

The Meaning of Meanings

We all know that words can have multiple distinct meanings. Some words have a few definitions that are closely related to one another, like *handle*: whether you're handling money, grabbing a handle, or deciding if you can handle a challenge, there's a common denominator related to competently holding something.

Other words, like *season*, kick things up a notch by meaning disparate, seemingly unrelated things. (What's a seasoned chef's favorite season for serving seasoned salmon?)

And then there are Janus words, which mean two opposite things at once. Yes, seriously. Read on for some of our favorites.

What's Up at KB COMM?

At KB COMM, we provide mission-critical communication and learning services to clients in a variety of industries. Thanks to our established and new clients for keeping us busy. Recent and ongoing projects include:

- Writing and editing numerous information products for a healthcare diagnostics manufacturer, including employee communications, customer presentations and letters, product marketing brochures and data sheets, and training materials
- Formatting and revising technical reports and manufacturing standard operating procedures, work instructions, forms, logbooks, and batch records for a pharmaceutical company
- Revising and maintaining GMP facility drawings
- Drafting, reviewing, and editing for consistency and accuracy response documents and associated modules for electronic submission to health authorities on behalf of pharmaceutical companies

KB COMM LLC is a certified Women's Business Enterprise. We are officially qualified to participate in corporations' woman- and minority-owned vendor programs.

Please keep us in mind for your communication or training projects.

I Am Serious, and Don't Call Me Janice

Janus words (also known as auto-antonyms, contronyms, or antilogies) have two contradictory definitions, with meaning relying solely on context. They're named for the Roman god of gates, transitions, duality, beginnings, and endings, Janus, who is often depicted as having two faces on a single head.

One well-known Janus word is *sanction*, which can mean either "permission" (as in, "the board sanctioned the procedure") or "threatened penalty" (as in, "the sanctions will discourage unethical behavior"). Luckily, the latter definition is most often invoked in the form of the plural noun *sanctions*, so it's usually easy to deduce the correct meaning.

In fact, most Janus words aren't difficult to interpret if you have a working grasp of the language. But some words have old or infrequently used definitions that trip up modern speakers, and others may have multiple meanings only within a certain context or dialect. In the United States, for example, a *peer* is a person of similar status; but in the UK, *peer* is also a word for a member of the noble gentry, who are definitely not peers of we KB COMMers.

Here are some of our favorite Janus words:

Dust can mean adding or removing dust or powder; "dust the beignets with sugar," vs. "please dust the chandelier."

Weather can mean enduring one's environment or being eroded by it; "we weathered the storm," vs. "a weathered facade."

Buckle can mean fastening together or breaking apart, especially after bending; "buckle your seatbelt," vs. "the floor buckled under the weight."

Oversight can mean watchful care or accidental mistake; "we're under the board's oversight," vs. "it was a costly and embarrassing oversight."

Screen can mean display or conceal; "let's screen the film," vs. "screen it from view."

Some words enter Janus territory not necessarily via their official definitions but by their popular use. *Literally* being used for emphasis (rather than, you know, literally) is a pet peeve of many; *factoid*, meanwhile, was originally devised to mean something that sounds like a fact but isn't.

What Janus words did we forget? Which are your favorites, or the ones that trip you up from time to time? Let us know!

And please remember, *when it has to be right*, KB COMM is here to help.

Sincerely,

Kathy

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KB COMM

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