



LAKE SUPERIOR STATE UNIVERSITY

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COVID-19 Terminology Tops Lake Superior State University's Annual Banished Words List Just in Time for the Vaccination Rollout

Sault Ste. Marie, MI — Enough already with COVID-19!

People across the U.S. and around the world let Lake Superior State University know that they're tired not only of the coronavirus pandemic but also of hearing, reading, and talking about it—especially when the communication is bad or excessive.

COVID-19 terminology monopolized submissions for LSSU's annual Banished Words List this year. Out of 1,450-plus nominations, upwards of 250 of the words and terms suggested for banishment for overuse, misuse, or uselessness relate to the coronavirus. In fact, seven of the 10 words and terms that LSSU is banishing for 2021 are about it.

Ranked No. 1 to get rid of is what started of all this: "COVID-19" itself.

"It should surprise no one that this year's list was dominated by words and terms related to COVID-19," said Banished Words List committee members Associate Professor of English Mary McMyne, Assistant Professor of English Julie Barbour, and Associate Professor of English Dr. Chad Barbour. "LSSU's Banished Words List has reflected signs of the times since debuting in the mid-1970s, and the zeitgeist this year is: We're all in this together by banishing expressions like 'We're all in this together.' To be sure, COVID-19 is unprecedented in wreaking havoc and destroying lives. But so is the overreliance on 'unprecedented' to frame things, so it has to go, too."

LSSU has compiled an annual Banished Words List since 1976 to uphold, protect, and support excellence in language by encouraging avoidance of words and terms that are overworked, redundant, oxymoronic, clichéd, illogical, nonsensical—and otherwise ineffective, baffling, or irritating. Over the decades, LSSU has received tens of thousands of nominations for the list, which now totals more than 1,000 entries. This year, nominations came from most major U.S. cities and many U.S. states, as well as from Australia, the Czech Republic, England, and Canada. Here is the list of the banished words and terms for 2021:

1. COVID-19 (COVID, coronavirus, Rona)

A large number of nominators are clearly resentful of the virus and how it has overtaken our vocabulary. No matter how necessary or socially and medically useful these words are, the committee cannot help but wish we could banish them along with the virus itself. Coincidentally, this list arrives as does a vaccine—the committee hopes this proves a type of double whammy.

2. Social distancing

This phrase is useful, as wearing a mask and keeping your distance have a massive effect on preventing the spread of infection. But we'd be lying if we said we weren't ready for this phrase to become "useless." With north of 50 nominations, many others clearly feel the same, and the tone of their reasoning ranged from impatient to heartfelt.

3. We're all in this together

This phrase was likely intended as a way to keep everyone feeling safe and calm at the start of the pandemic. However, as the virus made its way across the globe and nation, it became clear that we are all dealing with COVID-19 in different ways and that we confront some vastly different challenges in coping with it. As with many words that show up on the list, its usefulness has faded.

4. In an abundance of caution (various phrasings)

Yes, humanity needs to follow safeguards during COVID-19. The statistics are sobering: more than 300,000 deaths and more than 16 million confirmed cases in the U.S. and more than 1.6 million deaths and more than 73 million confirmed cases worldwide. But the phrasing about how to take preventative steps is vague. What is the standard measurement for caution, metric or U.S. standard?

5. In these uncertain times (various phrasings)

The committee agrees that COVID-19 has upended everyday life and wishes this weren't so. But putting things into imprecise context doesn't help matters. The blur dilutes reality and, to some, sounds like the beginning of a movie trailer. Keep as wide a berth of trite parlance as those who don't wear masks in public. What exactly does it mean for times to be uncertain? Look at a clock!

6. Pivot

Reporters, commentators, talking heads, and others from the media reference how everyone must adapt to the coronavirus through contactless delivery, virtual learning, curbside pickup, video conferencing, remote working, and other urgent readjustments. That's all true and vital. But basketball players pivot; let's keep it that way.

7. Unprecedented

It's unheard of that a word would be repeated in the Banished Word List. Actually, it's not. In the early years, words wound up repeated, although we try to avoid repetition nowadays. Despite the fact that "unprecedented" was banished in 2002, given that it was nominated many times this year for misuse in describing events that do have precedent, inclusion again seems warranted.

2021 Banished Words Not About COVID-19:

8. Karen

What began as an anti-racist critique of the behavior of white women in response to Black and Brown people has become a misogynist umbrella term for critiquing the perceived overemotional behavior of women. As one nominator said about reasons for its banishment, "I would tell you why, but I'd sound like a Karen." Another commentator observed, "Offensive to all normal people named Karen."

9. Sus

It's a shortened version for "suspicious" in the video game *Among Us*. No committee members play, but our children who do explained that this multiplayer online social game is designed around identifying

“sus” imposters so they can be “thrown into the lava.” Complainers a) ask: How much effort does it take to say the entire word; and b) request: If that can’t happen, confine the syllable to the gaming world.

10. I know, right?

An amusing phrase flooding social media, “I know, right?” is a relatively new construction to convey empathy with those who have expressed agreement. But as one wordsmith put it, if you know, why do you need to ask if it’s correct or seek further approval? Another grammarian suggested that the desire for confirmation connotes insecurity. In other words, it’s reiterating something already seconded.

“Real-world concerns preoccupied word watchdogs this year, first and foremost COVID-19, and that makes sense,” said LSSU President Dr. Rodney S. Hanley. “In a small way, maybe this list will help flatten the curve, which also was under consideration for banishment. We trust that your new normal—another contender among nominations—for next year won’t have to include that anymore. ”

For more about the Banished Words List and to nominate a word or term for banishment for 2022, go online to lssu.edu/banishedwords.

About Lake Superior State University: Lake Superior State University is one of Michigan's most affordable public universities with One-Rate at Lake State tuition for all. Surrounded by three Great Lakes, LSSU is an unsurpassed location for research, innovation, and real-world experiences. Signature programs include fisheries and wildlife management, engineering, nursing, criminal justice, business, robotics engineering, and fire science. In 2019, Lake State launched the first cannabis chemistry program in the nation. LSSU also was the first campus nationwide to offer an accredited four-year fire science program; it is one of three in the U.S. LSSU was the first campus nationwide to offer an accredited four-year robotics engineering technology program and is the only university nationwide to offer undergraduate education in industrial robotics. LSSU also offers several certificate programs, including a one-year culinary arts chef certificate at its 5,000 square-foot, state-of-the-art Les Cheneaux Culinary School in Hessel. Regional centers are in Escanaba, Iron Mountain, and Petoskey. LSSU opened its newest location in St. Helen in 2020. Additional LSSU hallmarks include the annual Banished Words List that receives worldwide media coverage and a student-run Atlantic salmon hatchery at its renowned Center for Freshwater Research and Education. LSSU’s NCAA Division I hockey team has won five national championships; men compete in five other sports and women in six at the Division II level. Lake State was founded in 1946 in Sault Ste. Marie, the oldest city in Michigan (1668), on the site of the former U.S. Army’s Fort Brady. Lake State has approximately 2,000 undergraduate students, with 88 percent coming from Michigan, and with every county represented. Ninety percent of full-time students receive financial aid.

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