

What is the difference between a casket and a coffin?

For people who are not speakers of American English, being asked about the difference between a casket and a coffin might be confusing, because in most English speaking countries, a casket is a small box for holding jewelry, while a coffin is a box for burying the dead. However, in the United States, many people use the term “casket” to refer to a coffin, echoing a trend propagated by the American funeral industry, which is very fond of euphemisms. “Coffin” seems cold and final in the ears of funeral directors, while a “casket” seems more user-friendly.

Many Americans distinguish between a casket and a coffin on the basis of shape. They may use the term “coffin” to refer to a traditional rectangular box used for burial, while they think of a casket as a burial container which is tapered on both ends. The term “casket” is also sometimes used for a coffin with a split lid which is designed to allow people to view the decedent at an open casket funeral.

Outside of the United States, most people refer to all burial containers as coffins, regardless as to their shape. However, the use of the term “casket” for a burial container started to spread in the 1990s, in no small part thanks to the outreach of American funeral homes, which have branches overseas in many English-speaking nations. Some people are distressed by the reach of the American funeral industry, arguing that traditional modes of burial should be retained, and rejecting the sometimes garish and overstated trappings of an American funeral.

Burial containers can be built from any number of materials, including plastic, metal, cardboard, wood, stone, and clay. They may be ornately decorated or left simple, and typically, handles are included to make the container easier to move. Funerary containers may be used for burial or cremation, with some firms designing special cremation coffins which are intended to break down quickly in the retort.

In some communities, the tradition of building a coffin for the deceased has been retained, especially in rural areas with a strongly traditional bent. In other regions, people purchase a coffin from a funeral home as part of a funeral package, although it is also possible to purchase coffins through wholesalers, coffin manufacturers, and wood workers. In the United States, people are specifically allowed to bring their own caskets or coffins to a funeral home for use in a burial or cremation, under the Funeral Rule, a law which is supposed to protect the right of funeral consumers.