

*Etymology:* The word *anecdota* is used to describe information that is presented as a substantiated truth (i.e., data), when it is in fact based on personal experience, speculation or opinion (i.e., anecdote). Or, as the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* briefly defines it, “information based on what someone thinks but cannot prove.” It is interesting to note that the designation neither confirms nor denies the accuracy of a piece of evidence; it only speaks to the process that informed its coming into being.

*Meaning:* The earliest references to anecdota appear in technical and legal documents. The *Oxford English Dictionary* catalogs the first citation in 1989 in the *Michigan Law Review*. The term is thought to have come into more mainstream use a few years later. Economics journalist Paul Solman is on record using it on the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour* in 1992, calling anecdota “the journalist’s approach to reality.”

Still, references to the word have only really gained in popularity in the past few years. One might attribute that to a rise in use of anecdota in our content-hungry, information-saturated society. It’s as if the unrelenting demand for fresh ideas mixed with an infinite supply of information both

permits and pressures us to speak beyond our areas of expertise. Today, anecdota fuels everything from dinner-time debate to flimsy academic writing to fake news cycles—and the term is used as a dismissive rebuttal by those policing or poking fun at peddlers of these unreliable ideas.

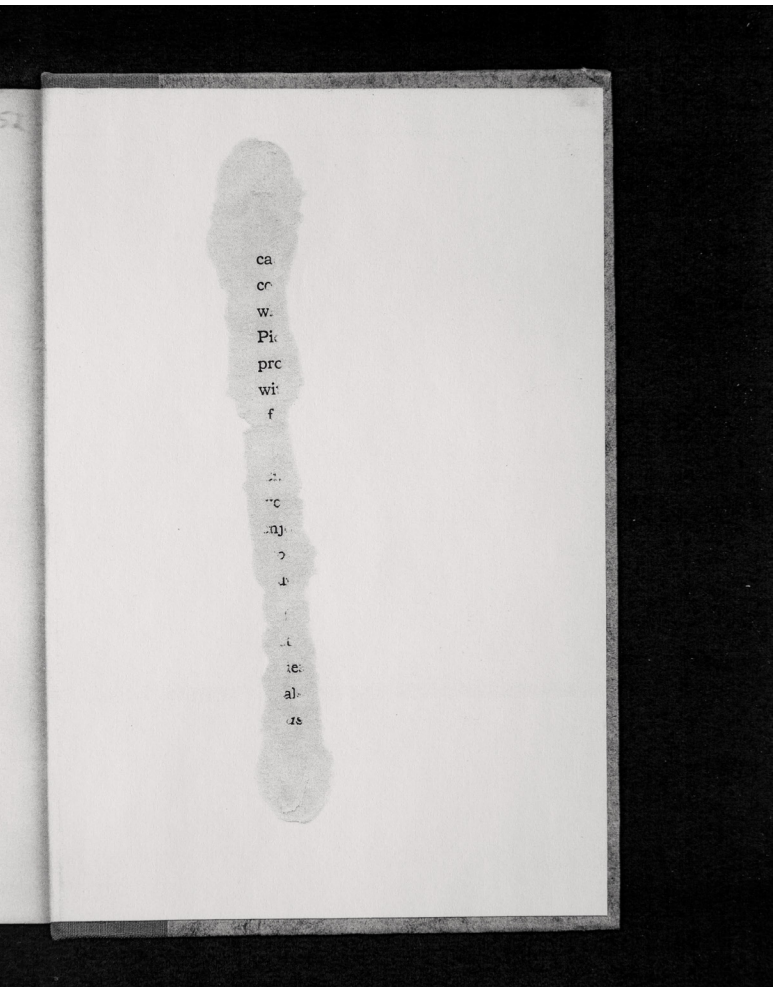
But anecdota’s reputation might be on an upswing if research projects like Anecdota.org succeed. Created by scientists and researchers at MDI Biological Laboratory, a nonprofit biomedical research center based in Maine, the website describes itself as a “free citizen science platform anyone can use to collect observations of our changing world.” Its hypothesis is that large amounts of anecdotal evidence can be crowdsourced and analyzed to yield data sets that are as (or even more) rigorous than what emerges from conventional research.

This formalizing of informal information might be anecdota’s most interesting moment yet. There is something elitist in the notion that only a narrow set of experts, sources and methods can lead to indisputable truths, just as there is something exciting and democratic about extending that privilege to a broad and plural public.

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# WORD: ANECDATA

## Fact, meet fiction.



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Artwork: *Thin Poem* by Mary Ellen Bartley

Though often unsatisfying, losing is as much a part of our lives as its more coveted counterparts: winning, gaining and improving. As we age, we lose our youth; as we gain experience, we lose our naivete. In many ways, life is an accumulation of these losses.

Alongside these existential losses are more dreary failures: Loved ones pass, job offers fall through, relationships falter. One way of processing setbacks is to treat them as a springboard to a brighter future. But in his 2021 book *Losers*, Josh Cohen argues against this search for silver linings and toward a new outlook on losing. As a psychoanalyst, Cohen sits with his clients as they come to terms with their losses and failures. It’s a necessary intervention: Only through exploring the range of ugly feelings can his clients recognize the possibility of another state of being. To banish this darkness would be to know no light at all.

Cohen’s argument is not a pep talk that promises losers that “the only way is up.” That way of thinking plays into the same unhelpful binary: By optimistically imagining a win on the horizon, we are still acting out our fear of loss. Instead, salvation lies in humility, which Cohen describes as “the consequence of an awareness that truth doesn’t belong to us.” Like loss, humility is characterized by an absence: of pride, self-regard, entitlement. This absence humbles us when we lose, and when we win—as Cohen writes, “Humility reminds us of the large portion of arbitrariness that determines any personal success or failure.”

In a world without losers, we would still face loss. But in a world without winners, we might finally find relief.



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# ON LOSERS

## A fresh perspective on failure.