

Naked truth or a web of lies? Expressions of honesty and dishonesty in English

More than just a list of words

A dictionary like the *Macmillan English Dictionary* is far more than just a list of words in the language with their definitions and details of their accompanying grammatical behaviour. It is a vast repository of information about the **culture and attitudes** in the countries where that language is spoken. It is a snapshot of the way we see things and feel about things, of the images and metaphors which we use, consciously or unconsciously, when we talk about any subject in our lives. Examining and understanding, *en masse*, the body of vocabulary and phrases which relates to any given subject is a useful way to discover the ideas and attitudes embedded in the words we use. It is also an interesting and efficient way to expand and enrich one's vocabulary.

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Unlike idioms, which generally allow a lot less freedom for variation or invention, **metaphors** can be adapted, built upon and played with, so long as the central idea remains intact. Once we have grasped the core ideas relating to a topic in English, we can start to use these to create our own metaphors using synonyms to make our language more fluent, inventive, poetic, or even amusing. These novel uses may even catch on and find their way into future editions of the dictionary.

This article explores metaphorical use of language relating to **honesty** and **dishonesty**. What do we talk about when we talk about honesty and dishonesty? The metaphors and expressions included here are all taken from the *Macmillan English Dictionary* and are not intended as a comprehensive list.

Honesty is white and clean; dishonesty is dark and dirty

[Candid](#), which is defined in the dictionary as 'honest and direct, even when the truth is not pleasant', came into English via French from the Latin word *candidum*, meaning 'white', which came from the verb *candere* 'to be white, to glow'. This same source word, which, through metaphorical sense extension, eventually changed its meaning from 'white' to [honest](#) also gave us [candle](#) and [incandescent](#), thus showing the link between the ideas of whiteness and light and our notions of truth.

The adjective [white](#) also has at its roots this link with light, since it comes from the same Indo-European word *kwitnos* or *kwidnos* that gave rise to the Russian word for light – *svet*. When we consider someone or something 'completely fair and honest', we say that it is [white](#), [lily-white](#), or [whiter than white](#), thus emphasising an absence of blemishes or stains that is seen in many words we use to describe honest people and behaviour. An honest person is [squeaky clean](#), [stainless](#), or [as clean as a whistle](#). The adjective [sincere](#), meaning 'true and honest', comes from Latin *sincerus*, meaning 'clean and pure'. When somebody tells the truth they [make a clean breast of it](#) or [come clean](#). If you try to live an honest life, you [keep your nose clean](#). Honest dealings are described as [above board](#), which comes from card players keeping their hands above the table, therefore visible and not hidden under the table (and possibly switching cards).

Dishonest people and behaviour, on the other hand, are [shady](#), [dirty](#), [grubby](#), [sleazy](#), [slick](#), or [slippery](#). Dishonest methods for achieving things are humorously referred to as [the black arts](#) or labelled [dirty tricks](#). If you get involved in dishonest dealings, you [get your hands dirty](#) or [play dirty](#). Dishonesty is dark and dirty.

Honesty is straight; dishonesty is crooked

Honesty exists in our minds and language along a straight line. An honest person is [direct](#), [on the level](#), [straight](#), [straight talking](#), [as straight as a die](#), [straightforward](#), or [straight up](#). If you lead an honest life, you live on [the straight and narrow](#), and somebody who decides to change after a criminal past resolves to [go](#)

[straight](#). Even the word [true](#) has a, mainly technical, meaning that is defined as 'completely straight, upright, or level'. Dishonesty is quite the opposite. The dishonest person is [bent](#), [crooked](#) (or a [crook](#)), or [devious](#). The word *devious* comes from Latin *deviare* which is formed by combining the prefix *de-*, meaning 'from' and the noun *via*, meaning 'way'. Thus, *devious* means, literally, 'departing from the way', reflecting the idea of straying from the straight path ([the straight and narrow](#)) often found in biblical imagery. If someone tries to deceive someone, they [bend the truth](#), [distort the truth](#) (from Latin *distorquere*, meaning 'to twist completely') or [lead somebody astray](#).

Honesty is up; dishonesty is down

Like most things that are seen as universally good, for example success and good health, honesty exists metaphorically on a high plane. An honest person is described as [being on the up and up](#), [upright](#), [upfront](#), or [upstanding](#). If we want to emphasize that something we are saying is true, the informal interjection is [straight up](#). At the other extreme we have the dishonest person or dishonest activities being described as [low](#), [the lowest of the low](#), [lowdown](#), [underhand](#) or [underhanded](#), or [underground](#). If somebody does something very unfair or dishonest, we ask how they could [stoop/sink so low](#).

Honesty is bare and open; dishonesty is covered and closed

An honest person is [open](#) and [openness](#) is 'an honest way of talking'. Related to this idea of clarity and visibility, is [transparency](#) – 'an honest way of doing things that allows other people to know exactly what you are doing'. We also talk about [the naked truth](#). Conversely, when we look at the way we talk about lies and lying, we find an underlying theme of hiddenness and obscured visibility, of [obscurantism](#) – '... so that people do not know the truth'. The liar tries to [cover up](#) the truth with metaphorical cloth which he/she often weaves like a spider. The liar [spins somebody a yarn](#), or [embroiders the truth](#) with false details, producing a [tissue of lies](#), or a [web of lies](#). Lies are also described as [flannel](#); another cloth image. The purpose of all this spinning and weaving is to [blind somebody to something](#), or to [pull the wool over somebody's eyes](#). False stories are [cover stories](#), and deception is described as [taking place backstairs](#) or at the [backdoor](#) rather than [out in the open](#) where the truth is [laid bare](#). The verb to [hoodwink](#) originally meant 'to make somebody unable to see by covering their eyes with a hood', but soon (in the 17th century) came to have the metaphorical meaning 'to make someone believe something that is not true'.

Honesty and dishonesty are treated in our language as opposites which exist at two metaphorical extremes, between which there is nothing. With the possible exception of the [half-truth](#) and the [white lie](#) when we talk about honesty and dishonesty, there is only truth and lies: whiteness and cleanness versus darkness and dirtiness; straightness versus crookedness; up versus down; openness versus hiddenness.

In the news

The media has recently devoted acres of newsprint and airtime to the scandal surrounding UK MPs' expenses claims, which centres on the perceived honesty or dishonesty of MPs. Here is a list of some of the expressions that have been pushed of the forefront in this context:

gravy train

a type of work or activity that provides a lot of money without much effort

'The European Union and European parliament has long been mocked as a "gravy train" by eurosceptics.'

[EXPATICA.COM](#) 29TH MAY 2009

For a discussion of the origin of **gravy train**, see [this page](#) on World Wide Words.

letter of the law

the exact words that are used in a law, rather than its general meaning

*'On the basis of those explanations, the Prime Minister was confident that they had both acted in a way that was consistent with both the **letter of the law** and the spirit of the rules.'*

[DOWNING STREET SAYS](#) 21ST MAY 2009

spirit of the law

the real meaning or intention of a law, even if the way it is written does not express this

*'The present drift of the law suggests that it is no defence for a person to contend he is not guilty simply because he acted within the letter but outside the **spirit of the law**.'*

[TIMES ONLINE](#) 21ST MAY 2009

spirit of the rules

*'According to the Telegraph, a claim for gardening costs made by Conservative MP Alan Duncan was rejected because it was deemed to not be in the **spirit of the rules**.'*

[BBC NEWS \(MAGAZINE\)](#) 12TH MAY 2009

by [Diane Nicholls](#), editor of the [Macmillan Dictionary Thesaurus](#)

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