In elementary school, we learn that a noun is a “person, place or thing.” Rabbit. Cereal. Toilet. Especially toilet. Words like “toilet” make Mad Libs a hit with my kids when we take road trips.

However, at some point down the line, we learn that an “idea” is also a noun. I don’t know which governing English language body decided this or at what point it became part of the school curriculum, but I’ll bet it was met with the same backlash as Pluto being relegated to a lower-level planet.

Yes, ideas are nouns, and they’re my favorite types of nouns. These ideas were the ones the Founding Fathers often capitalized, and that the Bible extols: joy, honesty, freedom, loyalty, wisdom, truth and friendship. Sam the Eagle would be proud. Pride — there’s another one.

The above examples were all positive words (except “pride,” depending on context). What about some negative idea nouns? I’m all too familiar with disappointment, failure, misery, sadness and underachievement. I find these negative idea nouns as real mood-lifters in the Mad Libs road trip game: It’s time for your summer failure; don’t forget to pack disappointment and plenty of misery in your suitcase!

You can’t have idea nouns without “-isms,” which, again, are great Mad Libs head-scratchers: communism, antidisestablishmentarianism, totalitarianism, fascism, absolutism, materialism and even patriotism: It’s time for your summer fascism; don’t forget to pack communism and plenty of materialism in your suitcase!

Although idea nouns can change the trajectory of a Mad Libs game, they do share a common characteristic: idea nouns aren’t concrete nouns. Idea nouns are abstract nouns.

You can’t touch “peace,” but you can experience it. You can’t lick “sorrow,” but somehow you can still taste it. Pain and pleasure are both fleeting and impossible to capture in a jar. And I’ve yet to see “faith” with my own eyes, but I suppose that’s kind of the point.

I like ideas. I’m an idea guy. I think our language and culture would be incredibly pointless without the abstract concepts we wrestle with in idea nouns. Along with patience, perseverance and potential, we have to deal with anxiety, chaos and death. These are all idea nouns!

After a few drinks, philosophical Mad Libs would be hilarious. In this version, you wouldn’t change any of the subjects: T.V. shows, president for a day, the recipe for a perfect great clam chowder. Instead, you’d have to pepper in a constant flow of ideas, concepts and belief systems. Who wants to get a kick out of disappointment with me?

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