

Foul-Mouthed, Filthy and Utterly Nasty

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Скверный: nasty, ill-tempered, foul, filthy, grim

OK, kids! Since you had a day off midweek, you must be well-rested for your Friday pop quiz.

What do these five words have in common: скверный, скаредный, скупой, скудный and скудоумный? They are all adjectives, all begin with “ск,” and all describe something nasty or meager. Are they all related? That was a trick question. Some are, some aren’t. But it does seem that the initial hiss and kick of “ск” evoke decidedly yucky associations among Russians.

Скверный (nasty), which originally meant “unclean,” is the most versatile adjective in the “ск-” pack. It can mean gloomy, immoral, mean-tempered or miserable. Скверная погода is foul weather. But скверный анекдот is usually a nasty joke or story — the kind that makes you wince, not smile.

If someone is said to have скверный характер, he is ill-tempered and nasty. But if your

significant other admits to suffering from скверное настроение, it means he's in the doldrums. If he further admits to committing скверный поступок, it means he has done something particularly disgraceful and deserves his glum mood.

Скверно пахнет means that something smells bad — filthy, rotten, putrid bad. This phrase can also be used figuratively when describing something suspicious or dubious. Скверно пахнет эта история, если она правда (That story sounds fishy if it's true).

Скарედный is related etymologically to скверный and originally referred to excrement. Today, however, it refers to someone who is cheap — which is apparently pretty crappy in the Russian scale of values. Раз в неделю её скаредный муж отсчитывает рубли на щи (Once a week, her cheapskate husband counts out rubles for cabbage soup).

Since Russians prize generosity, скупой (stingy, scant) is also at the bottom of the Russian values scale. Most of the time it is used to describe a stingy person: Скупой платит дважды (A miser pays twice).

But a miser can be stingy in things other than money. For example, someone can be скупой на похвалу (begrudging praise) or скупой на слова (taciturn; literally, “stingy with words”).

But скупой can also be used to describe something that is the result of stinginess, as it were. For example, a short media release might be скупое сообщение (an uninformative piece).

Скудный describes a pitifully small amount of something. If you have скудные средства существования, you're living on a shoestring (literally, “meager means of existence”). Your empty purse and скудная диета (poor diet) is a result of the скудное жалование (pittance) paid to you by your скупой начальник (tightwad boss). And when you ask for the company's financials, you will probably be given скудная информация (scant information).

Скудный can also cross the line from meager to poor and wretched. In the countryside, скудное хозяйство might be a wretched little farm.

Скудный is often used to describe a paucity of knowledge or intelligence. If someone asks for your expert opinion on a subject you know little about, you can say: Вот и всё моё очень скудное знание (That's the sum total of my extremely limited knowledge).

This might indicate that you lack intellectual breadth, in which case your friend might say about you: Он скуден умом (literally, “he is poor in brains”). This has been turned into the word скудоумный, which describes someone whose knowledge base is narrow. Он не глупый, но он скудоумный (He's not stupid, but he's limited.) Which is certainly скупая похвала (faint praise).

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