

## Exemplar Informational Texts: English Language Arts – The American Language, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition

**Mencken, H. L. *The American Language, 4th Edition*. New York: Knopf, 1938. (1938)  
From Chapter XI, “American Slang,” Section I: “The Nature of Slang”**

What chiefly lies behind (slang) is simply a kind of linguistic exuberance, an excess of word making energy. It relates itself to the standard language a great deal as dancing relates itself to music. But there is also something else. The best slang is not only ingenious and amusing; it also embodies a kind of social criticism. It not only provides new names for a series of every-day concepts, some new and some old; it also says something about them. “Words which produce the slang effect,” observes Frank Sechrist, “arouse associations what are incongruous or incompatible with those of customary thinking.”

Everyone, including the metaphysician in his study or the eremite in his cell, has a large vocabulary of slang, but the vocabulary of the vulgar is likely to be larger than that of the cultured, and it is harder worked. Its content may be divided into two categories: (a) old words, whether used singly or in combination, that have been put to new uses, usually metaphorical, and (b) new words that have not yet been admitted to the standard vocabulary. Examples of the first type are rubberneck, for a gaping and prying person, and iceberg, for a cold woman; examples of the second are hoosegow, flim-flam, blurb, bazoo and blah. There is a constant movement of slang into accepted usage. Nice, as an adjective of all work, signifying anything satisfactory, was once used in slang only, but today no one would question “a nice day,” “a nice time,” or “a nice hotel.” ...The verb-phrase to hold up is now perfectly good American, but so recently as 1901 the late Brander Matthews was sneering at it as slang. In the same way many other verb-phrases, e.g., to cave in, fill the bill and to fly off the handle, once viewed askance, have gradually worked their way to a relatively high level of the standard speech. On some indeterminate tomorrow to stick up and to take for a ride may follow them.