

Oxford Australia Word of the Month

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Rort – *noun* a trick, a fraud; a dishonest practice.

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General Division

Phone:
(03) 9934 9131

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Rort

The story behind the Word of the Month

The Australian word **rort** means ‘a fraud, a dishonest practice’. The term is often applied to people in positions of power and privilege who ‘work’ a system to gain the greatest benefit for themselves. Politicians are typically accused of *rorting the system*. A **rorter** is a person who indulges in **rorts**. Most Australians will be surprised to learn that from the 1940s to the 1970s a **rort** was also ‘a wild party’. By the 1980s, this ‘wild party’ sense had disappeared.

What is the origin of **rort**? Dictionaries assume, in spite of the seemingly very different meanings at play here (a fraud on the one hand, and a wild party on the other), that all the meanings come from the one word **rorty**, first appearing in London in the mid-nineteenth century, and meaning: ‘splendid; boisterous, noisy; (of drinks) intoxicating; (of behaviour, speech, etc.) coarse, earthy, of dubious propriety; crudely comic.’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*). This **rorty** certainly fits the Australian ‘wild party’ sense, but it does not quite explain the fraud sense. There is a potential hint of fraud in ‘of dubious propriety’, but when we look at the historical evidence it is clear that the ‘dubious propriety’ alludes to coarse jokes and the like. There is not a hint of fraud and swindling in the historical evidence for **rorty**.

Is it possible that the dictionaries are wrong about this word, and that we have in fact two quite different words with two quite different origins? When we look more closely at the Australian evidence for the fraud sense, it becomes clear that two spellings

alternate—our present **rort**, but also *wrought*. The earliest evidence for **rorter** is spelt *wroughter* in a 1917 poem that describes gambling shysters as ‘racecourse wroughters’. *Wrought* is the spelling in the earliest appearance (1926) of the noun in the fraud sense. A story in the *Argus* newspaper in 1938, headed “‘Wroughting’ and How to ‘Wrought’”, tells of a *wroughter* who engages in *wroughts* and *wroughtings*. The *wroughter* explains some of his tricks, including selling a ‘cockroach exterminator’ made of ground-down house bricks, and a razor sharpener: ‘The razor sharpener wrought’s a good one, too. You melts a pile of soap down in a dish, then yer mixes it with lamp-black and lets it set. Then you cuts it up into cubes about one inch square, wrap, label, and sell.’

Australian **rort** in the swindling sense is therefore probably a later spelling of *wrought*, the archaic past participle of the verb *work*, now existing mainly in compounds such as *finely-wrought*, *hard-wrought*, or *wrought iron*. The primary sense of *wrought* is ‘worked into shape or condition’, and the early uses of *wrought* and **rort** in Australian English have this notion of a swindler or fraudster ‘working on’ his victims. In criminal slang in the nineteenth century to work could mean ‘to steal’, and this sense is listed in the *Sydney Slang Dictionary* of 1882. There is no doubt that our Australian **rort** is from *wrought*.

metrosexual
weapon
of mass destruction
karrack
glycaemic
burka
index
barbecue stopper
senior moment
Sudoku
hornbag
dishlicker
witlof
cyberstalking
Naltrexone
pear-shaped
yakitori
Bioterrorism