

# Heaven Forbid

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*Вход воспрещается: No entry*

There is nothing worse than trying to pass yourself off as a fluent and knowledgeable Russian speaker and being asked a question that you can't answer and — worse yet — never thought to ask yourself. So it was with me when a friend looked at a lot of signs prohibiting entry and asked the difference between *запрещать* (to prohibit) and *воспрещать* (to prohibit). "They're basically synonyms," I began, "but..." But what? Then I remembered a Russian translator who told me what she says when a student asks a question she can't answer: "It's a matter of usage."

The usage ploy helped me save face, but it was a cheat. What is the difference between these two words?

Dictionaries make clear that *запрещать* and *воспрещать* are in fact synonyms. But

запрещать had many more examples than воспрещать. So perhaps воспрещать is just a less common word?

To test that theory I ran them through a search engine and saw that запрещать had about eight times more hits than воспрещать. The delightful Google Ngram Viewer confirmed this with a graph that showed consistently more use of запрещать over the last 200 years, with a peak at 1808, a smaller one at 1833 and a zig-zagging decline until the mid-1980s, after which it picked up again slightly.

Воспрещать peaked dramatically in 1833 — what on earth were Russians up to in 1833 that needed to be prohibited? — and then petered out to almost nothing by 1930.

So now I had some of the picture. Воспрещать isn't used as much today as запрещать. But can they be used interchangeably?

For that I checked an associative dictionary. Воспрещать was associated with religion, laws, monastic leaders and princes. But запрещать had the same associations plus another dozen or so — including alcohol, marriage and etiquette. More confirmation of what I already knew: запрещать is more common. But not much help in figuring out when and with what activities воспрещать and запрещать could be used.

Then I did a search on the Russian corpus, hoping to find categories of activities that were only prohibited with one word or the other. For hours I plowed through the centuries, reading examples of everything from tweets to monastery rules.

And I came up empty — almost.

It doesn't appear that запрещать is used for some activities and воспрещать for others. People are prohibited from reading books, playing in the garden and eating certain foods with both words. But after about a hundred pages of quotes, I began to see the stylistic differences more clearly.

Воспрещать is most often found on signs. Вход воспрещается. (No entry.) Спиртные напитки распивать строго воспрещается. (Drinking of alcoholic beverages is strictly forbidden.) По газону ходить воспрещается. (Don't walk on the grass.)

And then there's the matter of the prefix вос- (or воз-, depending on what kind of vowel it precedes). It's almost never used today to form a perfective verb, so it has a slightly old-fashioned feel. In many cases, it gives an official, bookish or ceremonial shade to a word. In some cases it has the sense of raising something up, with a general connotation of "on high."

So I finally made my rule: Запрещать and воспрещать are synonyms, but today воспрещать has the stylistic connotation of bureaucratic, ceremonial or lofty language.

Twelve hours and 20 books later, it turns out it's a question of usage after all.

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