

A Word, Please: Is it worst?

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I try not to cringe when people use language in a way that seems wrong to me. My idea of what's right, as I've learned the hard way, isn't necessarily right. So who am I to judge? But though I can hold my tongue, I can't just turn off my cringe impulse at will, as evidenced by my reaction when I hear people say, "If worst comes to worst."

To me, that first T is like nails on a chalkboard. How can worst come to worst, I wonder, if it's already worst? Clearly, the fear is that something already bad — a worse thing — could go even further downhill, all the way to its worst possible state. So obviously, people who use two "worsts" in this expression are botching up the logical original wording, "if worse comes to worst."

So I scoffed and I sniffed and I silently judged every time I heard the version with two "worsts" until the year 2023 when, after about 20 years of writing about grammar, I finally looked it up.

Good thing I held my tongue. "The traditional idiom, evidenced by the Oxford English Dictionary consistently from the 16th century, is worst comes to worst," writes Garner's Modern English usage.

Merriam Webster's Dictionary of English Usage reports that the expression "worst comes to worst" seems to have first appeared in print in 1597, its meaning identical to the way people use it now: "if the worst that can possibly happen does happen." It wasn't till more than a century later that the expression I assumed was the original, "worse comes to worst," appeared in print.

"Presumably it was the desire to make the phrase more logical that gave rise to the variant 'if the worse comes to the worst,' which was first recorded in 1719, when it was used (in the past tense) by David Defoe in 'Robinson Crusoe,'" Merriam's writes.

Interestingly, when I searched a version of “Robinson Crusoe” online, I found on page 183 “if the worst came to the worst” — with two Ts — meaning that sometime between the publication of the edition Merriam-Webster referenced and the edition I saw, someone had change Defoe’s “worse” to “worst” in order to make it correct according to the standards of his time.

This back-and-forth supports Merriam’s central point about the two forms of this expression: “In the centuries since, this phrase has shown a stubborn unwillingness to settle into fixed form.”

For example, in 1937, a writer in the New Republic wrote: “... if worst comes to worst, come to the aid of France.”

Then in 1952, the Publication of the Modern Language Association of America wrote, “... if worse comes to the worst, the author himself can arrange for it.”

The back and forth continues to this day. Searching Google, I get 64,000 hits for “worse comes to worst” and 92,000 for “worst comes to worst.”

My Microsoft Word spell-check, as I type this, insists that “worst comes to worst” is an error. The Associated Press Stylebook, however, prefers the two Ts.

A search of Google’s Ngram Viewer, which is a database of published writing, shows that both forms have been in regular use since at least 1820. “Worst comes to worst” was two to three times more popular until the 1950s, when “worse” began to close the gap, eventually becoming the preferred form in the late 1970s — but only slightly.

Both “worse comes to worst” and “worst comes to worst” are common today. Even a form that uses “worse” twice is pretty common in print, but experts don’t defend that one.

So if you use this expression, make sure you use “worst” as the final word, but it doesn’t matter if you use “worst” or “worse” in the first position. I’ve learned — the hard way — not to judge.

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