

What Really Slays: Exploring How the Meaning and Usage of “Slay” Has Evolved From 1850 Through 2023

Introduction

For this project I researched how the usage of “slay” has changed over time, and how the meanings have evolved at certain points in time. I was inspired by my first mini project, where I looked at how the meaning of “slay” has evolved over time, from the 1850s up until 2023. This initial research was more of an overview, so I was inspired to continue my research in more depth. My main goal was to identify all the usages of the word I could find, gain more insight into their contexts, find trends, and track the shifts in meaning and usage.

Before getting into my methods, I would like to break down the definitions of “slay” using the [Merriam-Webster dictionary](#). The primary definition of “slay” is “to kill violently, wantonly, or in great numbers.” It can also mean “to strike down.” During my research, I used these definitions fairly interchangeably, as I usually did not have enough context to specify the type of killing being described. The next definition is “to delight or amuse immensely,” which I coded as “kill metaphorically (positive).” The last definition of slay is “to do something or perform exceptionally well or impressively: to be exceptionally impressive.” This is the more modern meaning of the word that, based on my research, emerged in popularity within the last ten years or so.

Methodology

To conduct my research, I used three databases: [COCA](#), [COHA](#), and [NOW](#). I used COHA to get data from the 1830s to the 1980s, specifically the decades of the 1830s, 1880s, 1920s, 1950s, and 1980s. I used COCA for data from the 2000s and 2010s. And I used NOW to supplement my data because it is more updated and references a lot of pop culture. I gathered data from NOW for the years 2015, 2017, 2019, 2021, and 2023. NOW is organized differently than COCA and COHA; it groups data from specific years, rather than decades. During my analysis, and in my results, I combined the data from COCA and COHA but left the NOW data separate since it is organized differently.

From these databases, I searched for all instances of “slay” as a verb. I chose 15 random sample examples of “slay” and 15 of “slaying” for each time period, resulting in 360 examples of “slay” to analyze. COCA separates time periods into first and second halves of decades (for example, 2010-2019 is split into two groups of 2010-2014 and 2015-2019). For this corpus, I chose seven examples from the first half of the decade and eight from the second half in an attempt to make it as even as possible. I put all these examples into spreadsheets and coded them into the following categories, with multiple categories being used for some: “kill violently,” “do impressively,” “kill metaphorically,” “kill metaphorically (positive),” “noun form,” “fantasy,” “fashion,” “sexuality,” “unspecified,” “typo,” and “name.” The last three categories (“unspecified,” “typo,” and “name”) do not appear on my graphs or data analysis because they do not add to the understanding of my research question and the number of data points in these categories was very small. If there was a higher number of data points in these categories I would have referenced them specifically, but for the purposes of my research I do not find them highly relevant. The ones tagged as “unspecified” I could not find enough context to confidently place

in a certain category. Those tagged as “typo” were simply that, just typos. And those tagged with “name” were not caught by the databases as proper nouns rather than verbs. On a similar note, I created the category “noun form” because even though I conducted my searches to find only verbs, the databases did not filter out all the noun forms properly, so there was a significant enough of them to be included in my research.

As I stated above, the category “kill violently” was used for any instances of literal killing in the data. “Do impressively” is a condensed version of the Merriam-Webster definition. I coded data with the category “kill metaphorically” if it used the word in a metaphorical sense, as well as specifically with a negative connotation. “Kill metaphorically (positive)” refers to the usage of “slay” in a metaphorical sense, but used positively, as I stated previously. The “fantasy” tag was employed in addition to another category, clarifying that “slay” was being used within the genre of fantasy for fictional sources or in a fantasy-related metaphor for non-fictional sources. The “fashion” tag was used similarly, as it further explained another category. As I’ll explore more in my analysis, it was always used alongside the category “do impressively.” “Sexuality” was a tag I created later in my data analysis, as I found two examples that used “slay” within the context of attraction to another person. While there were only a couple data points that this applied to, I found it noteworthy because of how different the context was compared to the rest of my data.

After I coded all the data, I created separate spreadsheets to quantify the total number of usages within each category. I then used these spreadsheets to create line graphs to represent how the meaning of “slay” has changed over time. I chose to use line graphs, because I wanted to show how the frequency of usage per meaning has shifted. I made six graphs. Of the six, three are based on the COCA and COHA data, and three are from the NOW data. They are split in the

same way as the data, with one from each containing just the “slay” data, one containing the data for “slaying,” and one that combines both. I had to keep the NOW graphs separate because they are basically a zoomed in look at the time period between 2015 and 2023. On the graphs, each line represents a different meaning. The time period is on the X-axis, and the Y-axis contains the frequency.

I also want to make note of how I counted data points that were coded into multiple categories. I could have created separate categories for each specific grouping (such as tagged as “kill violently” and “fantasy” could be its own category). But I thought this would not accurately show the development in meaning, as there would be several micro-categories with much smaller trajectories. I instead opted to count the tags, so the frequencies on the Y-axis don’t represent the number of examples from the data I coded, but rather the frequencies of the tags themselves. This works better for my research question, as well as my skill set, which I explain further in my section on limitations. Counting each of the tags separately allows me to see how the specific contexts have evolved alongside the meanings.

Findings and Analysis

Firstly, according to my data, I found that the definition of “slay” that means “to kill violently” in the literal sense is the most prolific and has withstood the test of time. From the data from the 1830s up until the 2010s, it was consistently the highest category. An example of this usage reads, “His brothers forbade us to say that he was alive, threatening to slay us if we did” (RussianFairyTales, 1887). This is an accurate representative of how “slay” is used in terms of this meaning. Many of the examples I looked at involved battles of some kind, race-related violence, and religiously motivated

violence. Based on the definition I cited earlier, “slay” is essentially a more intense way of saying “kill,” so it makes sense that the conflicts referenced would be more intense or tinged with more emotion in some way. However, the intensity can also be in reference to the brutality of the act of killing. This meaning has survived not through biblical-type killings, but instead through reports of crime. When crimes are particularly egregious, they seem to be labeled as “slayings.” While this is the noun form of the verb, the databases I used were not able to distinguish it as such. The usage of “slaying” as a noun first emerged in my dataset in 1920: “...damaging evidence against them in connection with the Binkowitz slaying” (NYTReg, 1920). This usage appeared to initially be used in news reports, and then migrated into academia, fiction, and other media, such as TV shows and films. In total, I found 24 instances of it used in the COCA and COHA data, and 27 instances in the NOW data. The prominence of its appearance in the NOW data, spanning only from 2015 to 2023, shows how it has risen in popularity and stayed in the zeitgeist. In all my datasets, the noun form exclusively appears alongside literal killings, and is never used in reference to fantasy or metaphorical contexts. I did find one usage of “slay” as a noun in 2015: “Teacher gunned down; slay suspects arrested” (Inquirer.net, 2015). This could suggest that “slay” may morph into more common usage in this context as a noun, or it could be an outlier; I don’t have enough data to support a conclusion either way.

Next, I’d like to discuss the fantasy association with “slay.” In my COCA and COHA datasets, I found 22 total usages of the word in a fantasy context, and 34 in my NOW data. The first instance of “slay” I found in regard to fantasy was in a source from 1838. It reads, “...he drew the curtain from the four pictured of St. George slaying the dragon, and looked at me with an air of great satisfaction...” (IncidentsTravel, 1838). The most

common fantasy context involved dragons. Within my COHA and COCA data, this usage

peaked in the 2000s, with seven total examples from my data. For the NOW data, it peaked in 2021, with 11 total usages. A more modern example of this usage is, “In the next room, slay the Winged Lizards, and then head to the left until you reach a bridge” (gamesradar.com). The most common modern context is within video games, or media talking about video games and their content. While the form of media has shifted, it still appears to be a common way to describe killing in a fantasy context.

The next usage I’ll discuss is “slay” in a metaphorical sense. I separated this category into positive and negative metaphorical language. First I’ll explore the negative usage, which is similar to the definition for “kill violently,” however, it is used in a metaphorical context. The first example of this usage I found was from 1883: “Ah! light-hearted, Would thy scorn might slay me!” (Betrothal, 1883). This is an example of a concept slaying someone, essentially affecting them negatively. It is reminiscent of how we use “kill” and “murder” to describe when we feel affected very strongly. A more modern example is: “Here was life perpetually slaying man's perpetual dreams of success” (KingParis, 1956). In even more modern usage, it seems that people take the fantasy context of “slaying dragons” and use that as a metaphor for accomplishing something difficult. For example, “Grumpy Old Women will stop for nothing on their mission to slay the dragons of nonsense and reclaim the kingdom of common sense” (The Oamaru Mail, 2017). In this example, “slay” retains the older fantasy notion of killing something with a type of flourish, and becomes an evocative metaphor that opens up a world of fantasy metaphorical language.

I also will mention how, based on the graphs below, “kill metaphorically” has an inverse relationship with the literal “kill violently.” This is especially apparent in the COCA and COHA

data graph, as well as the NOW data graph. In the first COCA and COHA data graph, “kill violently” peaks in the 1920s and 1980s, while “kill metaphorically” falls to zero in those decades. Conversely, as “kill metaphorically” rises in the 1880s, 1950s, and 2000s, “kill violently” dips down in those years. The same can be seen in the NOW total data graph, in which “kill violently” rises in 2015, 2019, and 2023, and “kill metaphorically” falls, reaching zero in 2023. But in 2017, the metaphorical usage peaks while the literal usage falls. In 2021, the two meanings meet with equal counts of 10 on both sides. While I need to do more research to make concrete claims, I would argue that based on this data, people may feel more comfortable using the metaphorical language when fewer literal violent actions are talked about or are occurring.

I want to quickly highlight a specific metaphorical usage of “slay” that appeared only twice in my data, but felt significant enough to mention. The examples it appeared in are: “...they spent all their time parading up and down in them and slaying the ladies and wouldn't work at all” (NativeSoil, 1951) and “Okay! Felix! Look at you slaying puss in the playground, huh?” (Little Monsters, 2019). Both of these examples I tagged as “sexuality” because of their sexual connotations. This meaning of “slay” references the violent language used to describe sexual attraction and actions with or against women. Using a violent word, like “slay,” in this context, implies that women are objects to be conquered or killed. I believe that language like this perpetuates rape culture and bolsters the oppressive nature of the patriarchy. Based on my data, this usage does not appear to be very common at all, but I would not be surprised if further research revealed otherwise.

Next I'll discuss how the metaphorical usage of “slay” in a more positive sense can perhaps be seen as the precursor to the common usage of “slay” today, as in doing something

impressively. I'm equating this usage to one of the definitions of "slay": "to delight or amuse immensely." The first instance of this usage I found was in 1985: "You starry-eyed kids slay me. Get it? Slay me" (Screamplay, 1985). This fits into "slay" as a word that means to amuse. However, I think the word takes on a slightly different meaning in later contexts. For example, it was used in 2015 as "Matthew Dunster's perfectly executed production is now slaying audiences at Wyndham's Theatre" (The Independent, 2015). Another representative usage reads, "I know he's slaying' em in heaven right now" (hellomagazine.com, 2021). Both of these examples retain more of the undertone from the original definition; although they are positive contexts, they have a darker energy to them because they reference this metaphorical "slaying" of another party. I read it as the subject is killing them with their comedy. This meaning is only employed when someone does something exceptionally well. You wouldn't say that someone who only did an acceptably funny comedy routine slayed the audience.

This leads me into the newest iteration of "slay" that has entered the greater cultural sphere: "slay" as to "do impressively." I first saw this meaning appear in my data in examples from 2017. Some representative examples include, "Head up Girl. Ignore the Haters, keep being happy, keep dazzling and slaying, and stay beautiful" (Bella Naija, 2017), "The actor keeps slaying fashion goals like a pro with snippets from her fashion diaries on her Instagram profile" (hindustantimes.com, 2023), and "When I dress, I dress for different occasions. I dress to slay, I'm a fashion person" (howng.com, 2019). Just within these examples, "slay" encompasses several meanings. As someone who uses the word "slay" in my daily life I have found it difficult sometimes to articulate all the things that "slay" can mean or imply. The word has become so pervasive that, in some instances, it has almost lost its original meaning. In the first example from Bella Naija, the speaker encourages the audience to "slay" as a motivational statement, as if

to stay positive, while also maintaining good looks. The example from hindustantimes.com is more reminiscent of the metaphorical usage of “slay,” as it could be replaced with “kill” and the sentence would still be effective. However, “slay” adds another layer that is perhaps more positive than the connotations of “kill,” because of its associations with beauty and fashion. The last example, from howng.com, shows “slay” in an aspirational sense; “slaying” is the goal the speaker wants to achieve. One of the biggest shifts this meaning brings to the word “slay” is that it can now exist as a word on its own. The previous meanings require a person or object to be slaying something, whether literal or metaphorical. But now “slay” commonly acts as a standalone phrase, or as a verb without an object to act upon.

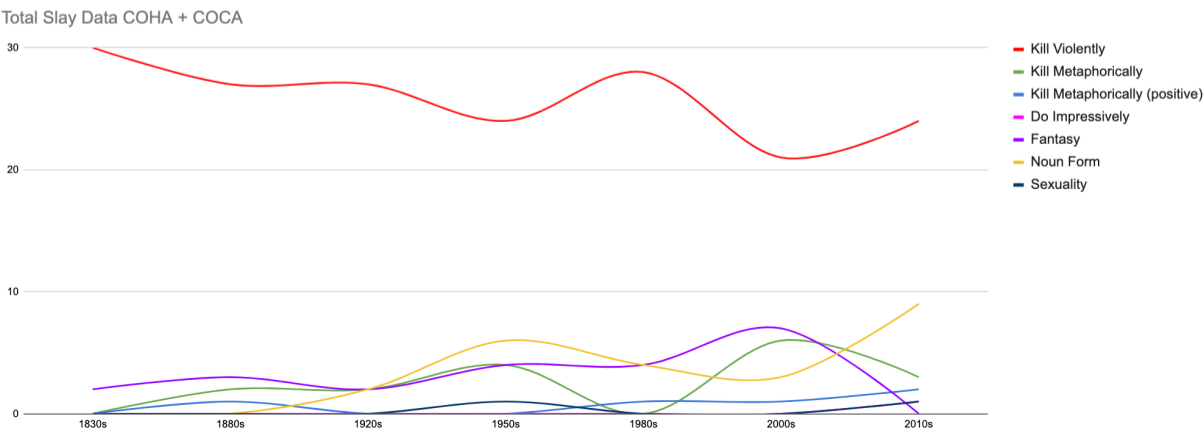
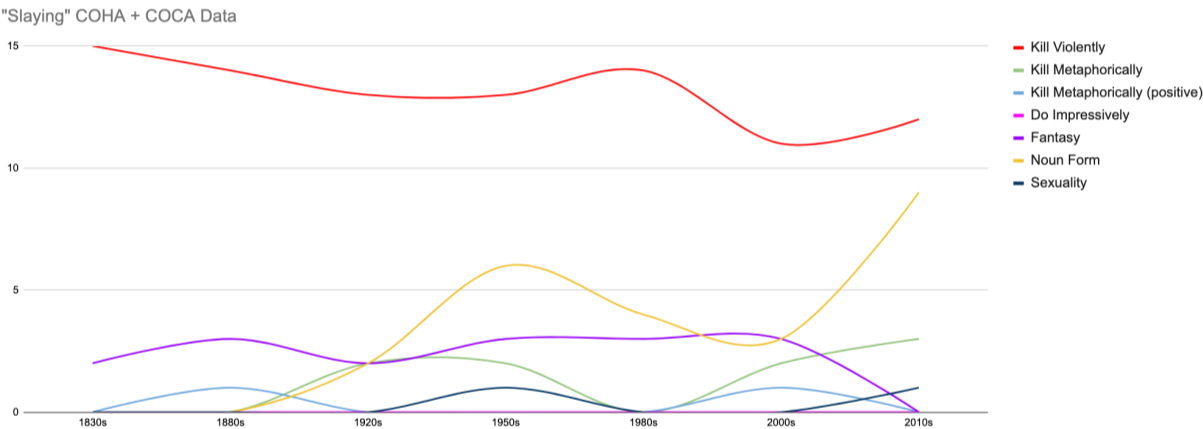
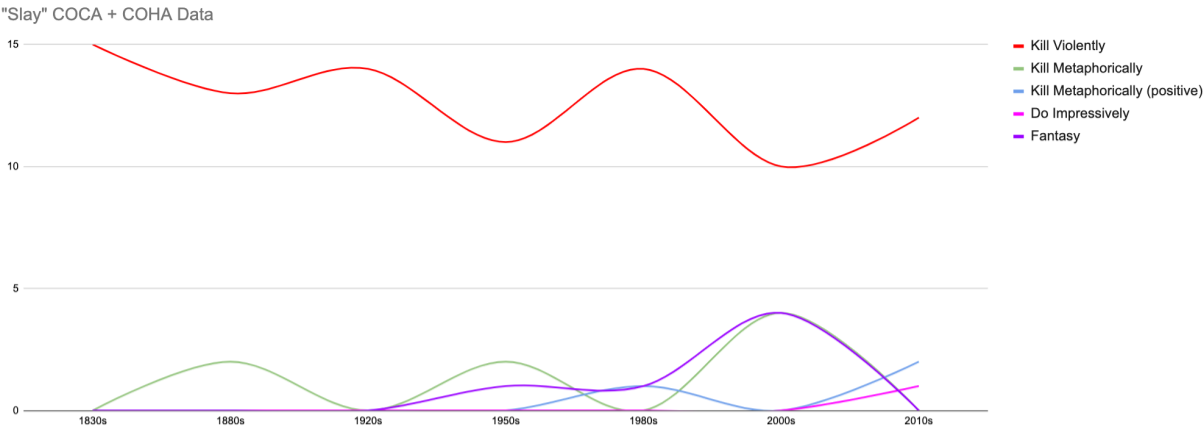
I also want to note how often “slay” is used in a fashion-associated context. Of the 36 examples of “slay” meaning “do impressively,” 19 of them are explicitly fashion related. This also shows how “slay” is entering a new contextual domain. Before, it was almost entirely related to killing of some sort, especially relating back to its fantasy or medieval origins. But now it is widely associated with stereotypically feminine things, a large contrast to the stereotypically masculine association with killing. “Slay” is commonly used to describe women, specifically their fashion sense, makeup, and overall demeanor or energy—for example: “Gwyneth Paltrow is here to slay!” (Yahoo! Sports, 2021). I find it so fascinating how a word that was originally associated with the most brutal kinds of violence is now used to describe beauty, arguably an act of creation within artistic expression. It celebrates people’s liveliness, their skills in expressing themselves through makeup and fashion, and creates a sense of significance that can be achieved and celebrated in their daily lives.

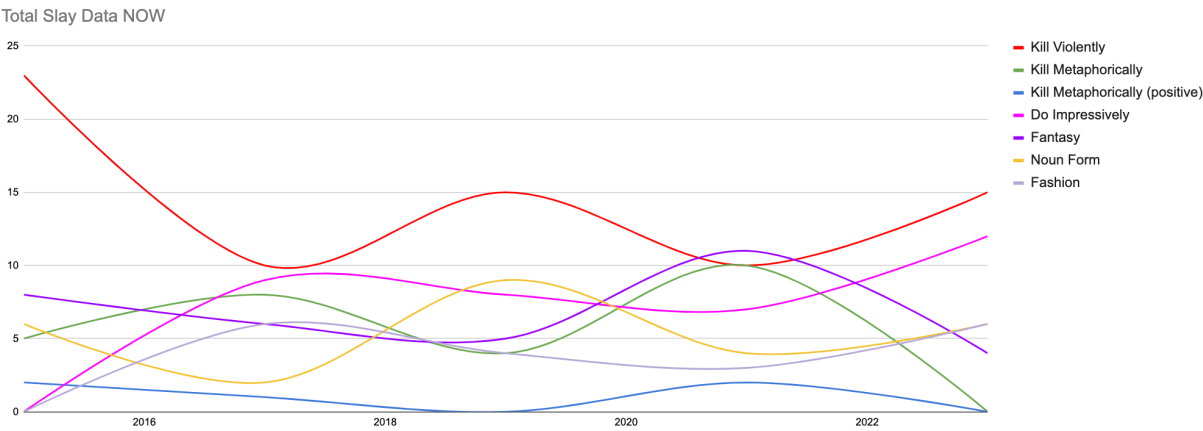
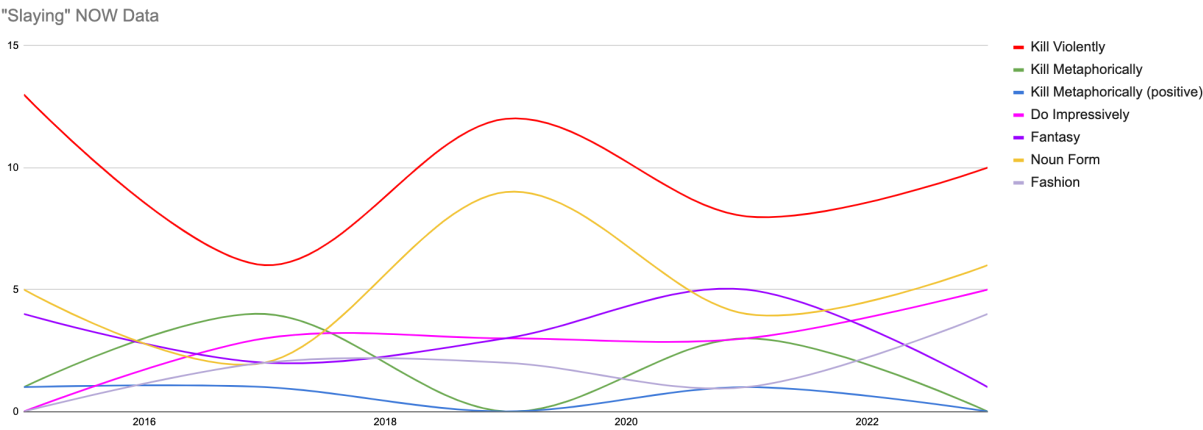
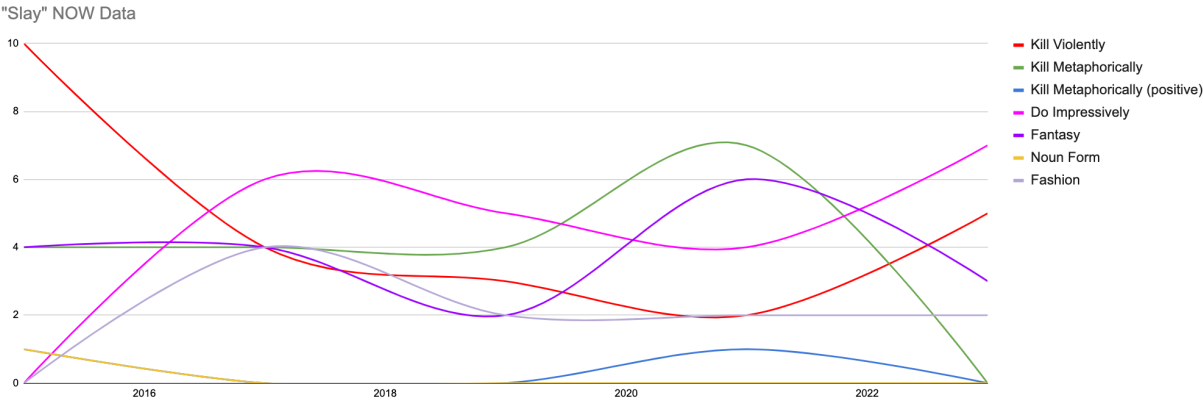
Limitations

There are several aspects of this research that, given more time, I would have loved to expand on. First, I would like to compile even more data points in all areas to gather a more cohesive understanding of how the meaning of “slay” has changed and at what points in time. Additionally, my original idea for this project was to compare the time periods when the meanings have shifted with the changes seen in the meaning and usage of the word “kill.” Given more time and resources, I would have also gone into more detail about the modern usage of “slay,” especially its various usages as different parts of speech, specifically as a noun or interjection. I also would like to do a more queer-centered data analysis, as the word was pioneered by the queer community before becoming more mainstream.

In terms of sorting and visualizing data, it potentially would have been more accurate to create two separate categories of codes, with one being the primary meaning and then the secondary context or content tag. However, my data analysis and visualization skills are not strong enough to accomplish that in the amount of time I was given.

Data Visualization - Graphs and Tables





“Slay” COCA + COHA Data

	Kill Violently	Kill Metaphorically	Kill Metaphorically (positive)	Do Impressively	Fantasy
1830s	15	0	0	0	0
1880s	13	2	0	0	0
1920s	14	0	0	0	0
1950s	11	2	0	0	1
1980s	14	0	1	0	1
2000s	10	4	0	0	4
2010s	12	0	2	1	0
Total	89	8	3	1	6

“Slaying” COCA + COHA Data

	Kill Violently	Kill Metaphorically	Kill Metaphorically (positive)	Do Impressively	Fantasy	Noun Form	Sexuality
1830s	15	0	0	0	2	0	0
1880s	14	0	1	0	3	0	0
1920s	13	2	0	0	2	2	0
1950s	13	2	0	0	3	6	1
1980s	14	0	0	0	3	4	0
2000s	11	2	1	0	3	3	0
2010s	12	3	0	0	0	9	1
Total	92	9	2	0	16	24	2

Total Slay Data COCA + COHA

	Kill Violently	Kill Metaphorically	Kill Metaphorically (positive)	Do Impressively	Fantasy	Noun Form	Sexuality
1830s	30	0	0	0	2	0	0
1880s	27	2	1	0	3	0	0
1920s	27	2	0	0	2	2	0
1950s	24	4	0	0	4	6	1
1980s	28	0	1	0	4	4	0
2000s	21	6	1	0	7	3	0

2010s	24	3	2	1	0	9	1
Total	181	17	5	1	22	24	2

“Slay” NOW Data

	Kill Violently	Kill Metaphorically	Kill Metaphorically (positive)	Do Impressively	Fantasy	Noun Form	Fashion
2015	10	4	1	0	4	1	0
2017	4	4	0	6	4	0	4
2019	3	4	0	5	2	0	2
2021	2	7	1	4	6	0	2
2023	5	0	0	7	3	0	2
Total	24	19	2	22	19	1	10

“Slaying” NOW Data

	Kill Violently	Kill Metaphorically	Kill Metaphorically (positive)	Do Impressively	Fantasy	Noun Form	Fashion
2015	13	1	1	0	4	5	0
2017	6	4	1	3	2	2	2
2019	12	0	0	3	3	9	2
2021	8	3	1	3	5	4	1
2023	10	0	0	5	1	6	4
Total	49	8	3	14	15	26	9

Total Slay Data NOW

	Kill Violently	Kill Metaphorically	Kill Metaphorically (positive)	Do Impressively	Fantasy	Noun Form	Fashion
2015	23	5	2	0	8	6	0
2017	10	8	1	9	6	2	6
2019	15	4	0	8	5	9	4
2021	10	10	2	7	11	4	3
2023	15	0	0	12	4	6	6
Total	73	27	5	36	34	27	19

Links to Spreadsheet Data

[“Slay” Data - COCA + COHA](#)

[“Slaying” Data - COCA + COHA](#)

[“Slay” Data - NOW](#)

[“Slaying” Data - NOW](#)

