

MEDIA RELEASE

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Children’s Word of the Year, ‘power’, illustrates students’ desire to take back control of their lives following the pandemic

This year’s shortlisted words provide valuable insights into the minds of school-aged children as we emerge out of the COVID-19 pandemic

After another disrupted school year of remote learning and virtual classrooms during the COVID-19 lockdowns and prolonged restrictions, it’s not surprising that Australian students have been preoccupied, in their writing, with reclaiming control of their lives, with ‘power’ being awarded Oxford Australian 2021 Children’s Word of the Year (CWOTY).

As the pandemic continued to limit children’s options in Australia and climate change was highlighted as a major global concern, students in Years 3–8 showed interest in their decision-making within their creative writing as part of Writing Legends, which provides inspirational writing experiences to students.

Children’s language experts analysed more than 76,000 short stories and over 9 million words written by Australian students aged seven to 13 years old. Shortlisted words included ‘love’, ‘kindness’, ‘choice’, ‘dragon’, ‘imagine’, ‘happiness’, ‘humanity’, ‘power’ and ‘environment’.

Anne Bayetto, literacy expert at Flinders University, highlighted the usage of the word ‘power’ had increased by 61.8 per cent compared to 2020.

“This year there was a strong trend towards fantasy themes, such as superpowers and flying. During the pandemic, imagination could be used as escapism. It was fitting, then, that some writers also reflected on the power of imagination,” says Ms Bayetto.

The use of ‘power’ also suggests a desire of students to exercise their freedom of choice after a long period of lockdown restrictions. It may also suggest a feeling of disenfranchisement and lack of control about important issues such as climate change.

“Students wrote about electrical power, the power of nature, and political or social power, reflecting awareness of global issues. In fiction and non-fiction stories, students pondered what it means to have and use power in an unequal world,” says Ms Bayetto.

Other themes that emerged within the large body of writing included a strong feeling of positivity, an appreciation of connection, and a degree of introspection following a year of upheaval.

“We witnessed a significant change of mindset among students this year, especially when compared to last year, as the usage of the word happiness increased by 280%. Overall, there is a distinctly more positive tone within the writing, this illustrates the resilience that students have demonstrated this year, despite another year of continued restrictions and distance learning,” says Ms Bayetto.

“There also seems to be an increased appreciation for social connection within the students’ writing. The word ‘people’ was the only non-monosyllabic word in the top 10 most used nouns, and third-person pronouns were up by 42% compared to last year.”

Ms Bayetto explains that many of the more complex popular verbs used within the students’ writing described thought processes and reflection, such as ‘decide’, ‘believe’, ‘realise’, ‘wonder’, ‘forget’, and ‘remember’.

“This indicates a level of introspection and reflection perhaps brought about by having fewer distractions due to lockdowns or by another year of disruption and unfamiliarity,” says Ms Bayetto.

Lee Walker, Director of Publishing at Oxford University Press, spoke about the CWOTY research.

“This year it’s been fascinating to see such an increased focus on activism and humanitarianism, which has been reflected in the language used by our younger generation,” Ms Walker said.

“In our analysis, we noted the word ‘power’ was used in a variety of contexts that reflect the challenging times we’ve been living through and will continue to be challenged by into the future – the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and looking after our earth, how leaders use their power to influence change – and how children use their imaginations to express their thoughts and to process the complex world we live in.”

The words collected as part of CWOTY have been added to the Oxford Australian Children’s Language *Corpus* – a collection of texts which records the development of children’s linguistics over time and informs Oxford Children’s Language Australia research and assessment of children’s language trends.

For more information about the Oxford Australian Children’s Word of the Year, [visit oup.com.au/cwoty](https://www.oup.com.au/cwoty)

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For more information and interview opportunities, please contact Sedgwick Communications:

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About Oxford Children's Language Australia

Oxford Children's Language Australia (OCLA) was established by Oxford University Press (OUP) to further our collective understanding of Australian children's language and share evidence-based research insights and advice. We partner with leading Australian language and literacy research experts to support the education community in developing our children's language and literacy skills.

The Oxford Australian Children's Word of the Year is one of the ways OCLA and OUP engages with the ever-changing language of Australian children. Previous Children's Word of the Year include: 'Creativity' (2018) and 'Equality' (2019).

About Oxford University Press

Oxford University Press (OUP) is dedicated to improving communication through an understanding of, and a passion for, language around the globe. As experts in children's language, OUP is constantly listening to Australian children, and reflecting on their use of language, in order to develop an understanding of the challenges they are facing.

About Writing Legends

Writing Legends is part of 3P Learning, a global leader in online learning for school-aged students, with programs covering mathematics (Mathletics and Mathseeds) and reading skills (Reading Eggs). The e-learning programs are designed by educators and trusted by over 5 million students and 20,000+ schools across the world.

About Anne Bayetto

Anne teaches at Flinders University, with a focus on how to teach school students with literacy and numeracy difficulties. A former schoolteacher, she has taught in both mainstream and special needs classes. Anne has been a disability support coordinator, a founding member of the Learning Difficulties Support Team (SA), and a literacy policy and project officer. Anne provides consultancy and professional learning sessions for educators across Australia. She was the reading expert for the Principals as Literacy Leaders (PALL) project, initiated by the Australian Primary Principals Association.

About Lee Walker

Lee is Director of Publishing, Editorial and Design at Oxford University Press Australia & New Zealand. She has 30 years' experience in Australian educational publishing, a career that first focussed on primary literacy and mathematics research and resource development, and then expanded to secondary and higher education publishing, including a significant focus on digital innovation.