Understanding Scrabble Dictionaries: NWL, CSW, and OSPD Explained

If you play Scrabble even occasionally, you have likely run into a disagreement over whether a word is allowed. One player insists "qi" is fine; another says it is not in the book. The confusion usually comes down to which dictionary the group uses. Scrabble does not have one universal word list. Instead, several official dictionaries exist, and the one you choose can change the game.

This article explains the three main Scrabble dictionaries you will encounter: NWL, CSW, and OSPD. Knowing the difference matters whether you play casually at home, in a club, or in tournaments. It also helps when you want to check words against a dictionary before a game starts, so you can avoid arguments at the table.

Why Scrabble Has Multiple Dictionaries

Scrabble is played in many countries, and each region developed its own official word list over time. The game's publisher, Hasbro, licenses different dictionaries for North America and for the rest of the world. Tournament organizers also have their own preferences. As a result, a word that is valid in one setting may be rejected in another.

This is not a flaw in the game. Language varies by region, and Scrabble reflects that. The key is to know which list your group or tournament follows, then use the appropriate reference.

NWL: The North American List

NWL stands for North American Word List. It is the official dictionary for Scrabble tournaments and clubs in the United States and Canada. The list is maintained by the North American Scrabble Players Association (NASPA) and is updated every few years to add new words and remove obsolete ones.

NWL is a relatively conservative list. It includes common English words, many two-letter words (like "aa" for a type of lava, "za" for pizza slang), and a range of technical terms that have entered everyday use. It does not, however, include every word from a standard English dictionary. The list is curated specifically for the game, so it omits offensive words, most proper nouns, and many archaic terms.

If you play in a club or tournament in the US or Canada, you will almost certainly be using NWL. The current edition is NWL2020, which replaced the previous 2015 edition. It added about 300 new words, including "bae", "dox", "yowza", and "frickle".

CSW: The International List

CSW stands for Collins Scrabble Words. It is used in most of the world outside North America, including the UK, Australia, New Zealand, India, and much of Europe. CSW is published by Collins and is updated roughly every two years. The current edition is CSW2019.

CSW is significantly larger than NWL. It includes many more words from British English, Commonwealth spellings, and a broader range of technical and slang terms. For example, CSW contains "colour" (the British spelling) and "theatre", as well as words like "foozle" and "quizzify" that are not in NWL.

Because CSW is larger, it offers more scoring opportunities. Players who are used to NWL may be surprised to find that words they thought were invalid are actually allowed in CSW. This makes CSW a popular choice for competitive play outside North America, as well as for online Scrabble games where players from different countries join the same match.

OSPD: The Official Scrabble Players Dictionary

OSPD stands for the Official Scrabble Players Dictionary. It is the dictionary sold in bookstores and included with many Scrabble board game sets. The current edition is the sixth edition, published in 2018.

OSPD is essentially a subset of NWL. It contains the same word list as NWL but is aimed at casual players rather than tournament competitors. The dictionary includes definitions and parts of speech, which NWL does not. It is a handy reference for home games, but it is not the official tournament list. Tournament players use NWL, not OSPD, because NWL is updated more frequently and is the actual list used in competition.

One important thing to know: OSPD has not been updated since 2018, while NWL has had two updates since then (2020 and a minor 2022 revision). So if you rely solely on OSPD, you may miss newer words that are now legal in tournaments.

How to Choose the Right Dictionary

If you play mostly at home with family or friends, OSPD is a fine choice. It is easy to find, includes definitions, and covers the words most people know. If you play in a club or tournament in North America, you should use NWL. If you play online with players from around the world, or if you live outside North America, CSW is the standard.

For those who want to practice or settle disputes, it helps to check words against a dictionary before the game. Many online tools let you enter a word and see which list it belongs to. This

can save time and prevent arguments, especially when you are playing with a mixed group that might use different dictionaries.

What Happens When a Word Is Challenged

In tournament Scrabble, if a player plays a word and an opponent challenges it, the challenge is resolved by looking it up in the official dictionary for that event. If the word is in the list, the challenge fails and the player keeps their score. If it is not, the word is removed and the player loses their turn. The same principle applies at home: if you have agreed on a dictionary, a quick lookup settles the matter.

Knowing which dictionary your group uses is important. If you are the host, it is a good idea to state the dictionary at the start of the game. Some groups use a printed OSPD, while others use an online dictionary checker that can filter by NWL or CSW. The important thing is to agree in advance so no one feels surprised.

Keeping Your Word List Up to Date

Dictionaries update every few years. New words enter the language, and old ones sometimes drop out. For example, "selfie" was added to NWL in 2015, and "emoji" followed in 2020. If you play with an old dictionary, you might miss out on valid words or accidentally use a word that has been removed.

For tournament players, staying current is essential. The Scrabble community usually announces new editions and provides lists of added and removed words. Casual players may not need to update as often, but if you play regularly, it is worth checking the latest edition every few years.

Practical Tips for Every Scrabble Player

Here are a few simple practices that can help you avoid dictionary disputes:

- Before a game, ask which dictionary the group uses. If no one knows, suggest using a standard one like NWL or OSPD.
- If you play online, note which word list the platform uses. Many sites let you choose your preferred list in the settings.
- If you are learning new words, study from the list that matches your usual play. Learning words from CSW will not help much if you play NWL tournaments.
- Use a Scrabble dictionary checker to verify words quickly. This is especially useful when you are unsure about a word's spelling or validity.

Understanding the differences between NWL, CSW, and OSPD makes you a better player. You will know which words to study, how to avoid challenges, and how to choose the right reference for any game. The next time someone plays "qi" and you wonder if it is legal, you will know exactly where to look.