In almost every bookstore a whole section is devoted to Idiot’s Guides. These books teach you the very basics of almost anything you want to know. They teach you as if you are an idiot. So many people buy these books because they are essentially idiots when it comes to their perspective subjects. It doesn’t matter if you’re being classified as an idiot, the books are helpful teaching sources. The word doesn’t have the same connotation as it did when psychologist used it to describe someone’s IQ range. Because of these books being an idiot has become a common trend. Currently in society the word idiot is thrown around as a colloquial insult but it is viewed as an offensive word. It may be appropriate to use this word in select cases but it’s important to note the background of the word in order to decide when these cases are.

When defining the word idiot, The Oxford English Dictionary lists that an idiot is “a person without learning; an ignorant, uneducated; a simple or ordinary person”, or “a person without professional training or skill” or in psychiatry “A person so profoundly disabled in mental function or intellect as to be incapable of ordinary acts of reasoning or rational conduct”. The dictionary also notes that some idiots are people that maintain low intelligence to amuse others (Murray). They speak in a stupid way like jesters or fools.

Idiot also correlates to a specific level of IQ. Dictionary.com has idiot defined as a person with the lowest level of intelligence with an IQ of less than 25 (“Idiot” Def. 2). As it turns out Henry H. Goddard was a prominent American psychologist in the early 20th century and he classified people as idiots. He was the first to translate the Binet Intelligence Test into English in 1908. He defined words such as idiot and moron (“Idiot” Wikipedia).

Goddard labeled idiot, imbecile and moron as having separate meanings. In psychology they each correlate to a range on the IQ test. Idiot is the lowest level with a score between 0-25, imbecile is connected to an IQ range between 26 and 50 and moron relates to an IQ from 51 to 70. These terms were all commonly used in psychology until the 1960’s but now they are replaced with mild retardation, severe retardation, and moderate retardation and profound retardation (Hiskey). Since new phrases referring to retardation have replaced idiot, imbecile and moron, they have become part of every day slang.

Many people are casually called idiots on a day to day basis but it’s important to be aware that people may take offense to it. Gloria Naylor had a similar experience with the word nigger that she describes in “The Meanings of a Word”. Ms. Naylor is an educator and a novelist (“Gloria Naylor Biography”). She reflects on a time in class when she was called a nigger. She didn’t know what the word meant at the time but she still felt hurt because of the reactions around her. The moment she was embarrassed in class led her to find out what the word meant. Then, she truly understood why she felt bad. Being called an idiot can have a similar effect on people, that’s why it’s important to understand the meanings of a word before using it. You might be comfortable hearing the word thrown around in the background of your life but when someone calls you an idiot, it might take on a whole new meaning.

Now, from the 1990s to the present, it is mostly appropriate to use idiot in fiction. Charts of the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) show that idiot appears mostly in fiction rather than any other genre of reading including academic work. In fiction the word idiot takes the connotation of being a fool. Idiots tend to act irrationally for the comic relief of others. People frequently call themselves idiots when they feel they acted stupidly. The use of the word idiot can describe the way someone looks, feels, sounds, and acts.

Many people call themselves idiots or do idiotic things sometimes. It’s understandable to use the word as a way to describe yourself or your friends but it does have an offensive meaning to it. Use your judgment and be wise about when you use the word. In most cases it will be acceptable to use the word idiot because it isn’t perceived as offensive to a lot of people. Words are very strong ways of expressing yourself and describing people, many people will take offense if words are used the wrong way.

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