



word histories

“AD FONTES!”

origin and history of the word ‘sport’

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The noun **sport** is a shortening of **disport**, which was borrowed in the early 14th century from Anglo-Norman and Old and Middle French forms such as **desport**, **deport**, **disport** (modern French **déport**). This French word was thus defined by Randle Cotgrave in *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (1611):

Deport: masculine. Disport, sport, pastime, recreation; pleasure.

These Anglo-Norman and French forms are from the verb **desporter**, **deporter**, etc. (modern French **déporter**), which, among other meanings such as **to deport**, had that of **to entertain, amuse**. In the above-mentioned dictionary, Randle Cotgrave thus defined the reflexive form:

Se deporter. [...] to disport, play, recreate himselfe, passe away the time.

The French verb is from Latin **deportare**, **to carry away**. The French verbs **divertir** (cf. English **divert**) and **distraindre** (cf. **distract**), which also mean **to entertain, amuse**, have had a similar semantic development (**divertir** is based on Latin **vertere**, **to turn**, and **distraindre** on Latin **trahere**, **to draw, drag**), the notion common to these three verbs being that of **turning, leading or carrying away the attention from serious or sad occupations**.

One of the first known users of the English noun, in the sense of **diversion from work or serious matters**, was the English poet Geoffrey Chaucer (circa 1342-1400) in *The Man of Law's Tale*:

(interlinear translation)
Now fil it that the maistres of that sort
Now it happened that the masters of that company
Han shapen hem to Rome for to wende;
Have prepared themselves to travel to Rome;
Were it for chapmanhod or for **disport**.
Were it for business or for **pleasure**.

In the *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer used the word in the sense of **deportment**, that is, **behaviour, manners**:

(interlinear translation)
And sikerly she was of greet **desport**,
And surely she was of excellent **deportment**,
And ful plesaunt, and amyable of port,
And very pleasant, and amiable in demeanour,
And peyned hire to countrefete cheere
And she took pains to imitate the manners
Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
Of court, and to be dignified in behaviour,
And to ben holden digne of reverence.
And to be considered worthy of reverence.

The English poet and playwright William Shakespeare (1564-1616) used **disport** to mean **sexual intercourse** in *The Tragædy of Othello, The Moore of Venice* (around 1603). When the Duke of Venice decides that Othello must go to Cyprus to defend the island from the Turks, Othello accepts but asks that appropriate accommodations be provided for his wife, Desdemona. He explains that if her presence makes him neglect his official duties, if his “disports corrupt and taint” his business, then housewives can make a skillet of his helmet:

(Quarto 1, 1622)

I therefore beg it not
To please the pallat of my appetite,
Nor to comply with heate, the young affects
In my defunct, and proper satisfaction,
But to be free and bounteous of her mind,
And heauen defend your good soules that you thinke
I will your serious and good businesse scant,
For she is with me; — no, when light-winged toyes,
And feather'd Cupid foyles with wanton dulnesse,
My speculatiue and actiue instruments,
That **my disports**, corrupt and taint my businesse,
Let huswiues make a skellett of my Helme,
And all indigne and base aduersities,
Make head against my reputation.

The noun **sport** appeared in the early 15th century in the same senses relating to **play**, **pleasure** or **entertainment**. Its first known instance is in *Medulla Grammaticae* (*The core of the grammatical (art)* – around 1425), a compilation of Latin words with English meanings:

*Lecta, **sporte** of redynge.*

In the sense of **an activity involving physical exertion and skill in which an individual or team competes against another or others for entertainment**, **sport** is first attested in an act of the Parliament of Scotland in 1491, under the reign of James IV (1473-1513, reigned 1488-1513); it was ordained

*that in na place of the realme be vsit fut bawis gouff or vthir sic vnproffitable **sportis** bot for commoun gude & defence of the realme be hantit bowis schvting and markis.*

literal translation:

*that in no place of the realm be used foot balls, golf or other unprofitable **sports**, but for common good and defence of the realm be practised bow-shooting and marks [= targets or butts set up for shooting at].*

The term **field sport**, denoting **an outdoor sport or recreation**, especially hunting, shooting or fishing, is first recorded in *A posie of gillogflowers eche differing from other in colour and odour, yet all sweete* (1580), by the poet Humphrey Gifford (floruit 1580); he wrote the following in the dedication “*To the Worshipfull John Stafford of Bletherwicke Esquier*”:

*The thing that I here present you with, is but a collection of such verses and odde deuises as haue (at such idle howres as I founde in my maister his seruice) vpon sundry occasions by me byn cōposed. The one I confesse farre vnworthy your view, and yet such as **when ye shal retorne home weered from your fieldes sportes**, may yeelde you some recreation.*

However, in early use, the sense of **sport** as a diversion or amusement was predominant. By the 18th and 19th centuries, the term was often used with reference to hunting, shooting and fishing, as in **blood sport**, a term dating back to the 19th century and meaning **a sport involving the hunting, wounding or killing of animals**. In the 19th century, the consolidation of organised sport, particularly football, rugby, cricket and athletics, reinforced the notion of sport as physical competition.

In this later sense, the English word has been borrowed into numerous other languages. In French for instance, **sport**, **doublet** (<https://wordhistories.wordpress.com/2016/07/23/turban-tulip/>) of **déport**, is first attested in May 1828 in the *Journal des haras* (*Journal of the stud farms*), in which **sport** was explained as “*la chasse, les courses, les combats de boxeurs*” (“*hunting, horse racing, boxing matches*”).