

Good evening fellow toastmasters and honored guests.

In response to the positive feedback I received from last week's Table Topics, I decided to devote a speech towards words and their origins – don't worry though, they aren't as difficult as the words in the table topics. As a nice segue into my speech, who can remember the definition of nexus?

Excellent, and who remembers the story behind nexus? As you can see, it is through the story of the word that we have come to remember the definition of the word. Today, I would like to explore three other words and the stories behind those words with the hope that it will help ingrain the definition in your minds and increase your vocabulary. The three words that I would like to look at today are ampersand, guillotine and figurehead.

Ampersand:

In early schools, [children](#) were taught letters, numbers and symbology by rote, chanting the series in chorus. In the late 1700's, the chant was developed to include the three most common symbols of the day, the "and" symbol (&), the "at" symbol (@) and the "per centum" symbol (%). All three were commonly used in trade documents of the time and it was considered necessary that all learned [children](#) should have at least a rudimentary understanding of the marks. The chant was simple: Starting with the first letter of the alphabet, the [children](#) would chant the letters in order, separating each letter with the word "and;" thus "A and B and C and D..." When the [children](#) would reach the symbols, they would use the Latin phrase *per se*, that is, "in essence." Thus the & symbol was chanted as "and, *per se*, 'and.'" Over the years, and with countless repetitions of the chant, the phrase was elided to our current "ampersand." Similar overuse led to the ampersat (@) and the "percent" symbol as short for the Latin *per centum* "per 100."

Guillotine:

The unfortunate whose name graces this machine neither invented it nor died by it, although both legends have been ascribed to him. Dr. Charles Guillotin was a French physician in the days before the Revolution and the Reign of Terror (he survived both and died of [natural](#) causes in 1814). Until his time, executions in France were generally carried out by a number of means, including hanging (the method used actually strangled the victim instead of breaking the neck), disembowelment (known as "drawing") and drowning. The good doctor, horrified by the barbarism exhibited in these spectacles, proposed a [new](#) method of execution in which all people would be killed humanely and quickly. The method he proposed with beheading, but the lack of skilled headsman in the country caused a vote before the French Parliament to be tabled. Not dissuaded, Dr. Guillotin traveled to Italy to obtain a prototype of an old Persian execution machine, which required two people to operate (the blade was held between the executioners and ran down a wooden track) with little [training](#) or, for that matter, skill. His improved design, which included a heavier blade that did not require outside assistance to shear through the neck, was adopted by the French Parliament in 1791, and was named in honor of the doctor who proposed its use.

Figurehead:

This is an oddity born of the sea. As early as the 11th century, the Norsemen would carve the prow of their proud ships into fanciful creations; the practice probably predates them by another two millennia or more if the truth be known. Later shipbuilders would contrive a similar carving, generally a bust or torso, and mount it below the bowsprit, just above the waterline. Hence, regardless of where the boat was headed, the figurehead was in the lead. However, it bore no additional function than decoration; the ship could have been handled as easily (and perhaps more easily) without the décor. It is in this figurative sense of a useless person that simply looks good for the organization that we get our current term.