

We use cookies to enhance your experience on our website. By continuing to use our website, you are agreeing to our use of cookies. You can change your cookie settings at any time. Find out more

Oxford English Dictionary | The definitive record of the English language

willy-nilly, *adv.* and *adj.*

Pronunciation: /'wɪlɪ'nɪli/

Forms: Also 16 **wille nille**, 17 **willi nilhi**.

Frequency (in current use):

Etymology: = *will I*, *nill I* (*he*, *ye*) 'be I (he, ye) willing, be I (he, ye) unwilling': see WILL *v.*¹ VI., NILL *v.*

A. *adv.*

Whether it be with or against the will of the person or persons concerned; whether one likes it or not; willingly or unwillingly, *volens volens*.

- 1608 T. MIDDLETON *Trick to catch Old-one* I. sig. B. Thou shalt trust mee spite of thy teeth, furnish me with some money, wille nille.
- 1797 E. BERKELEY in G. M. Berkeley *Poems* Pref. p. ccxxix, But her Ladyship would, *willi nilhi*, constantly join the one who drank the waters every morning, and converse with her.
- 1807 *Salmagundi* 25 Apr. 166 He was sure, willy nilly, to be drenched with a deluge of decoctions.
- 1818 J. BROWN *Psyche* 121 From whence it follows, will y' nill y', The thought of your's is mighty silly.
- 1884 A. GRIFFITHS *Chron. Newgate* II. vii. 306 He..conceived an idea of carrying her off and marrying her willy nilly at Gretna Green.
- 1898 L. STEPHEN *Stud. of Biographer* II. vii. 272 You are engaged in the game willy-nilly, and cannot be a mere looker-on.

B. *adj.*

1. That is such, or that takes place, whether one will or no.

- 1877 TENNYSON *Harold* v. i. And someone saw thy willy-nilly nun Vying a tress against our golden fern.
- 1880 *Cornhill Mag.* Feb. 182 All willy-nilly spinsters went to the canine race to be consoled.
- 1882 TENNYSON *Promise of May* II. 119 If man be only A willy-nilly current of sensations.

2. *erron*. Undecided, shilly-shally.

- 1883 F. GALTON *Inquiries into Human Faculty* 57 The willy-nilly disposition of the female in matters of love is as apparent in the butterfly as in the man.
- 1899 W. BESANT *Orange Girl* II. vi. 194 Let us have no more shilly shally, willy nilly talk.

This entry has not yet been fully updated (first published 1926).

Oxford University Press
Copyright © 2016 Oxford University Press . All rights reserved.

Your access is brought to you by:
University of Toronto Libraries