

Quiz

*To question closely or repeatedly; interrogate.
To test the knowledge of by posing questions.
To poke fun at; mock. (British)*

“Quiz” was the word that got me into all this etymology. I remember reading this story about this guy in a bar who made a bet that he could introduce a new word into the language in one day (or some ungodly short period of time). His friend/enemy took the bet and the man went around all of the town writing “quiz” on every public restroom, shop-door and wall. The next day, or so, everyone was talking about this word “quiz” which began to mean something of a “mystery” or “to test”.

I, also, like this word because it has a “Q” and a “Z” in it. I’m really indifferent to “U” and “I”.

The story, to start there, is probably unfounded and untrue. The story states it was James Daly from Dublin who made the bet and did the deed with the help of some street urchins to write “quiz” all over town. Mostly because the dates are wrong. Daly was suppose to have done all of this in 1791 which is 11 years after the word was recorded and used.

The first record of the word “quiz” was on June 24, 1782 and meant an odd person. It’s appearance was in the book The Early Diary of Frances Burney by Fanny Burney, for example, “He’s a droll quiz, and I rather like him.” This meaning is now arcane. The only scrap of it still exists in the word “quizzical” but “quiz” got a make-over.

By 1796, the term even meant to ridicule. To “quiz” was to insult in British slang of the time. This is another branch of a single word that goes nowhere.

The argument for the story of Daly was made as follows: the word existed, but, he gave it it’s meaning. That, again, is wrong. Going backward, there is a Latin phrase “Qui es” meaning “Who are you?” and it’s not a huge leap to “quiset” which is probably a corruption of the Latin phrase that surfaced in English dialects and means “to question”. It shares a root with the words “question” and “inquisitive”. If the story is true - the word AND meaning where already in place rather fundamentally.

To digress a moment, a monocle was often called a “quizzing glass” and the rich, English upper-class found them quite fashionable for a time. I could make the argument that “quizzing glass” and the action of using the monocle to examine something COULD have nudged the word “quiz” into the direction of testing and/or asking something of someone. But, that’s really just me knowing something random.

“Quiz”, in the modern sense, was first recorded in 1847 in the America novel The Doctor by Robert Southey (poet, translator, enemy of Byron). The sentence was “She com back an’ *quiesed* us.” Meaning she is coming back to ask us questions about this stuff.

Penned on December 26, 1867, William James (teacher, psychologist, philosopher) wrote *“perhaps giving ‘quizzes’ in anatomy and physiology . . . may help along.”* to a co-worker. This is said to be the

second recorded instance of the modern word.

By 1886, there is plenty of evidence of “spelling quizzes” in schools and that's pretty much the end of the old uses for “quiz”.

In essences, there are holes in the story of “quiz”. There are several leaps that must be made to make all the pieces fit together in the way we would want them to. The interesting story of Daly and various branches and phrases that contain the word cloud any real path of logical and explorable steps. When the culture around a word changes, a lot of the history and meaning of those words die or transform as well. This is not uncommon but it does create a certain drive to explore more of the time, slang and literature of the time.