

What Do You Say When Things Just Ain't Right?

After delivering a litany of reasons I'm exhausted, I told my friend, "Soon I'll get back in whack." Huh?

We laughed. How can you be out of whack if you can't be in whack?

And what about being out of kilter? What's a kilter, anyway? Sounds like a Scottish skirt.

And what do we refer to when we say we're out of sorts?

I wasn't previously aware of any stockpiled whacks, kilters or sorts in my psyche. But I know what it looks like when I'm out of them. It looks like my bleary-eyed reflection in the mirror this morning after yet another night with less than four hours of sleep.

Without knowing the origins of the idioms, we still get the gist. Things just ain't right.

So I thought, jokingly, if I knew what a kilter or a sort were, I might be able to get me some on sale this week at Walmart and set my world right again. If only it were so easy.

As it turns out, *whack* is the word with the Scottish origin. It hailed from onomatopoeic roots sometime between 1717 and 1720, and the Scots spelled it *thwack*, meaning "to strike a smart blow."

The English—were they intentionally being contrary?—"whacked off" the initial *t* and chose to reverse the *h* and *w* to form their own version of the word.

A test. Go and smartly strike something (not someone) and see if your wallop doesn't just sound like "*whack*." If you think "*thwack*," put on some plaid. If you think it sounds like something else, create your own idiom and we'll see if your word catches on in the next 250 years.

Incidentally, *wacky* (originally whacky) and *wacko* are the etymological step-children of whack. They conjure a very specific whack to the head, resulting in crazy behavior after the whacking incident.

By the late 1700s, the noun *whack* had donned other meanings as well, especially in the thieving set, and is seen in idioms such as "pay one's whack" and "pay top whack." In these cases, it referred to a cut of the loot (the same way we use the word "cut" today), and by extension, it referred to an agreement (who contributed or received how much whack).

It was 100 years later that "out of whack" hit the verbal scene, and there are suppositions but no solid answers as to what it refers to.

Perhaps it refers to "an agreement gone awry." Perhaps it contrasts another 19th century expression, *fine whack*, meaning "in good condition."

I did find one instance of a man in whack, and that was President Abe Lincoln. John Hay, in describing Lincoln's level-headedness as he ran the nation during the Civil War, wrote, "The Tycoon is in fine whack. I have rarely seen him more serene and busy."

And it turns out you can be in kilter, too. If you live in Britain, that is. It's just the American English that focuses on kilter deficits. In generalized British dialect, to be *in kilter*, or *in kelter*, is to be in good condition.

For more insight, let's go back to the thieves. Around 1800, in thieving slang, *kelter* referred to money (think "that which puts things in good order"). To be out of kilter, was indeed a bad thing. As for being out of sorts, there are good stories that accompany this one, though no thieves.

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For one popular etymology, we turn to the printers of the 17th century, who used the word *sorts* to refer to the individual metal characters (letters, numbers, etc) in their boxes. Imagine that mid-printing, you found you were out of sorts. Troublesome, to be sure.

But the expression predates the printer's term. Uh oh. Good story, no truth.

So we go back to Latin. At its origin, the word *sort* referred to a piece of wood used to draw lots.

From this practice, the word became linked with the notion of fate, fortune or condition, and by the time it entered the English language in the 1200s, that's what it meant.

Just after Shakespeare's day, we find our first written uses of out of sorts, and so it could, in part, connote that to be out of sorts is to be out of synch with fate—that Lady Fortune somehow forgot to smile upon you and your lot is snot.

But by then the word *sorts* had also garnered connotations of rank, order and class, describing people, their attributes and status. As I found on www.worldwideword.org, "There were once phrases such as *of sort* that implied high quality or rank. Others that we still use today, such as *of your own sort*, *the right sort*, or *of all sorts*, evolved out of the same idea."

And so our idiom *out of sorts* also hails from this notion of quality, or to the point, the lack thereof.

Well, I did do a Montrose run today and didn't find any whack, kilter or sorts in City Market.

Not even in the health food store slipped between the silken tofu and the Wellness Formula.

Afterward, I spent an hour on the banks of the San Miguel River with my son, Finn, throwing rocks and listening them splash. And I found there enough whack to partially remake the day.

My eyes are still toting last night's luggage, but for a riparian hour, I felt in fine whack, in good kilter, and even sported a smile. Of sorts.

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