

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

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Boofhead – *noun*: 1. a person or animal having a big head. 2. a fool or simpleton.

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Boofhead

The story behind the Word of the Month

In July 2009 the *Australian* newspaper ran an article that praised Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard:

And she is not easily, if ever, intimidated. She confronted the comrades at the June ACTU conference, telling them what they did not want to hear. Her speech at the last North Melbourne Grand Final breakfast was witty and learned in football lore but made no concessions to the cult of the boofhead.

A **boofhead** does not have to be male, but the records at the Australian National Dictionary Centre show that the term is used almost exclusively of males. This male emphasis may have something to do with the typical qualities of males vis à vis females (such as ‘stupidity’), but it may also have something to do with the history of the term **boofhead**. It was popularised by its use as the name of a male cartoon strip character in the *Sydney Mirror*, first appearing in 1941. Here is a passage from a 1953 cartoon:

‘Did my medicine do any good, **Boofhead**?
‘It was a wonderful remedy, Doctor. I took three spoonfuls and my cough went, I rubbed four spoonfuls into my knee and it cured my rheumatism and I just left my mother at home using the rest of it to clean the silver.’

So where does **boofhead** come from? *Buffle* is an obsolete variant of *buffalo*. *Buffle-headed* (first recorded 1697, and now obsolete) meant ‘having a head like a buffalo’s’, and then came to mean both ‘large-headed’ and ‘stupid’. An abbreviated form, *bufflehead*, meant ‘a fool, blockhead, stupid fellow’.

Australian **boofhead** is a variation of this Standard English *bufflehead*. The Australian term’s origin is proved by the fact that it means both ‘a fool or simpleton’ and ‘a person or animal having a large head’. The latter sense is first recorded by Rohan Rivett in his 1946 wartime novel *Behind Bamboo*.

In the 1970s the adjective **boofy** developed from **boofhead**. The earliest evidence for the use of the adjective applies it to a teddy bear:

Little Ted was a typical fat, cuddly, button-eyed bear. The playschool spokesman said ‘He had a nice **boofy** quality—not very bright, but well-meaning’. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 October 1973

In the evidence, most **boofy** people are males, but occasionally the adjective is used of a female:

I could say it was ground into the pudding by that big **boofy** friend of Adam’s. Joyce I think her name is. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 March 1977

In most uses, however, the macho and blokey connotations are essential ingredients of the stupidity (even when, as is often the case, the **boofy** bloke is viewed with some affection), as in H.G. Nelson’s paean to the **boofy** blokey world of rugby:

But the prospect of listening to H.G. Nelson describe the greatest game of all was irresistible: ‘A couple of big, **boofy** blokes having a cuddle after a mudbath—that’s what it’s all about’. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 October 1989.

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