

The American Heritage® Dictionary *of the English Language*

FOURTH EDITION



HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
Boston New York

Words are included in this Dictionary on the basis of their usage.
Words that are known to have current trademark registrations are shown with an initial capital and are also identified as trademarks. No investigation has been made of common-law trademark rights in any word, because such investigation is impracticable. The inclusion of any word in this Dictionary is not, however, an expression of the Publisher's opinion as to whether or not it is subject to proprietary rights. Indeed, no definition in this Dictionary is to be regarded as affecting the validity of any trademark.

American Heritage® and the eagle logo are registered trademarks of Forbes Inc. Their use is pursuant to a license agreement with Forbes Inc.

Copyright © 2006, 2000 Houghton Mifflin Company. All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of Houghton Mifflin Company unless such copying is expressly permitted by federal copyright law. Address inquiries to Reference Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company, 222 Berkeley Street, Boston, MA 02116.

ISBN-13: 978-0-618-70172-8

ISBN-10: 0-618-70172-9

ISBN-13: 978-0-618-70173-5 (hardcover with CD-ROM)

ISBN-10: 0-618-70173-7 (hardcover with CD-ROM)

Visit our websites: www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com
or www.ahdictionary.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The American Heritage dictionary of the English language.—4th ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-395-82517-2 (hardcover) — ISBN 0-618-08230-1

(hardcover with CD ROM)

1. English language—Dictionaries

PE1628 .A623 2000

423—dc21

00-025369

Manufactured in the United States of America

back-for-ma-tion or **back formation** (băk'fôr-mă'shən) *n.* 1. A new word created by removing an affix from an already existing word, as *vacuum* from *vacuum cleaner*, or by removing what is mistakenly thought to be an affix, as *pea* from the earlier English plural *pease*. 2. The process of forming words in this way. See Note at **baby-sit**.

back-gam-mon (băk'gām'ən) *n.* A board game for two persons, played with pieces whose moves are determined by throws of dice. [BACK + GAMMON.]

back-ground (băk'grōnd') *n.* 1. The ground or scenery located behind something. 2a. The part of a pictorial representation that appears to be in the distance and that provides relief for the principal objects in the foreground. b. The general scene or surface against which designs, patterns, or figures are represented or viewed. 3. A position or area of relative inconspicuousness or unimportance. 4. The circumstances and events surrounding or leading up to an event or occurrence. 5. A person's experience, training, and education: *Her background in the arts is impressive.* 6. Subdued music played especially as an accompaniment to dialogue in a dramatic performance. 7a. Sound that intrudes on or interferes with an audio recording. b. Low-level radiation, as from radioactive decay, that exists as part of the natural environment. —**idioms:** on background For publication but without specific attribution of the source: *The Senator would only speak on background with the reporter about the crisis.* on deep background For publication without any attribution of the source. —**back/ground' v.**

back-ground-er (băk'grōn'dər) *n.* An informal news briefing for reporters by an official often speaking off the record.

back-hand (băk'händ') *n.* 1. *Sports a.* A stroke or motion, as of a racket, made with the back of the hand facing outward and the arm moving forward. b. A pass or shot in hockey made with the back of the blade of the stick. c. A catch made in baseball by reaching across the body with the palm turned toward the ball. 2. Handwriting characterized by letters that slant to the left. *adj.* Made with or using a backhand. *adv.* With a backhanded stroke or motion. *tr.v.* -hand'ed, -hand'ing, -hands *Sports* To perform, catch, or hit with a backhand: *She backhanded the ball crosscourt.* —**back/hand'er n.**

back-handed (băk'hän'did) *adj.* 1. *Sports* Made with or using a backhand: *a backhanded shot into the opponent's court.* 2. Oblique or roundabout: *a backhanded compliment.* —**back/hand'ed-ly adv.** —**back/hand'ed-ness n.**

back-hoe (băk'hō') *n.* An excavator whose bucket is rigidly attached to a hinged pole on the boom and is drawn backward to the machine when in operation. —**back/hoe' v.**

back-ing (băk'ing) *n.* 1. Something forming a back: *the backing of a carpet.* 2a. Support or aid: *financial backing.* b. Approval or endorsement: *The President has backing from the farm belt.*

back-lash (băk'lăsh') *n.* 1. A sudden or violent backward whipping motion. 2. An antagonistic reaction to a trend, development, or event: *"As the backlash against divorce progressed, state legislatures . . . called for a rollback of no-fault divorce laws and even for premarital waiting periods"* (Walter Kirn). 3. A snarl formed in the part of a fishing line that is wound around the reel. 4. The play resulting from loose connections between gears or other mechanical elements. —**back/lash' v.**

back-light (băk'līt') *n.* A type of spotlight, used in photography, that illuminates a subject from behind. *tr.v.* -light'ed or -lit' (-līt'), -light'ing, -lights To light from behind: *The photographer backlit the subject for a dramatic effect.*

back-list (băk'līst') *n.* A publisher's list of older titles kept in print. *tr.v.* -list'ed, -list'ing, -lists To place (a title) on a backlist.

back-log (băk'līt') *v.* A past tense and a past participle of **backlight**. **back-log** (băk'lōg', -lōg') *n.* 1. A reserve supply or source. 2. An accumulation, especially of unfinished work or unfilled orders. 3. A large log at the back of a fire in a fireplace. *v.* -logged, -log'ing, -logs *tr.* To acquire (something) as a backlog. *intr.* To become a backlog; accumulate.

back matter *n.* Material, such as an index or appendix, that follows the main body of a book. Also called *end matter*.

back mutation *n.* A reversal process whereby a gene that has undergone mutation returns to its previous state.

back nine *n.* The second half of an 18-hole golf course.

back office *n.* The internal operations of an organization that are not accessible or visible to the general public: *"The . . . bank will . . . modernize its back office and computer systems and improve its marketing and customer service"* (Peter Sinton).

back-pack (băk'păk') *n.* 1. A knapsack, often mounted on a lightweight frame, that is worn on a person's back, as to carry camping supplies. 2. A piece of equipment, often containing life-support devices, designed to be used while being carried on the back: *a parachute in a backpack; an astronaut's backpack.* *v.* -packed, -pack'ing, -packs *intr.* To hike while carrying a backpack. *tr.* To carry in a backpack. —**back/pack'er n.** —**back/pack'ing n.**

back-ped-al (băk'pēd'əl) *intr.v.* -aled, -al'ing, -als or -alled, -al'ing, -als 1. To move the pedals of a bicycle or similar vehicle backward, especially to apply a brake. 2. To move backward by taking short quick steps, as in boxing or football. 3. To retreat or withdraw from a position or attitude: *The senator later backpedaled on the issue.*

back-pres-sure (băk'prēsh'ər) *n.* Residual pressure opposing the free flow of a gas or liquid, as in a pipe or an exhaust system.

back-prop-a-ga-tion (băk'prōp'ə-gā'shən) *n.* A common method of training a neural net in which the initial system output is compared to the desired output, and the system is adjusted until the difference between the two is minimized.

back-rest (băk'rēst') *n.* A rest or support for the back.

Back River A river, about 965 km (600 mi) long, of central Nunavut, Canada. It rises in several lakes and flows northeast and north to an Inlet south of Boothia Peninsula.

back-room (băk'rōm', -rōm') *n.* or **back room** 1. A room located at the rear. 2. The meeting place used by an inconspicuous controlling group. *adj.* 1. Of, relating to, or taking place in a backroom: *backroom card games.* 2. Marked by the exercise of inconspicuous control and maneuvering: *backroom politics.*

back-rush (băk'rūsh') *n.* The seaward return of water after the landward motion of a wave. Also called *backwash*.

back-saw (băk'sō') *n.* A saw that is reinforced by a metal band along its back edge.

back-scat-ter (băk'skāt'ər) *n.* 1. The deflection of radiation or particles by electromagnetic or nuclear forces through angles greater than 90° to the initial direction of travel. 2. The radiation or particles so deflected. —**back/scat'ter v.**

back seat *n.* 1. A seat in the back, especially of a vehicle. 2. A subordinate position, as in a group or hierarchy.

back-seat driver (băk'sēt') *n.* 1. A passenger who constantly advises, corrects, or nags the driver of a motor vehicle. 2. A person who persists in giving unsolicited advice.

back-set (băk'sēt') *n.* 1. A setback or reversal. 2. An eddy or countercurrent in water.

back-shore (băk'shōr', -shōr') *n.* The area of shore lying between the average high-tide mark and the vegetation, affected by waves only during severe storms.

back-side (băk'sīd') *n.* Informal The buttocks; the rump.

back-slap (băk'slăp') *v.* -slapped, -slap'ing, -slaps *intr.* To demonstrate effusive goodwill. *tr.* To demonstrate effusive goodwill toward (another or others). —**back/slap'per n.**

back-slash (băk'slăsh') *n.* A backward virgule (').

back-slide (băk'slīd') *intr.v.* -slid' (-slīd'), -slid'ing, -slides To revert to sin or wrongdoing, especially in religious practice.

back-space (băk'spās') *intr.v.* -spaced, -spac'ing, -spac'es To move the cursor on a computer screen or the carriage of a typewriter back one or more spaces by striking the key used for this purpose. *adj.* The key on a keyboard or typewriter used for backspacing.

back-spin (băk'spīn') *n.* A spin that tends to retard, arrest, or reverse the linear motion of an object, especially of a ball.

back-splash (băk'splăsh') *n.* An upright surface or border, as of tile, that protects the wall behind a sink or stove.

back-stab (băk'stăb') *tr.v.* -stabbed, -stab'ing, -stabs To attack (someone) unfairly, especially in an underhand, deceitful manner: *"Some backstab each other and threaten to settle their differences with a punch"* (Thomas Boswell). —**back/stab'ber n.**

back-stage (băk'stāj') *adv.* 1. In or toward the area behind the performing space in a theater, especially the area comprising the dressing rooms. 2. In secret; privately. *adj.* (băk'stāj') 1. Of, relating to, occurring in, or situated behind the performing area of a theater. 2. Concealed from the public; private.

back-stairs (băk'stārz') also **back-stair** (-stār') *adj.* Furtively carried on; clandestine: *backstairs gossip.*

back-stay (băk'stā') *n.* 1. A rope or shroud extending from the top of a mast aft to a ship's side or stern to help support the mast. 2. A supporting device at or for the back of something else.

back-stitch (băk'stīch') *n.* A stitch made by inserting the needle at the midpoint of a preceding stitch so that the stitches overlap by half lengths. —**back/stitch' v.**

back-stop (băk'stōp') *n.* 1. *Sports* A screen or fence used to prevent a ball from being thrown or hit far out of a playing area, as in baseball. 2. *Baseball* A catcher. 3. Something that supports or bolsters. *tr.v.* -stopped, -stop'ing, -stops 1. To serve as a backstop for. 2a. To support or bolster: *"The firm lacks a topflight strategic-consulting arm to backstop its technology gurus"* (Alex Beam). b. To substitute for (another) in an emergency.

back-story (băk'stōr'ē, -stōr'ē) *n.* 1. The experiences of a character or the circumstances of an event that occur before the action or narrative of a literary, cinematic, or dramatic work. 2. A prequel.

back-stretch (băk'strēch') *n.* The part of an oval racecourse farthest from the spectators and opposite the homestretch.

back-stroke (băk'strōk') *n.* 1. *Sports a.* A swimming stroke performed on one's back, especially one using alternating overarm strokes and a flutter kick. b. A race or a leg of a race in which this stroke is swum. 2. A backhanded stroke or motion. 3. A stroke or motion in the direction of an original starting point: *a saw that cuts on the backstroke.* —**back/stroke' v.** —**back/strok'er n.**

back-swept (băk'swēpt') *adj.* Swept, angled, or slanting backward: *a backswept hairstyle.*

back-swim-mer (băk'swīm'ər) *n.* Any of various aquatic bugs of the family Notonectidae that swim on their backs by means of broadened, oarlike hind legs.

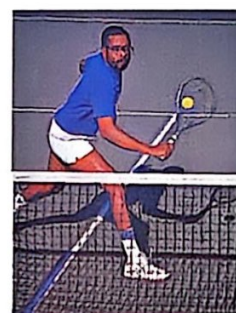
back-swing (băk'swīng') *n.* The initial part of a stroke, in which one moves a racket or club, for instance, to the position from which forward motion begins.

back-sword (băk'sōrd', -sōrd') *n.* 1. A sword with only one cutting edge. 2. A one-handed fencing stick; a singlestick.

back talk *n.* Insolent or impudent retorts.

back-to-back (băk'tə-băk') *adj.* Consecutive; successive: *back-to-back performances; back-to-back home runs.*

back-track (băk'trăk') *intr.v.* -tracked, -track'ing, -tracks 1. To go back over the course by which one has come. 2. To return to a previ-



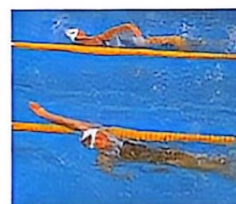
backhand
tennis player



backhoe



backsplash



backstroke

ă pat	oi boy
ā pay	ou out
ā care	ōō took
ā father	ōō boot
ē pet	ū cut
ē be	ūr urge
ī pit	th thin
ī pie	th this
ī pier	hw which
ō pot	zh vision
ō toe	ō about, item
ō paw	♦ regionalism

Stress marks: ' (primary);
' (secondary), as in
dictionary (dīk'shə-nēr'ē)