

# **DANGEROUS ENGLISH**

**in a  
Changing World**

**An Indispensable Guide for  
Language Learners and Others**

**Elizabeth Claire**

Pictures by Dave Nicholson and eluki bes shahar

Eardley Publications

DANGEROUS ENGLISH IN A CHANGING WORLD

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Fourth Edition  
Elizabeth Claire

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## Welcome to the United States

And welcome to the English language! I wish you great success in your adventures here.

*Dangerous English in a Changing World* will help you to understand a very interesting part of American culture. It will save you from many embarrassing and dangerous situations. It will keep you safe from other people's disapproval and anger. You absolutely need this book! We hope you enjoy it!

People change and language changes. Words that were too dangerous for people to say 30 years ago are now heard all the time in movies, on TV, and in the street.

But...that doesn't mean you can use these words anywhere! It's important to know where you *cannot* use them. You also need to know that words which were *not* dangerous 30 years ago are dangerous today!!

*Elizabeth Claire*

# Why I Wrote This Book

Why did a mild-mannered, New Jersey school teacher write a book with the worst words in the English language in it?

Good question. (But please note: *Most* of the words in this book are good, clean, useful words.)

Here's how a ***Guide to Dangerous English*** came to be:

I was brought up in an all-female household with mother, grandmother, aunt, and sister. I had seldom heard or seen vulgar language in English beyond *heck*, *darn*, and *caca*. Then, at age 18, I ran off and got married. For three months my husband and I lived with his much older brother, a merchant marine, and his brother's wife. Their language shocked me out of my innocent young mind for the first few weeks. My new brother-in-law spoke every sentence with imaginative ways to use the word *fuck* within it. Neither he nor his wife could have a conversation without a sprinkling of *damn*, *shit*, *fuck*, *ass*, and *cock*.

After several weeks, my brain stopped jumping up and down in judgement against them. After all, vulgar words were just sounds. Being a language student and hearing such words around me, I was soon just amused by the dialect of merchant marines. And after a while, prudery melted and I could speak it as well.

A few years later, after several months of student teaching, I got a visit from my college supervisor. She had come to observe my class (and grade me) on my teaching ability. The class she came to observe was a literacy class for native Spanish-speaking students. I was telling a story of a time I was very embarrassed, and I said, *Estaba muy embarazada*.

My supervisor gave me an A for teaching, but a C for my knowledge of Spanish. *Estaba muy embarazada* means *I was very pregnant!* She warned me, "Watch out for false cognates! Words that sound the same in two languages don't always mean the same thing." I wished something in my 24 college credits of Spanish could have warned me.

The school hired me anyway. In my second year, the principal came to me and said, “You speak Spanish, teach these kids English.” He brought me to a room full of delightful eighth graders from Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Venezuela, and Argentina. It was a self-contained class, which means they were with me all day without changing to other classrooms. I was their teacher for English, reading, geography, history, health, and science. (There were no books!)

I taught a lesson first in Spanish, then in English. One day, in a health lesson, I was explaining why the school nurse was examining students’ hair. I did not know the Spanish word for *lice*. I used the Spanish word from Spain for *insect*, which is *bicho*. I said, *una persona puede tener bichos en el pelo*. I thought I was saying that a person could have lice in their hair.)

The Columbian girls in the class jumped up in alarm. They shouted, *No no, Maestra, no diga eso!!!* (Teacher, don’t say that!) I continued to use the word *bicho*, and they proceeded to have a fit. *Porque no?* (Why not?) I asked. They would not tell me.

Later the bilingual counselor at the school explained that while *bicho* means insect in Spain, it was a vulgar word for *penis* in parts of South America. I was saying that people could have penises in their hair.

Oops. How could I have known? I wish I had been warned. There should be a book, I thought.

A few years later, I taught ESL at Haaren High School for Boys in Manhattan. Five teachers worked with 125 boys for all their subjects in “easy English.” The boys ranged in age from fifteen to nineteen. A few had never been in school. I was their biology teacher as well as English teacher. In my second year there, I came back in September to find that four of the boys had dropped out of school. Others told us that those boys had gotten girls pregnant. One boy got married, and three of the boys left New York City to escape their responsibilities.

We learned that birth control knowledge was not available in

the Dominican Republic. It was a Catholic country. Parents did not allow girls to be with boys without a chaperone. We teachers realized that this “pandemic” of pregnancies might continue. We had to provide information to warn the boys to protect their future and their girlfriends’ future. We invited Planned Parenthood to visit our school to teach the boys the facts of life. And to teach about safe sex.

I was the boys’ biology teacher. I created a vocabulary list for the anatomical words they would be learning, with translations in Spanish. The Planned Parenthood presenter explained in simple English and diagrams how babies were conceived. He demonstrated how to put a condom on a banana.

After the presentation, two of the boys came up to me with questions. They asked for the words for *penis* that American boys used in the street. Such words were not in their bilingual dictionaries.

And such words were not going to be spoken by their sweet young female English teacher! Yet I thought they had a right to know. I told them that they would see a list on Mr. Buehler’s desk at 3 o’clock. We four teachers made a list of slang and vulgar synonyms for *penis* and sexual intercourse. And left the list on Mr. Buehler’s desk.

I thought: *these boys should have a book to refer to, and not have to ask a female teacher.*

Two years later, I had moved and taught ESL to kids in elementary school in Fort Lee, New Jersey. One day, in my group of sixth graders, a Korean boy raised his hand in class and politely said, “*Teacher, may I go take a shit?*”

Before I said yes, I gave him and the class a quick lesson in saying, *May I go to the bathroom?* And that they might hear the word *shit* in the playground but should not say it in school.

I thought that there ought to be a book to help newly-arrived parents teach their children bathroom words that were OK and



which words to avoid. They need to know that there are registers (“social classes”) of words in English. The same body function can have words in five or six different registers: formal, general use, children’s words, euphemisms, slang, and vulgar. Examples: *Defecate, move one’s bowels, go to the bathroom, poop, crap, and shit.*

I had no idea who would write such a book.

I taught an evening adult ESL class in Englewood, New Jersey, a class with both men and women. Then one day, all the men were absent. Suddenly there was a flurry of excitement: the women wanted to know the English words for their sexual body parts. They had not dared to ask about such words when the men were in the class. One woman said to me, “Tomorrow I go doctor, I need tell doctor about itchy.” She pointed to her crotch. “But I no want to point. I want right word.”

This led to me drawing diagrams of female body parts with labels on the blackboard. I gave the women pronunciation practice in things they might need to say to a doctor.

Then they asked, “How about men bodies?” So I drew another diagram on the board.

These women (and their daughters, sons and husbands) needed the anatomically correct words for sexual and bathroom body parts and functions. These words were not going to appear in *English Side by Side* or their other ESL textbooks. I thought, *Someone has to write a book for them.*

In the evening, I tutored a Korean banker at his home. He lived in a penthouse in Fort Lee. One evening, his wife welcomed me into the apartment. She apologized, “My husband will be late. He is still in New York Shitty.” She then asked me to “Please shit down”. She brought me a cup of tea while I was waiting.

I knew I should help her with her pronunciation of the /s/ sound. It was important to be able to say *city* and *sit down*, and *baby sitter*. But how was I going to explain what her words

# What Makes a Word *Dangerous*?

Words are just sounds. How can a sound be bad or dangerous?

In the early 1600s, English Puritans came to America so they could practice their form of Christianity. Puritans believed that *sex was only for creating children*. Sex for any other reason was a sin. It was important to teach people not to think about sex. Words for sexual body parts and activities were declared *obscene* by religious leaders. The words for them became *taboo*, that is, forbidden! Words for toilet activities became taboo as well. These words could not be printed in books, newspapers or magazines. They were called “dirty words.”

Our society has changed, and language changed with it. You can hear dirty words on the Internet, TV, movies, and read them in books and social media.

Nevertheless, words for sex and toilet activities seem to have an electric charge. People say that *some* words are “dirty,” “vulgar,” “offensive,” or “derogatory” (very insulting). It is still taboo to use such language in classrooms, churches, temples, courts of law, in formal meetings, and in the presence of some older people or children. Don’t use dirty words with people you don’t know. Don’t use dirty words at funerals, graduations, weddings, and other formal occasions.

Using dirty words is called *swearing*.

## What topics are taboo for Americans?

- sexual parts of our bodies and sexual activities
- bathroom functions
- excrement [ehks krə mehnt]
- yucky things such as vomit and nose-picking
- upsetting things such as cancer, death, and dying

Americans have many different opinions on topics such as religion, politics, and race. Conversation on these issues can help exchange ideas. But sometimes it may lead to arguments .

Why is that?

There seems to be a mysterious emotional connection with words that are forbidden. Somehow swearing helps some people lower the pain of sudden hurt, surprise, or failure.

## Why are there so many words for taboo topics?

There is only one common English word for the body part *shoulder*. There is only one common term for *ear*, *wrist*, *knee*, *toenail*, *elbow*, *neck*, *hand*, *foot*, and so forth.

No one forbids these words. The words for these parts of our bodies do not make people think of sex. These words are not as interesting as our “forbidden” body parts.

On the other hand, there are hundreds of words for each of our sexual body parts. When the direct words are forbidden, people invent *euphemisms* [yoo fə mi zəmz] (polite words) and slang terms for the taboo words.

## How can I tell if a word is dangerous?

You can't, unless someone tells you. That's why you need this book.

It is not the *meaning* of the word that makes it dangerous. *Buttocks*, *behind*, and *ass* all mean the same part of the body. *Buttocks* is a “clean” word. It may be used in biology class, a courtroom, and a doctor's office. The word *behind* is also a “clean” word and is used in general conversation.

The word *ass*, however, is a “dirty” word. It's vulgar. People avoid using the word *ass* in classrooms, in church, at business meetings, in formal speeches, or in formal writing. Please don't abbreviate the word *assistant* as *ass*!

So you might ask: If it is all right to say “*buttocks*” or “*behind*,” what makes “*ass*” a bad word? It means the same body part!

# Discussion

1. What are three kinds of dangerous words?
2. What events in history created taboos in American English?
3. Why are there so many words for sexual parts of our bodies and sexual acts?
4. What language taboos are in your language?
5. What “power” does a “dirty word” have?
6. How can you know that you should not use a word in class, church, or a court of law?
7. Are there people’s names in your native language that in English, sound like words for sex organs or dirty words? Do some people change their names for this reason?

## Test your pronunciation

Have a native English speaker read the following pairs of words to you:

sick, seek	did, deed	fill, feel
pill, peel	sin, seen	chip, cheap
lip, leap	still, steal	ship, sheep

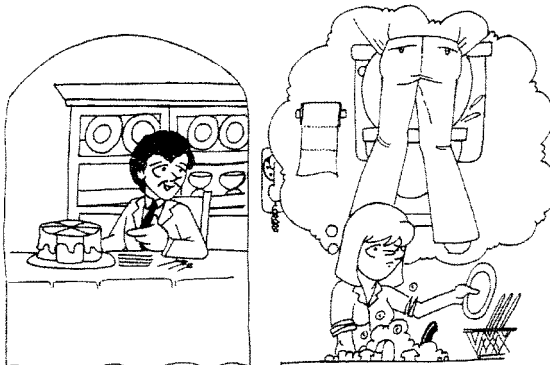
Can you hear the difference?

Next, have the English speaker listen as *you* say the words. Ask if you are saying them correctly. For the long /ee/ sound, your tongue should be a little higher in your mouth. Pull your lips back slightly as though you are smiling.

If you had trouble with these pairs of words, watch out!

This pronunciation problem means that when you want to say *sheet* (a cloth covering for a bed), you may be saying *shit* (a vulgar word for feces).

When you want to say *piece* (a part of), it may sound like *piss* (peeing). This mispronunciation can sound very funny to Americans. It may be very embarrassing to you.



“Do you mind if I take a piss?”

# Can a Word Have a Social Class?

An English word has a sound, a spelling, and one or more meanings. Words also have a “*register*.” The register is the “social class” of a word—a place where a word is welcome and expected. The register is also a warning that there are places where a word is not welcome.

In this book, we’ll talk about six social classes of sex and bathroom terms:.

**formal words**

**general use words**

**euphemisms** [yoo fə mi zəm]

**children’s words**

**slang**

**vulgar words**

**Formal words.** These are the words in biology textbooks for parts of the human body and body functions. Use formal words when you want to be clear at the doctor’s office, in a courtroom, in biology class.

**General use.** These words are the best-known and most common. Their meanings are clear to men, women, and young people.

**Euphemism.** A euphemism is a “polite” word. It is not as clear as a formal or general use word. Americans often use euphemisms to avoid embarrassing anyone. Use euphemisms with people you don’t know very well, with older people, and in mixed groups of men and women.

**Personal euphemisms.** A family or a group of friends may invent words about sex or bathroom activities. They use these personal euphemisms when speaking with each other in a public place. They do not want other people to know what they are talking about.

**Children’s words.** Many parents use special words (“baby talk”) with children. These are easy for the children to pronounce when they are learning to speak.

**Slang** terms are used in informal situations where people feel

# How Safe Is Your English? Test Yourself

The following ten words are common words with double meanings. Do you know the *dangerous* meanings of these words? Write the letter of your answer next to the word. Then check your answers on the next page.

- |                     |                            |
|---------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. bang _____       | A. homosexual              |
| 2. bone _____       | B. have oral-genital sex   |
| 3. drawers _____    | C. have sexual intercourse |
| 4. eat _____        | D. underpants              |
| 5. gay _____        | E. penis                   |
| 6. number one _____ | F. vagina                  |
| 7. can _____        | G. feces                   |
| 8. come _____       | H. have an orgasm          |
| 9. stool _____      | I. urine                   |
| 10. box _____       | J. buttocks                |

# Which English Words Have Dangerous Double Meanings?

Here are 76 common words that have dangerous double meanings. You will find the slang or vulgar meanings in the Definitions section of this book starting on page 116.

adult	cherry	hard	neck
affair	clap	head	number one
bag	climax	hole	number two
basket	come	hot	nuts
beat	crabs	hump	organ
beaver	crack	hung	period
bed	dick	John	popsicle
behind	do	joint	rocks
bitch	dirty	jugs	rubber
blow	drag	knob	runs
boob	finger	knocker	safety
bottom	fly	lay	satisfy
boxers	fruit	loose	screw
briefs	gas	madame	sixty-nine
buns	gay	make	meat
bush	go	member	moon
can	go down		
cheat	hammer		



## Restroom Manners

Some stalls may have a dispenser for toilet seat covers. You can put these on the toilet seat to help prevent germs. (It's often easier to cover the toilet seat with toilet paper.)

Be sure to flush the toilet before leaving the stall. Flush the toilet paper you use, but don't flush a large amount of it at once.

Some new toilets flush themselves when you stand up. Beware! Don't drop your keys, your cell phone, or your money in the toilet.

Do not flush paper towels. Don't flush anything that would cause the toilet to get stuffed up.

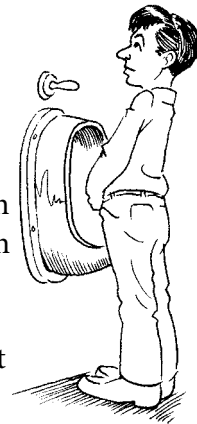
Clean up any drips. Wash your hands.

Wash your hands after using the restroom. It's polite to wipe the sink with a paper towel if you've splashed water on it. Many restrooms have air dryers for your hands. Many of them work automatically when you put your hands under them.

Little boys—up to the age of six or so—often go into the ladies' room with their mothers if there is no male parent or big brother to take them into the men's room.

### Men's room Behavior

Men's rooms have urinals as well as toilets in stalls. If there are many urinals, American men do not stand next to someone unless all the other units are being used. A man is expected to look up or straight ahead, but not to the left or right.



m.

# Avoid “Fighting Words”

## Proper Names for Races, Nationalities, and Religions

The United States is a land of many different races and nationalities. Native Americans, African Americans, Europeans, Middle Easterners, Asians, and their descendants live and usually get along well together here.

Americans are of many different religions, too. In the U.S., there are friendships, business partnerships, and marriages between people from different national backgrounds or religions. Many Americans are descendants of two, four, or eight different ethnic groups.

What holds all Americans together?

Many things: the English language, the love of the country, the love of being unique, economic opportunities, knowledge of our history, and the appreciation of our rights and freedoms.

An American ideal is that *all people must be treated equally*. National and state laws say that businesses, employers, schools, and landlords may not discriminate based on race, color, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or national origin. *All people must have a fair chance to get an education, to find a place to live, and to get a job.* There are special laws against “hate crimes” that hurt people because of race, sex, or nationality.

There is prejudice in some people’s hearts. There are bigots who are sure their race or their religion is the only true one. They believe that other races or religions are inferior. There is still unfairness in employment and housing. There are tensions and misunderstandings among races and between different national groups.

One sign of tension is the names that people call racial,

# What Do Words Have to Do With *Politics*?

Fairness is an American ideal. However, people don't always treat others fairly. There has been unfairness to racial, ethnic, and religious minorities. There has also been unfairness to women, people with physical differences, gay people, transgender people, children, and the elderly. Some unfairness is actually written in state and national laws.

American history is full of change. Wars, demonstrations, riots, and activists brought about changes in our laws. It's important to teach children to accept others and to be tolerant of people who are different from themselves.

There has been unfairness in language, too. People used offensive and hurtful names for others. They did some of this without thinking. The names identified some people by their occupations or their differences. The terms made them seem different from other people.

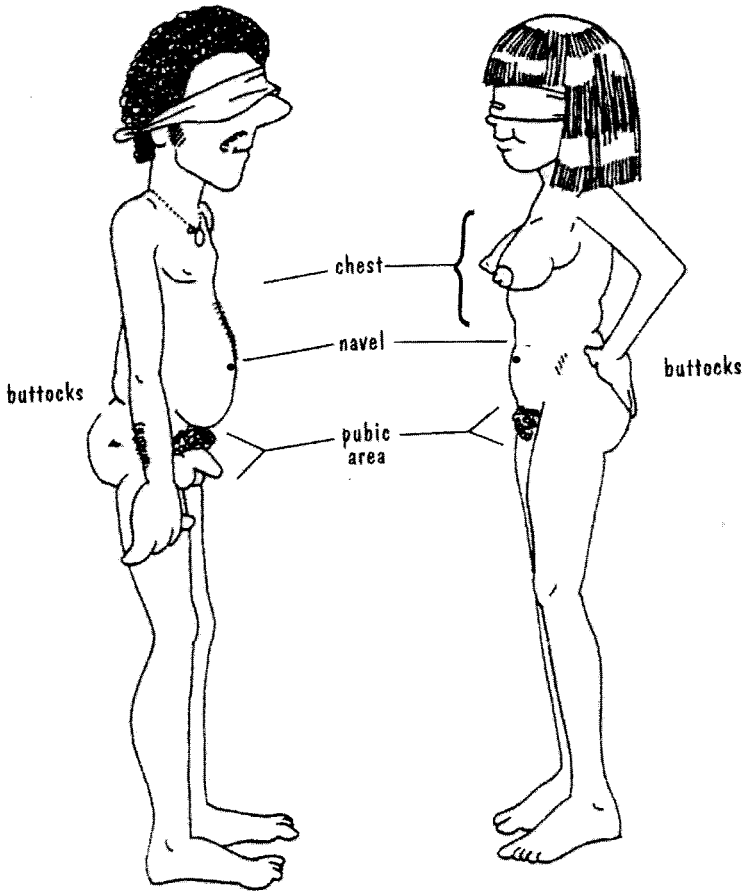
For example, children born with a certain genetic disability used to be called *Mongoloid idiots*. All of these individuals have a similar appearance, with narrow eyes and a flat nose. Some, but not all of them, have low intelligence. Today these individuals are known as *people with Down's syndrome*.

People who could not use their legs, were blind or deaf, or were missing a limb, were called "handicapped." This word made people think of them as unable to do many ordinary things, and unable to work.

The terms preferred today are *physically challenged*, or *people with disabilities*. Such terms tell that there are difficulties. But the newer terms have the "attitude" that the person has the power to have a useful life. It's true that they may need wheelchairs, braces, artificial limbs, seeing-eye dogs, or hearing aids. But many of them have the ability to work at a job and contribute to the community.

## Formal Terms for Our “Dangerous Parts”

There are many terms for each of our sexual body parts. Each word may refer to the same body part, but each word also has its own social class and “attitude.” To learn more about each word, check the *Dictionary of Dangerous Definitions* starting on pages 115 to 208.



# Formal English at the Doctor's Office

This section contains formal, medically correct terms. These are the terms you need to understand, and may use, when speaking with a doctor. The information in this chapter is not medical advice. It's a presentation of vocabulary you may need or hear when you consult a health professional

## Female Health Topics

A girl enters *puberty* between the ages of ten and fifteen. She begins to *menstruate* and to develop *secondary sex characteristics*: breasts, hair in the pubic and underarm areas, and wider hips. The female *hormones*—*estrogen* and *progesterone*—cause these body changes.

Each month, an *ovum* (egg) leaves the *ovary*. It passes through the *fallopian tubes* to the *uterus*, and out of the *vagina*. The thick lining of the *uterus* is released, and *menstruation* occurs. The woman says she is *having her period*. A woman can use a *sanitary napkin* to absorb the *menstrual flow*. Or, she may insert a *tampon* into the vagina.

Before her first *sexual experience*, a girl is a *virgin*. There is a *hymen* (a thin membrane) that partly covers the opening to the vagina. This will stretch or tear during her first *sexual intercourse*. Sometimes it will tear before this if the girl is active in such sports as tennis, volleyball, or running hurdles.

## What's a gynecologist?

A *gynecologist* [gI: nə kah lə jist] is a doctor who specializes in treating conditions of women's *reproductive* organs, and methods of *family planning*.

Problems that some women have are *menstrual cramps*, *heavy flow*, or an *irregular cycle*. Some women experience *P.M.S.* (*premenstrual syndrome*) for a few days before their period. They feel bloated, crampy, and irritable.

## Genders and Sex

The terms *sex* and *gender* are not the same. *Sex* refers to the sexual organs a person has. *Gender* refers to the inner feelings that a person has.

Sexual orientation is a person's attraction to members of the opposite sex (*heterosexual*) or the same sex (*homosexual*). A person may be attracted to both sexes and be *bisexual*. Some of us humans are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. These are natural conditions and don't need to be cured.

A baby is born with either male sex organs or female sex organs. In very rare cases a baby may be born with ambiguous sex organs. That is, it isn't clear if the baby is male or female. It's even rarer for a baby to have both male and female genitals.

## Gender identity

Some people sense that they are a different gender than the sex of their body. They may want to dress like the gender they feel they really are. They may prefer the activities and manners of their "true" gender.

Such a *transgender* condition can be confusing and upsetting to a child. It's possible that more than a million adults in the U.S. feel they are a different sex than their sex organs would tell them and others.

## Transitioning

In some cases, as the person gets older, they may desire to have treatments so their body will have the features of the gender they experience. This can involve hormone treatments and surgeries. Hormone treatments cause changes in the sound of one's voice, body hair, and the appearance of breasts. Surgery may remove breasts or implant breasts. Surgery can create a vagina, using the sensitive tissue of the penis, or create a penis.

**defecate** [deh fə kayt] *verb, formal*. To expel (push out) feces from the rectum.

**delicate parts of the anatomy** *noun phrase, plural, euphemism*. Genitals, usually male testicles. “If you are attacked by a rapist,” said the counselor, “kick him in the *delicate parts of his anatomy*.”

**derriere** [dayər ee ayr] *noun, euphemism*. Buttocks. This French term sounds polite and classy.

\***desire** 1. *verb, general use*. To want in a sexual way. To have a sexual need for someone. 2. *noun, general use*. A sexual need. “His *desire* for her increased each day that she rejected him.”

\***diaphragm** [di ə fræm] *noun, formal and general use*. A contraceptive device. It is a circular piece of rubber that is inserted into the woman’s vagina to cover the cervix before intercourse. It prevents sperm from entering the uterus.

**diarrhea** [di: ə ree uh] *noun, formal and general use*. Frequent need to go to the toilet, with watery feces. “Lynn had *diarrhea* after she ate green apples.” “The druggist gave me medication to stop the baby’s *diarrhea*.”

**dick** *noun, vulgar*. 1. A penis. 2. A mean, nasty person. “Her ex-husband is a real *dick*. He ran off and left her with three kids.” 3. A jerk; a stupid person. “Don’t be a *dick*; pay your share of the bill.” 4. *slang*. A detective.

**diddle** *verb, vulgar*. 1. To masturbate. 2. To have sexual intercourse. 3. To waste time. “Stop *diddling* around, and get to work!” 4. To cheat someone.

\***dig out** *verb phrase, vulgar*. Have sexual intercourse (from a male point of view).

**dildo** *noun, vulgar*. 1. An artificial penis used for sexual play. 2. An extremely stupid or clumsy person.

**dingleberry** *noun, vulgar*. 1. A small piece of feces caught in the pubic hair near the anus. 2. A stupid person.

\***dipstick** *noun, vulgar*. A penis. (A dipstick is a long measuring rod to check the level of oil in a car.) 2. A stupid person.

\***dirty** *adjective, slang*. Having a *vulgar* or sexual meaning: dirty words, dirty pictures, dirty jokes, dirty movies, etc.

**have a dirty mind** *verb phrase, idiom slang*. To think of sex often. To think that other people are always thinking of sex. To interpret situations with sexual meanings.

**dirty old man** *noun phrase, slang*. An older man who is interested in flirting, touching, and seducing women. This may be used as a term of affection, or in a derogatory way.

\***discharge** *noun, formal and general use*. A liquid that comes out of the penis or vagina which may indicate that there is an infection. “She went to the gynecologist because she had a bad-smelling *discharge*.” “One symptom of gonorrhea is a *discharge* from the penis.”

\***diving suit** *noun, slang*. Condom.

\***do it** *verb, slang*. To have sexual intercourse. “Merlin likes to *do it* with a different woman every night.”

**doggy style** *adverb, slang*. Sexual intercourse with the woman on her hands and knees, the man entering the vagina from the rear.

\***doodle** *noun, vulgar*. A penis.

**doo doo** *noun, children’s word*. Feces. Also: **doodee, make doo doo, defecate**.

**dork** *noun, vulgar*. 1. A penis. 2. A stupid, clumsy person.

**double meaning** *noun, general use*. Having two meanings,