which words have been reviewed in the current process, and how the Committee reached its decisions about categorizing offensive slurs. No words will be deleted from the database, as to do so would breach its lexicographical integrity and prevent players from understanding the reasons why some words are valid for play and others are not.

We define offensive slurs as those words not only abusive or disparaging in reference to protected categories of people, but also sufficiently repugnant to have merited formal lexicographic recognition.

Words can become more or less offensive just as they can be removed from or added to our source lexica. Some formerly innocuous words such as "Pepsi" can acquire offensive meanings such as "pepsi". Usage notes in source lexica show that "scaramouch" and "shaker" once had pejorative connotations and might formerly have been classified as offensive, but are *rehabilitated* and no longer regarded as offensive by authorities. Conversely, some offensive slurs have been partially *reclaimed* by their targets, but we found no cases (among over a dozen words in the process of being reclaimed) where lexicographical usage notes overturned tags indicating offensiveness.

We judged that regional and contextual differences occasionally indicated some versions of a root word were more offensive than others. For instance, the combined testimony of our authorities indicates that the American spelling "graybeard" is less offensive in its regions of use than the Canadian spelling "greybeard", and so only "greybeard" was categorized as an offensive slur, to best reflect its edge-case status. The DC also deleted several words from the school list to create NSWL2020, as necessitated by the categorization process.

There were some cases in which it was unclear whether or not a word referred to a protected category of people. We have documented our reasoning in the NASPA Word Database, and have for example ruled that obesity is not currently legally considered a disability, but that being Romani (or not) is a national origin based on historical grounds. We have asked the NASPA IDEA Committee to consider rewording the NASPA Code of Conduct to make it less ambiguous for our purposes.

There was disagreement within the DC concerning whether words should be designated as offensive slurs based on unanimity in our sources, or if one entry in one source was enough. Some members took the position that offensiveness tags were more sensitive than other

disqualifiers such as capitalization, which justified breaking with past practice and adopting a longer list. Other DC members took the position that words played that have senses that are not identifiable as offensive slurs (such as “coloreds”, which may refer to laundry items) have always been understood by mature players as relating to the inoffensive sense, which justified the adoption of a shorter list. In the end, since the EC took responsibility for the final decision, the DC did not take a vote, but records its research into these two categories for possible future use.

The scope of this project did not extend to making recommendations about the use of the Collins Scrabble Words lexicon in NASPA CSW-rated tournaments, due to uncertainty about editorial plans at HarperCollins.

The DC recommends the use of the multiplication sign (× alone, or x with a space) as the new symbol in Zyzzyva for identifying words that are in NWL2018 but not in NWL2020.

## Formal Definition

The search for offensive slurs included consultation with dictionary publishers and other advisors, review of historical lists of offensive words, and assiduous investigation of open sources. After review of over 2,500 candidate word forms, the DC selected the following criteria as resulting in the most reasonable categorization of offensive slurs.

- The candidate word was valid for play in NWL2018. Also, it is present neither in the Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary (6th Edition) nor in the SCRABBLE Word Finder at [scrabble.merriam.com](http://scrabble.merriam.com) (SWF), which have already been screened against offensive slurs by Merriam-Webster.
- The word is offensive: at a minimum, the word is labeled with an offensiveness tag in all senses in at least one of the up to seven current dictionaries in which it appears, or was clearly omitted from OSPD as offensive while present in the corresponding tournament word list (i.e., OSPD3 with OTCWL; OSPD4 with OTCWL2; OSPD5 with OTCWL2014).
  - Offensiveness tags are defined to include abusive, coarse, contemptuous, derisive, derogatory, dismissive, disparaging, hostile, obscene, offensive, opprobrious, pejorative, and vulgar (as well as the noun forms abuse, contempt, derision, disparagement, and hostility).
  - Other tags were not considered indicators of offensiveness, such as merely affectionate, condescending, disapproving, facetious, humorous, impolite, insulting, ironic, jocular, patronizing, playful, pretentious, sarcastic, scornful, or whimsical. Also, the Webster's New World usage tag "slur" was not considered because it was always accompanied by more specific labels.
  - Degrees of offensiveness were not considered as to minimum slur status (e.g., by many, chiefly, especially, extremely, frequently, generally, mainly, mostly, often, traditionally, typically, usually). A few words considered as "sometimes" offensive but not "often" offensive were excepted from the stronger standard for slur status (e.g., among a minority, by some, mild, mildly, not generally, not

normally, sometimes, somewhat). Age of offensiveness was not considered except to differentiate words only formerly offensive.

- The word is a slur: at a minimum, one of the known senses of the word applies solely to protected categories of personal identity as covered by the NASPA Code of Conduct: “race, color, creed or religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, age, marital status, military status, or disability.”
  - Protection does not necessarily extend to other categories protected by law or custom but not stated in the Code, such as (without limitation) age under 40, avocation or vocation, corporate or group status, other familial status, genetic information, intelligence level or medical condition other than disability, political activity or belief, pregnancy, relation to the speaker, rural or urban status, socioeconomic class, veteran status, or generalized abuse categories (imputing offensive anatomical, profane, prurient, scatological, or vulgar categorization without specific application).
  - Any future recommendations for lexicography-based changes to protected categories will be submitted from the DC to the EC as recommended Code of Conduct enhancements.
- This process resulted in two lists: a longer list of words categorized as offensive slurs according to at least one of their senses, and a shorter sublist of words categorized at least often as offensive (e.g., those labelled “usually disparaging”, but not those labelled “sometimes offensive”) according to all of their senses. The EC reviewed both lists, and determined that the longer list more closely met expectations of a list of offensive slurs, and decided to adopt it.
- Usage notes from a target word form apply to variant word forms (such as respellings, affixed forms, run-ons, undefined list entries, capitalization, etc.) when online or print dictionaries link the variants to the target.

## Word Lists

Because of the explicit language involved, the lists of offensive slurs are published for our adult members at the password-protected NASPA Member Services website:

<http://scrabbleplayers.org/cgi-bin/doc.pl?did=45>

There, each word is listed in alphabetical order, with a link to its entry in the NASPA Word Database, explaining the grounds on which its categorization has been proposed.

At this time, the minimum criteria are met by 259 words. They are divided into 155 words and inflections that were found to be at least often offensive and personally applicable in not just one but all senses; and 104 words and inflections that were found to be at least sometimes offensive in at least one dictionary and personally applicable in at least one sense, but not offensive and personally applicable in all senses. The Executive Committee has determined that the full list of 259 words will be considered offensive slurs when editing NWL2020.

It will be observed that the root form of each word is a noun applicable to protected personal identity (root nouns are themselves offensive except for “Jew”, offensive only as a lowercase adjective or verb, and “pope”, a narrow but protected class), even if the slur itself may be a derived word such as “nonpapists”.

The following root words were originally proposed as offensive slurs but did not meet the criteria above:

- “Graybeard” (MW, WNW, AH) appears as inoffensive in SCRABBLE Word Finder.
- “Baldie” (COD), “bumboy” (COD), “butches” (MW, WNW, AH, RH), and “shemale” (OCD) were inoffensive in all references.
- “Fatso” (MW, WNW, AH, RH) is not currently considered a legal disability.
- “Baywop” (COD), “culchie”/“culshie” (COD), and “hicksville” (COD) apply only to generic geographical categorization.
- “Coonshit” (COD) applies only to anything generically negligible or contemptible.

In addition to candidate offensive slurs, 14 words from NSWL2018 no longer meet the criteria for school lists (i.e., they are not in OSPD6 or SWF and are offensive in all senses in at least one authority), and are therefore also listed in the Member Services document.

## Authorities

For this project, the DC referred primarily to the original source lexica used to construct NSWL2018 and its predecessors, and secondarily to available later editions and online versions to research changes in offensiveness over time. Primary authorities determine whether or not a word is valid for play; secondary authorities may overrule primary authorities in determining whether or not the primary authority’s entry is a candidate offensive slur.

- AH: American Heritage College Dictionary
  - Primary: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th editions
  - Secondary: 5th Edition (unabridged) and online version at [ahdictionary.com/word/search.html](http://ahdictionary.com/word/search.html) and [yourdictionary.com](http://yourdictionary.com)
- COD: Canadian Oxford Dictionary
  - Primary: 2nd Edition
- FW: Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary
  - Primary: 1973 Edition
  - Secondary: online version at [funkandwagnalls.com](http://funkandwagnalls.com)
- MW: Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary
  - Primary: 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th editions
  - Secondary: [merriam-webster.com](http://merriam-webster.com) dictionary tab, excluding entries marked with specific sources such as their unabridged or medical dictionaries
- OCD: Oxford College Dictionary
  - Primary: 2nd Edition
- RH: Random House Webster’s College Dictionary
  - Primary: 1st and 2nd editions

- Secondary: Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, 2nd Edition, and online version at [dictionary.com](http://dictionary.com) and [infoplease.com/dictionary](http://infoplease.com/dictionary)
- WNW: Webster's New World College Dictionary
  - Primary: 2nd, 3rd, and 4th editions
  - Secondary: 5th Edition and online version at [yourdictionary.com](http://yourdictionary.com)