

THE ORIGIN OF THE NERD



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Introduction

In the little more than a decade since I created my [original web page](#) here about the origin of the word *nerd*, it has grown considerably, in part due to various controversies about the word's origins as well as to new information and speculation about its history. My views on the term's origin have not changed much, as you can see by the fact that Dr. Seuss's Nerd has joined me in the page's icon (assuming that you're not viewing the page in the "Full Width" style), but it does seem like time to reorganize the material.

The factor that made me decide that *nerd* might be a label worth reclaiming was its early association with Dr. Seuss. Having grown up with the Cat in the Hat, Horton and the Grinch, there are worse things to identify with than a hirsute curmudgeonly Seuss character, especially when one is a hirsute curmudgeonly engineer, as I am.

Controversy Nerd vs Knurd

The biggest surprise that my page has [brought me](#) is the vehemence of a number of readers that the original spelling is "knurd" and that the word derives from reversing the sense of the word "drunk", despite the lack of any documentation in support of the assertion. I had encountered this origin through an article published in the IEEE Spectrum (April 1995, page 16). It was also mentioned in the [Jargon File](#), but was dismissed there as "a bogus folk etymology". I tended then to agree with this assessment and am even more inclined to do so now.

Still, the theory has a number of adherents, especially among alumni of RPI, and so I will cover it below.

History Nerd

The first documented use of the word *Nerd* is in the 1950 Dr. Seuss story, *If I Ran the Zoo*¹, in which a boy named Gerald McGrew made a large number of delightfully extravagant claims as to what he would do, if he were in charge at the zoo. Among these was that he would bring a creature known as a Nerd from the land of Ka-Troo. The accompanying illustration showed a grumpy humanoid with unruly hair and sideburns, wearing a black T-shirt. A fitting image, these days, for a nerd.

I first learned about the Dr. Seuss connection from the American Heritage Dictionary's word history in their [nerd entry](#). According to that entry some experts "maintain that Dr. Seuss is the true originator of nerd and that the word nerd ("comically unpleasant creature") was picked up by the five- and six-year-olds of 1950 and passed on to their older siblings, who by 1957, as teenagers, had restricted and specified the meaning to the most comically obnoxious creature of their own class, a "square."

The problem with this is that the second documented occurrence of the word comes only a year after *If I Ran The Zoo*. The The October 8, 1951 issue of Newsweek states on page 16 that

In Detroit, someone who once would be called a drip or a square is now, regrettably, a nerd, or in a less severe case, a scurve.

I have [another reference](#) from page 14 of the St. Joseph, Michigan, *Herald-Press* on 23 June 1952:

TO 'CLUB YA' TO BE 'GEORGE' AND NOT A 'NERD' OR 'SCURVE'

[...]

If the patois throws you, you're definitely not in the know, because anyone who is not a nerd (drip) knows that[...]

Once more, "nerd" is tied to "drip" and "scurve", and from a city not far from Detroit, 8 months after the first sighting.

It seems a little hard to believe that in just one year, a Nerd can go from being a unkempt grouchy looking fellow to a scurve or a square. And so we find ourselves looking for an earlier source....

Krazy Kat and Dinner At Eight

So far, two much earlier instances of the words "nerd" or "nerds" appearing in popular culture have been reported, neither of which are particularly convincing to me, but both of which deserve a bit more research. The earliest of these was recently reported to me by one of my correspondents, Tami. While researching Krazy Kat, she came across a 1919 Krazy Kounty [page](#) at Coconino-World.com starring Krazy and Ignatz. As she reads the last balloon, Ignatz appears to be saying "The 'Nerd' Hour is at hand". I've tried a bit of [digital manipulation](#), to see if I can clarify the text, and as I read it, I believe what Ignatz says is "Nero Hour", or possibly "Zero Hour", not "Nerd Hour", but I really cannot be certain.

In the 1933 film, *Dinner at Eight*, Jean Harlow's character replies to her husband's suggestion that she might enjoy mingling with Washington "cabinet members' wives" by saying, "Nerds!... A lot of sour-faced frumps with last year's clothes on, pinning medals on Girl Scouts and pouring tea for the DARs..." [Spelling is from Turner DVD subtitles and not verified by the original script.]

—Deleted Wikipedia entry

The second alleged occurrence was cited for a time in the Wikipedia 'Nerd' entry. Until we removed it, the page [used to include](#) the claim that Jean Harlowe used the word in 1933 in the movie *Dinner at Eight*. This appears to be an after the fact interpretation by the captioning editors of the DVD version of the movie. I suspect that what she actually said was "Nertz!...", which was a moderately common polite variant of the explicative "Nuts!", which was considered rather harsh language at the time, as [pointed out](#) by user Ilnatko in the Nerd talk page.

Neither of these references has been cited elsewhere and both appear to be modern interpretations. Still, I have not personally verified either and so they are worth mentioning here, at least until they can be verified.

N.E. R&D

This next connection is highly speculative, but still appealing. One of my correspondents, Peter, [wrote](#) to suggest that the term originated at the Northern Electric Research and Development Laboratories in Ottawa. Northern Electric, now called Nortel, is Canada's equivalent of Western Electric in the US. Their first R&D lab, called the Special Products Division was founded in 1937. Plastic pocket protectors were invented in Chicago in 1947, and the N.E. R&D labs were established, with that name, in 1959, he points out, and concludes by saying,

Now I 'know' that somewhere out there is a picture of one of these Northern Electric R&D boys wearing the white shirt, sleeves rolled up, black thick framed glasses and a pocket protector with 'N.E.R.D. Labs' printed right on it... I've seen pictures of my father (sans glasses) in a General Electric lab of that vintage 1955-1960 with a similar pocket protector. It will be found... and I will send it to you. ;-)

He paints a nice picture here, but sadly it remains pretty speculative. Clearly R&D activities and departments had existed at Northern Electric for more than a decade at the time Dr. Seuss wrote his book, but the earliest date that the actual name "Northern Electric Research and Development Laboratories" is given by the [site](#) that Peter used is 1959, though it mentions an R&D site at Belleville established by Northern Electric in 1957. In either event, these labs were created 6-8 years after the word showed up in *Newsweek*.

I'd love to see solid documentation of the "N.E.R.D. Labs" acronym being used back in the 40s, especially if it came in the form of a picture featuring a NERD Labs pocket protector. The image is just too perfect. But for now it remains just a wonderfully creative suggestion.

One tantalizing aspect of the whole N.E. R&D Labs thing is that the two earliest pieces of documentation we have for the use of *nerd* meaning square, come from Michigan, with the earliest, being in Detroit just over the border from Northern Electric's home province of Ontario. That might be coincidental, but it is interesting.

And then, just to show them, I'll sail to Ka-Troo

And
Bring
Back
an IT-KUTCH
a PREEP
and a PROO
a NERKLE
a NERD
and a SEERSUCKER, too!



From *If I Ran The Zoo*, © 1950, Dr. Seuss



The Well Travelled Nerd



The next documentation of the meaning of *nerd* is found in Glasgow, Scotland, where in the February 10, 1957, issue of the *Glasgow, Scotland, Sunday Mail*, the "ABC for Squares" column gave the definition as:

"Nerd -- a square, any explanation needed?"

A researcher at the [Swarthmore](#) College library reports that the 1961-62 "Hamburg Show" featured a character named Millard Fillmore Nerd whose problem is that he is a square, having broken not a single rule. This gives us the following sightings of the term:

Year	Location
1951	Detroit, Michigan
1952	St. Joseph, Michigan
1957	Glasgow, Scotland
1961/2	Swarthmore College

This is a very small number of data points, but it would tend to suggest that the term originated somewhere near Detroit and spread out from there.

So far, every appearance through 1962 of the slang term spells it *nerd*, and all but the original Dr. Seuss give it the meaning of "a square" — a dull or boring person. There is another reported instance from the 1950's that puts an interesting twist on the story....

Knurds and Drunks

According to one of my [correspondents](#),

From: "Diane"
 Subject: Nerd...
 Date: Tue, 19 Sep 2000

[T]here was an alligator joke going around about 1955 or so. The alligator was poking fun at a drunk who became quite indignant. "Stop or I shall turn you inside out". "Drunk, drunk", taunted the alligator. So the drunk grabbed him and turned him inside out. "Knurd, knurd" continued the alligator.

It was funny in 1955.

It may have been funny, especially in another, [longer version](#), which ends, "Knurd!" says the rotagilla", but it doesn't seem to relate very closely to either the modern or 1950's meanings of *nerd*.

It does, however, introduce us to a pair of alternate spellings, *knurd* and *nurd*, and to one of the putative origins of the term.

Knurd

Several people, largely RPI (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute) alumni have [written](#) me to insist, often quite forcefully, that the term nerd derives ultimately from *knurd* which is drunk spelled backwards, and that it was coined to differentiate the non-drinkers from the drunks. To date, however, they have been able to supply very little in the way of documentation, but rather rely on long-standing oral tradition.

The earliest RPI document that using any form of the word that I have seen so far is the back cover of the Homecoming, 1965, edition of the RPI humor magazine, the *Bachelor*, shown here. As can be seen the spelling at that point is *nurd* rather than *knurd*.



The RPI *Bachelor* V14 #1 1965

Nurd

This spelling is also reported in the American Heritage dictionary entry, quoting *Current Slang*, which was published by the University of South Dakota, as giving the following definition a few years after the *Bachelor* citation, in 1970:

Nurd [sic], someone with objectionable habits or traits.... An uninteresting person, a 'dud'.

When I wrote to the reference desk at the I.D. Weeks Library at the University of South Dakota, they were able to provide 5 occurrences in 1970 and 1971. The AHD cited definition appears to be a combination of two of these.

Cumulation Volumes III & IV, p. 88, 1970.

Nurd, n. Someone with objectionable habits or traits; an affected person. —College students, both sexes, New Hampshire.

_____, n. Undesirable person. —College students and general population, Texas.

_____, n. An uninteresting person, a "dud". —University of Kentucky

Volume V, number 1, p. 21, Summer 1970.

Nerd, n. An undistinguished, popular person, a "creep".

Volume V, number 4, p. 17, Spring 1971

Nurd, n. Intellectually slow or foolish person.

No clear explanation, other than possibly its derivation from *knurd*, has been given for the "nurd" spelling, which appears to be substantially more recent.

Summary

The following table shows the various early appearances of the term that I have been able to document.

Year	Spelling	Publication	Meaning
1950	Nerd	<i>If I Ran The Zoo</i>	Funny animal
1951	Nerd	<i>Newsweek</i>	someone who once would be called a <i>drip</i> or a <i>square</i> (Detroit slang; extreme form of <i>scurve</i>)
1952	Nerd	St. Joseph, Michigan <i>Herald-Press</i>	Synonym for <i>scurve</i> , opposite of <i>George</i> . Also a <i>drip</i> .
1957	Nerd	Glasgow, Scotland <i>Sunday Mail</i>	a <i>square</i> , any explanation needed?
1961	Millard Fillmore Nerd	Swarthmore College <i>Hamburg Show</i>	Name of a self-confessed <i>square</i> , who has not broken a single rule
1965	Nurd	RPI <i>Bachelor</i>	Used to refer to 61 students
1970	Nurd	<i>Current Slang</i>	3 entries: • Someone with objectionable habits or traits; an affected person • Undesirable person • An uninteresting person, a "dud".

			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unpleasant person • An uninteresting person, a <i>dud</i>
1970	Nerd	<i>Current Slang</i>	An undistinguished, popular person, a <i>creep</i>
1971	Nurd	<i>Current Slang</i>	Intellectually slow or foolish person.



Meanings Nerd vs Geek

Like nerd, the term geek was originally an insult. It was the word used to describe the sort of carnival sideshow freak whose peculiarity was behavioral rather than physical. The denizens of the "geek pit" would do things like bite the heads off of chickens. The folk who played these roles were often of a similar physical type — think Ichabod Crane or Jim Varney's character Ernest — tall gangling fellows with prominent Adam's Apples, big mouths and noses, and buggy eyes. Thus the phrase "pencil-necked geek".

As an insult a geek thus was originally someone with unbecoming habits and few social graces, whereas the nerd was entirely dull and boring — a square. Both were outcasts, but one was hopelessly conventional, the other bizarre and outlandish. Not surprisingly as the terms became more common, they drifted towards each other. The square not merely wore thick rimmed glasses, but repaired them with adhesive tape. His dull hairstyle became a generation or two out of style — a greasy middle part. He was not merely non-athletic but clumsy, and perhaps gangling or slovenly.

The Geek at the same time was joined by another outcast — the Freak, as in "long haired hippy freak", and through the old carny associations we now had "freaks and geeks", two initially dissimilar groups of outcasts tied in a common expression. Then, to further muddy the waters, enter Brother Power...

"[Brother Power, the Geek](#)" was a comic book hero created by Joe Simon (who had created Capt. America back in 1941 with Jack Kirby) in 1968, out of his fascination with "Flower Power" and the hippy culture. Brother Power was sort of a cross between [Frankenstein's Monster](#), [Pinocchio](#), and Robert Heinlein's [Valentine Michael Smith](#) — an accidentally animated dress maker's dummy raised by hippies. Reportedly, he was originally supposed to be the "freak", but the editors were afraid that it might be taken as a drug reference and so changed "Freak" to "Geek".

Brother Power was definitely not an important social icon, but his story does illustrate how the various terms, once identifying quite distinct groups of social misfits slowly blended together. I suppose it is mildly of note that the replacement of "freak" with "geek" resulted in what is likely the first instance of the phrase "[geekout](#)" in print, likely predating its first actual use in real life.

All of these terms have been reclaimed by the folk at whom they had been hurled as insults. Still, while I embraced being a freak in the 60's and a nerd in the 90's, I had too many dealings with carnies in my youth to yet be comfortable being called a geek. Naturally, in 2004, MisterGeek.Com, whose mascot I appropriated to join Seuss's Nerd as the supporters for the heading above, awarded me the title "Geek of the Week" for the week of August 29, 2004. And so, like it or not...



I'd still rather be a hirsute curmudgeonly nerd. But that's obvious.

[Brons](#)

1: The passage from "If I Ran the Zoo" and the picture of the Nerd which accompanies it are both Copyright © 1950, 1978, Theodor Seuss Geisel.