

# On the bogusness of reporting the winning word in a spelling bee

 [devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20060504-30](http://devblogs.microsoft.com/oldnewthing/20060504-30)

May 4, 2006



Raymond Chen

Whenever the United States media report on a spelling bee (typically, the Scripps National Spelling Bee, the best-known spelling bee in the country), they always report on the “winning word“. But the winning word is a bogus metric because the winning word in real life tends to be comparatively easy. It’s the **penultimate** word that is the hard one. In nearly all spelling bees, when the field narrows to just two contestants, if one contestant misses a word, the other contestant must spell that word **plus** a bonus word to win. Sort of like volleyball. The bonus word is not necessarily a hard word; in fact, just by the principle of regression to the mean, it is likely to be a comparatively easy word. The hard word is the one that knocked out the second-place winner. Look at it this way: Nobody misspelled the winning word, so how hard can it be? Consider this hypothetical spelling bee: **Judge:** The word is “chiaroscuro”.

**Player A:** c-h-i-a-r-u-s-c-u-r-o.

**Judge:** I’m sorry, that’s incorrect. Player B?

**Player B:** c-h-i-a-r-o-s-c-u-r-o.

**Judge:** Correct. And your next word is “dog”.

**Player B:** d-o-g.

**Judge:** Congratulations, Player B, you’re the winner. [9am: How embarrassing. I misspelled “chiaroscuro”.] The newspapers all report that “The winning word was ‘dog’,” and people reading the newspaper say, “Pshaw, I don’t know why people get all worked up about this spelling bee thing. Even I can spell ‘dog’.” For example, in 2005, the “winning word” was “appoggiatura”, a word any musician can spell in their sleep. The penultimate word was the somewhat more challenging “roscian”.

This year’s Scripps National Spelling Bee will be held on May 31 and June 1, 2006.

[Raymond Chen](#)

**Follow**

