



A Look at Opposites

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Wordsmiths, for the most part, love word games. And I am sure there are many word game enthusiasts among our membership. So, here's another one to think about.

It has been said, "What goes up must come down." In the laws of gravity, that set of opposites is an absolute. However, is it so in the rules of words?

We recognize a number of word pairs or prefix pairs that define opposites or appear to. In the English language and in medicine, there are many words with the prefixes *pre-* and *post-* *over-* and *under-*, and modifiers like *small* and *large*, *short* and *tall*. In addition, many opposites are defined by *high* and *low* and some immediately come to mind:

- Highbrow and lowbrow
- High-rise and low-rise
- High pitch and low pitch
- High pressure and low pressure
- High comedy and low comedy
- High class and low class
- High frequency and low frequency

In our medical language, there are more:

- Overweight and underweight
- Large intestine and small intestine
- Greater omentum and lesser omentum

On the other hand, there are a number of "highs" that have no common opposites. In fact, in some cases, the "opposite" sounds ridiculous.

- High jinks. There are no low jinks.
- High school. What, you'd let your child go to a low school?
- High command. No army would allow a low command.
- Highfalutin. Did anyone ever hear of a low falutin?
- High hat. What in the world is a low hat?
- High horse. There is no low horse.
- High muck-a-muck. If there is a low muck-a-muck, he is not a muck-a-muck.
- High noon. Noon can only be high, never low.
- High priest. No one would ever admit to being a low priest.
- High commissioner. The same for this position.
- High tea. I'm invited to what?
- High fashion. Would you wear something that is low fashion?

And in medical terms:

- Preeclampsia. What is posteclampsia?
- Presystolic. How do you recognize postsystolic?
- Precordium. Where would the postcordium be?

Some other apparent opposites create confounding results.

- Upper crust. I'd hate to be a part of the lower.
- Short shrift. Who ever gave anyone the long shrift?
- Small fry. I guess we're all tall fry.
- Underwater. Do boats go "overwater"?
- Shortcake. A "tall" cake only if you're hungry.

Then, there are words that appear to be opposites that are so different that you cannot devise the meaning from one to the other.

Highlight vs Lowlight
Highlight. A lighter spot (as in a hairdo), or something that is very significant.

Lowlight. An unpleasant event or situation.

High life vs Lowlife

High life. An existence on the expansive and expensive side.

Lowlife. A person of ill-repute.

Highball vs Lowball

Highball. An alcoholic cocktail.

Lowball. A deceptively low price.

Knuckle down vs Knuckle under

Knuckle down. Work hard.

Knuckle under. Give in or submit.

(Knuckle has 2 different origins in these 2 terms.)

Shut up vs Shut down

Shut up. Cease writing or talking.

Shut down. Close an enterprise completely.

Of course, there will always be surprises (at least they were to me).

High five. Yes, there is a low five (street talk): clapping of hands in a low position.

Highboy. There is a comparable lowboy, but I admit I've never seen one advertised.

There they are—just a few "opposites" from this intriguing realm. How many more might there be in different categories? For one thing, it tells us to be careful always and not make assumptions about opposites when we are writing, then laugh when we find some that are asinine.