NEWS LESSON

A Joke Word That Is Making a Serious Point



BEFORE YOU READ

1 Warm up

Talk about these questions with a partner.

1. What does the language of optimisation assume about a life?
2. Why does slang often lose its appeal once it becomes mainstream?
3. Is a dictionary's word of the year a description or a verdict?

2 Key words

These words are in the article. Write the letter of the meaning (A to H) in each box.

1	**ancestor**	☐	A	all together, as a group
2	**suffix**	☐	B	close watching of someone or something, often all the time
3	**surveillance**	☐	C	shown as better or more perfect than it really is
4	**idealised**	☐	D	clever or funny use of words and their meanings
5	**wordplay**	☐	E	leading to the end of something
6	**collectively**	☐	F	able to last for a long time
7	**durable**	☐	G	letters added to the end of a word
8	**terminal**	☐	H	an earlier form of something that came before it

3 Read

Read the article and underline the key words from task 2. The paragraphs are numbered.

Dictionary.com has named "maxxing" its word of the year. The backlash arrived within a week, which may be the most revealing part.

1 Words of the year are usually chosen to describe a mood rather than a fact, and Dictionary.com's selection for 2026 does the job efficiently. The winner is "maxxing", a suffix rather than a word, attachable to almost any noun and meaning the pursuit of that thing to its furthest possible extent. Sleepmaxxing, proteinmaxxing, cozymaxxing: the grammar of self-improvement, applied to breakfast.

2 The data behind the choice is unambiguous. Steve Johnson, director of lexicography at the Dictionary Media Group, says the team weighs search behaviour, social media and news coverage against which word tells the year's story, and that maxxing won because it touches so many areas of life at once. By August 2026 it was appearing in digital media nineteen times as often as its 2025 monthly average.

3 What makes the term linguistically interesting is its portability. Daria Bahtina, a linguist at UCLA, describes the pattern as infinitely customisable but instantly recognisable, which is an unusually good combination: you can coin a word nobody has heard and be understood immediately, while signalling membership of a cultural moment. The researcher Kelly Wright, who tracks emerging terms, has documented examples back to 1990, when it belonged to Dungeons and Dragons; the ancestor "min-maxing" predates that, and the idea appears in game theory in the 1940s.

4 The critique has arrived faster than usual. Jennifer Donnelly, a researcher at RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences, argues that the word's reach is precisely the danger, because it implies that improvement has an endpoint. Health, wellbeing, relationships and habits are not completed, and a vocabulary that frames them as completable invites constant self-surveillance, self-criticism and the pursuit of an idealised optimal self. Her objection is not to effort but to scoring.

5 The health versions deserve care. A catchy label does not establish that a routine suits every body, and the advice attached still needs evidence and context.

6 Then, on 1 November, came the comic version. The Guardian columnist Polly Hudson announced that we had collectively maxxmaxxinged, having reached and passed the limit, and proposed that 2027 be the year of minning: doing things less, if at all. The column is a joke built almost entirely from wordplay and should not be mistaken for evidence of a movement. Nobody is minning: there are no figures and no interviewed practitioners.

7 Yet the speed of the parody is itself a finding of sorts. A suffix that spent a decade signalling ambition has become, within a single year of mainstream adoption, something a newspaper columnist can mock on the assumption that readers are already tired of it. Slang usually loses its appeal once it is everywhere, and Johnson notes that "-licious" went that way while "-gate" did not. Wright is less sure maxxing will fade, pointing out that middle-aged people and corporate brands have both embraced it, which is normally a terminal diagnosis for cool but an excellent one for survival.

8 The more durable question sits underneath the vocabulary. Optimisation language is useful when a problem genuinely has a solution and corrosive when applied to things that simply have to be lived. Choosing which is which may be the only skill worth maxxing.

Sources: The Guardian, 'Maxxing' is Dictionary.com's word of the year; Dictionary.com, 2026 word of the year; Polly Hudson, Let us make 2027 the year of minning, The Guardian. Picture: .

4 True, false or not given

Circle **T** (true), **F** (false) or **NG** (the article does not say).

1. The article suggests that the speed of the parody says something about how readers feel about the suffix. T F NG
2. According to the text, Hudson's column offers measured evidence that people have started minning. T F NG
3. Johnson predicts that maxxing will outlast the suffix "-gate". T F NG
4. Wright's reasoning suggests that adoption by brands and middle-aged people does not necessarily end a word's life. T F NG
5. The writer thinks that optimisation language is harmful in every situation. T F NG

5 Vocabulary

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed.

ancestry	coin	embraced	invites	mainstream	membership	predates	vernacular

1. The practice of tea-drinking in the region _____ the arrival of European traders by several centuries.
2. A headline that promises to fix everything usually _____ scepticism rather than trust.
3. Several of the big retailers have enthusiastically _____ the new payment system.
4. It takes a confident writer to _____ a phrase that readers understand without explanation.
5. Once a niche hobby, the sport has gone _____ and now fills stadiums.
6. Wearing the same style of jacket was a quiet way of showing _____ of the group.

6 Word forms

Use the word in brackets to make a word that fits the gap.

1. The sheer _____ of the suffix means it appears in almost every corner of online life. (PERVASIVE)
2. She was _____ of the trend, calling it a passing fad. (DISMISS)
3. The column offers no _____ data, only jokes. (VERIFY)
4. The _____ with which the joke spread suggests readers were already tired of the word. (SWIFT)
5. Treating hobbies as targets can leave people feeling _____ when they miss them. (ADEQUATE)

7 Language focus: linking words

Complete the sentences with words from the box. Two words are not needed. Notice what follows the gap: a noun phrase, a clause, an adjective or a new sentence. Some of these words are formal and rare in speech.

albeit **hence** **namely** **nevertheless** **notwithstanding** **thereby** **whereas**

1. The column is funny, _____ slight.
2. Maxxing promises a finish line, _____ minning promises only a rest.
3. The pattern needs no explanation; _____ its rapid spread.
4. _____ its popularity, the suffix has not been welcomed by everybody.
5. The column is a joke and measures nothing. _____ , it describes a tiredness many readers recognise.

SPEAK

8 Talk about it

Discuss in pairs or small groups. Give reasons for your answers.

1. A parody arrived within a week of the announcement. What does that tell us?
2. Where is the line between useful improvement and constant self-surveillance?
3. Should we worry about where a popular word originally came from?

9 Role-play: maxxing or minning?

Work in pairs. Read your card, then have the conversation. Swap roles and do it again.

Student A · the maxxer

You love tracking your sleep, food and steps. You want your friend to join a 30-day plan with you. Explain what you enjoy about it, and listen to your friend's worries.

Student B · the minner

You're tired of scores and targets. You want a weekend with no apps and no plans. Say why, and ask your friend to try it with you.

Useful phrases

I've been tracking my sleep for a month.

That's too much like homework for me.

I'd rather do less, not more.

Don't you feel better when you can see the numbers?

We could try a plan that's half and half.

I'm not sure that's fair, but I'll try it.

Afterwards, tell the class: did you agree on a plan, and who changed their mind?

ANSWER KEY

2 Key words

1 H · 2 G · 3 B · 4 C · 5 D · 6 A · 7 F · 8 E

4 True, false or not given

1 T · 2 F · 3 NG · 4 T · 5 F

5 Vocabulary

1 predates · 2 invites · 3 embraced · 4 coin · 5 mainstream · 6 membership

6 Word forms

1 pervasiveness · 2 dismissive · 3 verifiable · 4 swiftness · 5 inadequate

7 Language focus

1 albeit · 2 whereas · 3 hence · 4 Notwithstanding · 5 Nevertheless

---

This lesson is free. If it saved you time, you can support johnplusnews at **ko-fi.com/johnplusenglish**