

Colloquialism



DEFINITION

What is colloquialism? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Colloquialism is the use of informal words or phrases in writing or speech. Colloquialisms are usually defined in geographical terms, meaning that they are often defined by their use within a dialect, a regionally-defined variant of a larger language. Colloquialisms can include [aphorisms](#), [idioms](#), profanity, or other words.

Some additional key details about colloquialism:

- Colloquialism occurs frequently in everyday speech, and is also used frequently in poetry, prose, and drama.
- Writers often use colloquialism in dialogue or first-person narration, both because it helps make their characters seem more lifelike and because the way a character speaks may be one of their defining qualities.
- The word *colloquialism* comes from the Latin word *colloquium*, which means *speaking together*.

Colloquialism Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce colloquialism: kuh-**loh**-kwee-uh-liz-um

Dialects and Colloquialisms

Because colloquialisms are informal words that appear uniquely within specific dialects, it's helpful to understand what dialects are in order to fully understand colloquialisms. The two key points about dialects are that they are:

- **A language within a language:** A dialect is a variant of a language that is spoken by a specific group of people. It has some unique aspects—such as unique words, accent, and other features—that make it distinct within that larger language.
- **Often geographically defined:** Dialects are often regional, meaning that people in a one part of the world might speak a language in a way that is different from the way another group of people in another part of the world speak the same language.

Though English speakers around the world can more or less understand each other, a person who grew up in the US will speak an English dialect with a different accent and use slightly different words than a person who grew up in the UK or a person who grew up in India. Further, different dialects can exist *within* a country as well as between countries. People from Louisiana in the United States often speak differently than, say, people from New York or Wisconsin. While dialects are most often geographically defined, some dialects *can*

also be unique to a group of people who share a social class or ethnic background. For instance, cockney English is a term used to refer to the dialect of English traditionally spoken by working-class Londoners.

The term **colloquialism** refers specifically to the unique words that are specific to a particular dialect.

Colloquialisms: Unique Words or Common Words with Unique Meanings

Colloquialisms function in one of two main ways:

- **Words or phrases that only exist in a specific dialect.** Some colloquialisms are completely unique words or phrases that *only* appear in a particular dialect. For example, people in Philadelphia use the word *jawn* as a kind of universal pronoun that can replace and refer to any person, place, or thing without directly naming it. The word *jawn* is not commonly used by any English speakers in any other part of the world ([and in fact jawn is also a complete anomaly in terms of grammar](#)).
- **Words or phrases that appear in many dialects, but have a unique meaning in certain dialects.** Other words function as colloquialisms not because they are unique words that don't appear in other languages, but because they are common words that have different and unique meanings in different dialects. For example, in the US, English speakers use the word *pants* as a synonym for *trousers*. In the UK, however, *pants* is a synonym for *underwear*. Similarly, in some parts of the the United States, the word *coke* is used to refer to *any* kind of soft drink, while in other parts of the US it only refers to *Coca-Cola*.

The two types of colloquialism described above can include all sorts of different words or phrases, including unique **contractions** (*ain't*), **profanity** (*bloody*, which is a profanity in the UK but not the US), and **idioms** (*It's raining monkeys*, a variant of the idiom *it's raining cats and dogs* that's common in Louisiana). Colloquialisms can also be other types of words as well.

Colloquialism vs. Slang and Jargon

Colloquialism is related to (and easily confused with) slang and jargon.

- **Slang** refers to informal words and phrases that are used among a small group of people or a specific subculture. For example, in the movie *Mean Girls*, when the character Gretchen starts using the word "fetch" to mean "cool," she's trying to invent new slang within her clique (though she [fails miserably](#) in this attempt).
- **Jargon** refers to technical terms used by people within a specific profession or trade, and which would not make sense to people

outside of that industry. For example, in the publishing industry, the word "galley" refers to a nearly-finished draft of a book or magazine that still needs to be proofread.

While there's no disagreement that colloquialism, slang, and jargon are related terms, there is some debate about *how* they are related:

- **Slang and jargon as types of colloquialism:** Some people argue that slang and jargon are actually *types* of colloquialism, as they are unique words (or common words with unique meanings) used by a specific subset of people.
- **Slang and jargon as separate from colloquialism:** Other people argue that colloquialisms always have a geographical aspect—that they must be informal words and phrases that are widely understood within a given country or region. According to this point of view, if only people in the Northwestern United States understand a term, it's a colloquialism; if only teenagers understand a term, it's slang; if only plumbers understand a term, it's jargon.

Even people who believe that jargon, slang, and colloquialism are distinct from one another tend to agree that jargon and slang terms can *become* colloquialisms when their use becomes widespread enough to include a significant number of people in a country or region.



EXAMPLES

Colloquialisms in Everyday Speech

- In Minnesota, people may refer to a casserole as a **hotdish**.
- In the Northeast of the United States, **wicked** is commonly used as an intensifier similar to *very* or *really*. So if it's really cold, a person from Maine might say, "It's wicked cold out."
- In parts of the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic US, people top their ice-cream with **jimmies** instead of *sprinkles*.
- **Submarine sandwiches, subs, Italian sandwiches, heroes, and hoagies** are all different words that appear in different parts of the United States that refer to the same type of sandwich.
- In the American South, people refer to avocados as **alligator pears**.
- The words **pop, soda, and coke** are all used to refer to soft drinks in different parts of the United States.
- Americans eat **cookies** but people in the UK eat **biscuits**.
- In the Pacific Northwest, a rundown section of a city might be referred to as **skid row**.

Colloquialism in Literature

Colloquialism in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain

In [*The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*](#), Mark Twain's narrator and title character, Huck Finn narrates his story using colloquial language that includes idioms and words specific to a regional dialect:

The Widow Douglas, she took me for her son, and allowed she would sivilize me; but it was rough living in the house all the time, considering how dismal regular and decent the widow was in all her ways; and so when I couldn't stand it no longer, I lit out.

In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain uses colloquialism to give his characters a distinctive voice. Huck misspells *civilize* as "sivilize," which reveals his lack of formal education. Huck also uses "allowed" as a colloquialism for *said*, and he uses adjectives in an unusual and informal way in phrases like "it was rough living" and "dismal regular" (instead of "dismally regular," perhaps). The double negatives in "I couldn't stand it no longer" are an example of a regional dialect; in formal English, double negatives cancel each other out, but in casual speech, they can be used to add emphasis. When Huck says, "I lit out," he uses a colloquialism meaning "I left." All told, Huck's way of speaking helps to define his character and make him seem like a "real" person living in Missouri in the pre-Civil War time period in which the story is set.

Colloquialism in *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger

In [*The Catcher in the Rye*](#), the novel's teenage narrator Holden Caulfield, says:

When I was all set to go, when I had my bags and all, I stood for a while next to the stairs and took a last look down the goddam corridor. I was sort of crying. I don't know why. I put my red hunting hat on, and turned the peak around to the back, the way I liked it, and then I yelled at the top of my goddam voice, "Sleep tight, ya morons!" I'll bet I woke up every bastard on the whole floor. Then I got the hell out.

In this passage, Holden describes how he ran away from his boarding school. Throughout the novel, Holden speaks in a distinctive and casual voice filled with colloquialisms, and in this passage, his colloquialisms convey his anger and desire to rebel against the "phonies" at his school. Holden swears a lot, and one of his favorite curse words throughout the novel is *goddam*, which is also an informal contraction. Salinger conveys Holden's emotional distress by telling us that Holden is "sort of crying." The phrase "Sleep tight, ya morons!" is colloquial in several senses: *sleep tight* is an idiom, *ya* is a colloquialism for *you*, and *moron* is debatably either a colloquialism or slang. Bastard is arguably yet another colloquialism, since its use here as a catch-all derogatory word is different from the word's literal meaning of a child born out of wedlock.

Colloquialism in *A Visit From the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan

In *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, washed-up, alcoholic rock star Bosco says:

"I want interviews, features, you name it," Bosco went on. "Fill up my life with that shit. Let's document every fucking humiliation. This is reality, right? You don't look good anymore twenty years later, especially when you've had half your guts removed. Time's a goon, right? Isn't that the expression?"

In this passage, Bosco unintentionally invents a new expression, "Time's a goon." Because this phrase is not a widely used expression, it isn't actually a colloquialism (though perhaps it might eventually grow into one if other people picked it up). Nonetheless, Bosco's speech is littered with actual colloquialisms, including profanity and his use of the word "guts" to describe his liver, that establish him as a character of his time and place.

Colloquialism in *Othello* by William Shakespeare

In *Othello*, the villainous Iago tells Brabantio, Desdemona's father:

'Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not serve God, if the devil bid you

'Zounds sounds like a nonsense word to English speakers today, but it was a common colloquialism in Early Modern English, the dialect spoken in England during Shakespeare's lifetime. 'Zounds is an informal contraction of the phrase *Christ's Wounds*, and in Elizabethan England, it was considered a mild swear word. Here, Iago uses 'zounds to express a sense of frustration with Brabantio.

Colloquialism in "The Day Lady Died" by Frank O'Hara

Frank O'Hara's poetry is laced with slang and pop cultural references that may have been obscure to others even at the time he was writing, in the 1950s—but just because some of the words in this famous poem may be unclear to modern readers doesn't mean they're colloquialisms. "Quandariness," for example, is a word made up by the poet—not an example of colloquialism. The word "maltd," however, *is* a colloquialism—an adjective used in the place of a noun, and a quick way to refer to a "maltd milkshake." It was used only in the United States when O'Hara wrote the poem (and is barely in use any longer).

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun
and have a hamburger and a maltd and buy
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets
in Ghana are doing these days
I go on to the bank
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)
doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do

think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or
Brendan Behan's new play or Le Balcon or Les Nègres
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine
after practically going to sleep with quandariness



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Because real people constantly use colloquialism in their every day speech, writers use colloquialism to create realistic voices for their characters, both in dialogue and first-person narration. Colloquialism can be an excellent tool for [characterization](#) because a person's use of colloquialisms and the dialect they speak can help denote the region or country they come from, their socio-economic or ethnic background, and even the period of time in which they live (the first scene of the play *Pygmalion* actually shows a scholar identify people's background from how they speak). In *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain uses colloquialism to show that his narrator and main character, Huck Finn, comes from a specific region of the South (from Missouri, along the Missouri River) and lacks a formal education. Huck's colloquialisms are frank and vividly descriptive, which also gives a dynamic energy to his voice. To Twain's contemporaries, Huck would have sounded like a person from their own time; and to modern readers, Huck's colloquialisms help situate him in the nineteenth-century.

Writers also use colloquialism naturally—and even without expressly meaning to—for the simple reason that writers are living people who live in specific regions with specific dialects and so they often speak and think in colloquialisms. A writer's way of thinking and talking in casual conversation may drift unconsciously into their own writing—or they may be purposefully attempting to capture their way of speaking on the page. Bloggers and magazine writers, for example, often aim to write in a conversational tone that will make their articles engaging, humorous, unique, and easy to read.

Colloquialism is a central component of day-to-day speech, and so it is an essential tool for writers who want their voice to sound natural, or who want their characters' voices to sound natural.



OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia entry on colloquialism:** A short but solid [entry](#), with some coverage of the difference between colloquialism, jargon, and slang.
- **Colloquial woodlice:** English-speakers around the world have at least twenty different colloquialisms to describe woodlice, a common insect. Check out [this list](#) of names for the creepy-crawlies on the website Mental Floss.
- **New colloquialisms:** For a list of words recently added to the Oxford English Dictionary, check out [this web site](#). Many of these words are now widely understood as colloquialisms, but were once considered to be slang.

- **A colloquial test:** [This quiz](#) from the New York Times uses colloquialisms distinct to regional dialects in different parts of the US to predict where you grew up.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Frisella, Emily. "Colloquialism." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Frisella, Emily. "Colloquialism." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/colloquialism>.