The Sydney Morning Herald

Embrace hope, all ye who enter here: In 2026, this word is more alive than ever



David Astle

October 25, 2026 — 5:00am

"Hi there, hope you're well." How a thousand emails begin: a greeting plus well-wishing. Hope, the same verb, adorns countless Hallmark cards, the sentiment for imminent travellers, the sick and frail, the new parents.

We hope for the best. We half-hope or hope as much. Cross our hearts and hope to die. As a noun, hope comes in rays and glimmers. We even hope against hope, as it springs eternal. But what is hope, and does any dictionary have a hope in hell of telling us?



"Hope you're well": what are we really saying when we open emails this way? GETTY IMAGES

A family friend is expecting her third son in March. Sounds definite, doesn't it? A fixed month, framed by expectation, since expecting differs from hoping. It

expresses optimism rather than presumption. There's a wishfulness, or maybe wishy-washiness, since hope doesn't seem to lift a finger.

The verb feels passive despite its dynamic origins, the word possibly linked to hopping, as dictionary sleuth John Ayto speculates: "A suggestion that has found some favour is that the word is related to hop, and that it started from the notion of jumping to safety."
Hopeful as that sounds, Ayto adds a grain of salt. "The theory goes that 'the place of refuge' thus reached gives one 'hope', but it has an air of desperation." Being hope's opposite, of course. Hence, we live between the hop-skip-jump of hope and the swamp of despair.

So why focus on hope, you ask, and why now? After all, Barack Obama peddled the word in 2008, via Shepard Fairey's stencil poster with HOPE as election cry. Surely hope has run its race. Done its dash. Further proof is the snarky neologism of hopium, a metaphorical substance lending false cheer. Distinct from copium, or the rationalisation of an existing mess.



LA street artist Shepard Fairey poses with his Barack Obama Hope artwork in 2009. AP

As mess is our default setting. We dwell in bedlam on a grand scale. Or polycrisis, to borrow the label coined in 1990 by French theorists Edgar Morin

and Anne-Brigitte Kern, the demure alternative to clusterf---, the dumpster fire of 2026, our geopolitical omnishambles. I don't need to list the stressors as we deal with them daily – hence, hope. Or how today has fostered a new strain of hope, the active kind.

Writer Claire Scobie spotted the shift in *Wild Hope* (NewSouth, 2026). There she observes how hope has re-found its hop in recent years, a collective movement at grassroots level. Less activism than being active, hope seeks to reverse the gloomy narrative of things, undo the doom. Separate from Hallmark pap, hope is evolving into an invitation, a chance to make small differences.
In her quest, Scobie visits several examples, from wild swimming in Melbourne's Birrarung (Yarra) to a wind turbine outside of Bristol, the generator's output shared by the village of Lawrence Weston itself. That's right. In one local hop, POP (People-Owned Power) became reality.

Just as teaching Gumbaynggirr in schools around Coffs Harbour has knitted a community closer together. Or Lee Robb's decision to counter the online shit-talk about her beloved Carrickfergus in Country Antrim has helped to foster that town's Friendly Food Club for fresh organics. "Hope is the thing with feathers," wrote Emily Dickinson in 1861. And now, in 2026, it seems hope has wings, too.

davidastle.com

twitter.com/dontattempt
Tips and tricks from our crossword guru plus links to our online puzzles and quizzes. Sign up to get Puzzled with David Astle every Saturday morning.

Want more WordPlay?

- Richard Morecroft's surname yields the anagram 'comforter', which is only right
- Lisa says her husband is 'trolling', but he denies it. Who's right?
- Flong time no see: My adventures with a daily dictionary dip
- Language in the age of AI: Whimsymaxxing the apocalypse
- How card games shuffled the everyday language of sports
- TV or Not TV: our favourite two-letter word's identity crisis
- Fifty shades of … what? The absurd quest to name colours
- How a regional Instagram account is recording the latest entrants in the Aussie lexicon
- Out of the box: The grammatical nightmare keeping me awake

MORE: WordPlay For subscribers Spectrum Spectrum



David Astle is the crossword compiler and Wordplay columnist for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. He is a broadcaster on ABC Radio Melbourne.