

A Word, Please: Non-plussed

January 19, 2024



When it comes to grammar and usage, I'm generally non-nonplussable. I've been studying this stuff a long time. So when a friend or acquaintance asks me about a word, I usually have something intelligent to say.

But all that went out the window recently when, at a small gathering of friends, I was asked about "nonplussed." Everyone else at the table had an opinion on the subject. The consensus was that people tend to use "nonplussed" to mean the opposite of what it really means. "Right, June? What say you, June?"

To which I said me — nothing. I had a fuzzy recollection of once being aware of how this word worked. But for the life of me, I couldn't remember what the controversy was — or even the definition.

Clearly, it's time for a refresher on "nonplussed."

The verb "nonplus," means to perplex or baffle. But you don't hear it much as a verb. People don't often say, "Yo, don't nonplus me, dude." They could, but they don't.

Mostly, you hear it in sentences like "He was nonplussed," in which it's a verb participle being used as an adjective. Using past-tense verbs as adjectives is standard, by the way. Think: "broken heart," "painted fence," "canceled flight," "known quantity" and "waxed floor."

"Nonplussed" can be spelled with one S or two, but the double-S form seems to be preferred by dictionaries.

As a noun, "nonplus" means a state of perplexity or a quandary. But this, too, is rare. You don't often hear "The math questions on the test really threw me into a nonplus."

In fact, this is how "nonplus" first entered the English language in the 16th century: as a noun meaning "quandary," which was picked up from the Latin "non plus," which means "no more." Here's an example

from 1593 cited by Merriam-Webster. “I am brought to a nonplus, O Lorde what shall I saie?”

It took another century or so before “nonplus” evolved into a verb meaning “to cause to be at a loss as to what to say, think, or do,” which is basically what it means today.

But here’s where “nonplussed” gets controversial: About 100 years ago, people started using “nonplussed” to mean “unfazed” or “relaxed.” Take, for example, this passage from Jack London’s “White Fang”: “ ... when that god elected to laugh at him in a good-natured, bantering way, he was nonplussed. He could feel the pricking and stinging of the old anger as it strove to rise up in him, but it strove against love. He could not be angry.”

In other words: He was “nonplussed” because he didn’t get mad.

According to dictionaries, this is incorrect. But I would caution you against seeing this issue — or any language issue — in terms of absolute right and wrong. After all, just a few short centuries ago, “nonplussed” wasn’t an English word at all. And for at least a hundred years, it was wrong to use it as a verb or a participial adjective, which we now consider right.

Clearly, “nonplussed” is going through yet another transition. It’s what words do. They change. Constantly. And there’s no use trying to stop the march of linguistic progress by saying that a word achieved immutable perfection at a point in time that just happens to affirm one’s own preferences.

Besides, have you ever heard someone use “nonplussed” correctly, other than people showing off that they know how? I haven’t. But at least now that I’ve revisited the subject, I know that next time “nonplussed” comes up, I won’t find myself nonplussed.

— June Casagrande is the author of “The Joy of Syntax: A Simple Guide to All the Grammar You Know You Should Know.” She can be reached at JuneTCN@aol.com.