

September 9, 2022

In my book, *Backpocket Words: Sharing the Essence of English Spelling*, you may have noticed that I included a list of puzzles at the end— word pairs that might or might not be related, for readers to research such as *metropolis/monopoly*. I have found that students enjoy stumping their friends with these. Well, today I stumbled upon a new kind of backpocket puzzle. Here's how it came about:

About a week ago, I was doing the New York Times Spelling Bee puzzle which challenges readers to make as many seven-letter words as they can from a “hive” of letters – one in the middle surrounded by six others. The letter in the middle must appear in every word and each letter may be used multiple times. The puzzle that day included an <h> in the center, surrounded by <p, t, a, e, l, b>. The longest word that came to my mind was <phthalate>, a word known to me only because I have looked for “phthalate-free” food storage containers. But the feedback from the puzzle designer was that this word wasn't in its dictionary. Rats.

So forget the puzzle, I decided to see what the OED had to say about “phthalate” and that took me to the sidebar of the entry where I found these other <phth> words – and this is only a tiny slice of what's there!

phthiriasis, n.

phthiophagous, adj.

phthisiatry, n.

phthisic, n. and adj.

phthisical, adj. and n.

phthisicky, adj.

The word *phthisiatry* caught my eye because it connects two of the entries in my book. If you have *Backpocket Words*, see if you can find them. If you don't have the book, you might still be able to find them in the Table of Contents in the Amazon “Look inside the book” feature. You can find it at this link: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/1940722101/>. (Please don't post your answer – it will be obvious if you are correct.)

With or without trying to solve this puzzle, you might enjoy this dive into the OED:

Here's the OED etymological information for *phthisiatry*: “the treatment of tuberculosis,”

Origin: Formed within English, by compounding. **Etymons:** *PHTHISIS* n., *-IATRY* comb. form.
Etymology: < *phthis-* (in *PHTHISIS* n.) + *-IATRY* comb. form. Compare Italian *tisiatria* (1983; compare earlier *tisiatra* a doctor specializing in tuberculosis (1981)) and Russian *ftiziatrija* (1940 or earlier).

The British pronunciation given is /f(θ)ɪ'zɪɪətri/. Americans apparently don't even try to pronounce the /f/: /θɪ'zɪɪətri/. The word *phthisiotherapist* is “an expert or specialist in the treatment of tuberculosis.” Now you or your students might enjoy trying to pronounce *phthisiotherapist* and *physiotherapist* in such a way that a listener would be able to differentiate them! (And no pronunciation would be required to guess the definition of *phthisiophobia*.)

The OED lists the following frequency information for the word *phthisiotherapist*:

Frequency (in current use): ●●○○○○○

I knew that two red dots meant the word appeared rarely in published text, but only this week did Ann Whiting point me to the OED's detailed explanation of Frequency Band 2 <https://public.oed.com/how-to-use-the-oed/key-to-frequency/>. About 45% of all non-obsolete *OED* entries are in Band 2.

Band 2 contains words which occur fewer than 0.01 times per million words in typical modern English usage. These are almost exclusively terms which are not part of normal discourse and would be unknown to most people. Many are technical terms from specialized discourses. Examples taken from the most frequently attested part of the band include *decanate*, *ennead*, *scintillometer* (nouns), *geogenic*, *abactinal* (adjectives), and *absterge* and *satinate* (verbs). In the lower frequencies of the band, words are uniformly strange or exotic, e.g. *smother-kiln*, *haver-cake*, and *sprunt* (nouns), *hidlings*, *unwhigged*, *supersubtilized*, and *gumbose* (adjectives), *pantle*, *cloit*, *stoothe* (verbs), *lawnly*, *acoast*, and *acicularly* (adverbs), and *whethersoever* (conjunction).

Pantle? Lawnly? Unwhigged? I'm looking forward to Band 2!

Gail Venable