

Introduction to OED Online

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is the world's leading authority on the history and development of the English language since 1150. It was first published in 10 volumes, which took 70 years to complete (1878-1928). A dictionary needs updating constantly because new words crop up in the language all the time. The Second Edition was published in 1989, by which time the original 10 volumes had doubled to 20.

Work on the Third Edition is currently underway. At this stage, in print, the *OED* would probably take up about 5 feet of space on your bookshelf. But fortunately, the world's largest dictionary is available on CD-ROM, and also online.

Worksheets

1. Introduction - what is a dictionary?
2. Language development
3. Etymology
4. Language growth
5. Language borrowing
6. Patterns of word formation
7. Information or instruction?

Go to tinyurl.com/9nkypk7 and log in.

1. Introduction - what is a dictionary?

What is a dictionary used for? What do you use one for?

⇒ Many people keep an English dictionary as a reference point for finding out what a word means or how a word is spelt. Some dictionaries are designed to be suitable for these basic purposes and the individual word entries are kept relatively minimal for ease and speed of use.

The *OED* is at the other end of the scale. Whereas the vast majority of English dictionaries have, of necessity, to carefully select a portion of the lexicon to include on their pages because there are just too many words in the language to have them all, the *OED* is the most fully comprehensive dictionary of the English language in the world.

Its objective is to give as accurate a picture as possible of the entire lexicon, so the number of entries it contains is vast, and the amount of information given for each lemma (i.e., entry word) allows a user to find out a great deal more than spellings and meanings.

Type **dictionary** in the **Quick search** box and click **Go**.

If you scroll down you will see that this entry has 3 branches labelled A, B, and C. Branch A, the noun, has 4 senses (numbered 1-4) and different uses within those senses (labelled **a,b,c**, etc.).

⇒ What does that mean?

Some words have multiple senses: "ball" can mean a spherical bouncy toy or a formal dancing assembly.

"Dictionary" can refer to a book of the words of a language, or a person could be called a "dictionary" because s/he is a useful reference point on a given subject, but not because s/he is a book.

Branch C, you will see, lists some combinations of "dictionary" with other words to make another term in common usage.

⇒ The subdivisions (**a,b,c**) account for instances where the word is used for the same meaning, but in a different way such as metaphorically. According to sense **1.b.**, a dictionary can be a book of vocabulary for a different branch of knowledge (the *Timber Press Dictionary of Birds Names*).

How does the OED decide in what order to list its senses?

It is a historical dictionary, which means that the entries are listed in the order in which they are found to have occurred chronologically. According to sense **1.a.**, "Dictionary" was first used to mean a book of the words of a language.

To demonstrate this, the *OED* quotes from the earliest material that can be found featuring the word. **In c. 1480 Medulla Grammaticae published the oldest known instance of "dictionary" in the form dixonare.**

⇒ Each entry in the *OED* has a list of quotations to illustrate the use of the word in published materials since the first known occurrence and for a range of dates thereafter.

What is so good about the online version of the Dictionary?

Here is one of the perks.

⇒ Do you sometimes get a memory blank when you know the word you want but you just can't think of it? Say, the word for an assumed name that an author uses instead of his/her real name. A dictionary in book form cannot help in this situation - you can't search for a word you can't remember.

You can with *OED Online*, because you can search for words within definitions as well as for the entry words themselves. So,

Click on the link marked **Advanced search** underneath the **Quick search** box.

This search allows you to do more than the **Quick search**, with varying degrees of specificity. It is used to search for other things than the entry word itself, so is useful when you can't think of the word you want but you know (at least something about) what it means.

Type **assumed** in the first (top left) box

Select **definition** from the scroll-down list to the right

Type **name** in the left-hand box on the next line down

Select **definition** again in the box to the right

Click on **Add row**

Type **author** in the left-hand box on the third line down

And select **definition** to the right again

Click the red **Search button**

Voilà! You will get a list of the few entries that match your search criteria and one of them is **pseudonym!** Phew. If you click on any of the results, you will go to the dictionary entry for the word given in red on the left.

The fact that the *OED* is a historical dictionary means that once a word is included in it, it can never be taken out again. This is not the case in all dictionaries - many aim to include all of the buzzwords of the day, words that may not be around a couple of years down the line.

The breadth of the *OED* allows us to look at the way language develops and changes over time.

2. Language development

1. Do a **Quick search** for **naughty**. It tells you there are 4 results. What does "naughty" mean to you? Click on the result for naughty adj and look at sense **1**. Is this what you take "naughty" to mean? In senses **1** and **2.a** the cross symbol † and *Obs.* (for *obsolete*) at the end tell us that the earliest senses of "naughty" are no longer in use today. Several of the senses (eg. **2.a.**) cross refer us to the entries for **naught** and **noughty**. ⇒ What is "naught?" Another word for "zero"? "naught" is derived from "not aught" or "not anything" (similarly, "none" is from "not one", "never" is from "not ever") So, "naughty" in its early uses meant 'of nothing'. When Richard Benet was called "a naughty man" in c.1460 (1st quotation for sense **2.a.**) it was a very cutting disparagement - he was worth *naught*, worthless. In the present day, if one called a man naughty, it would be fair to assume one was reprimanding him playfully, or was alluding to his behaviour being sexually suggestive. The meaning of "naughty" has thus changed - quite subtly - over the centuries. Some words have developed even further to take on completely new significations. ⇒ Why not try looking up naughty in the *Historical Thesaurus of the OED*, by clicking on the link to the right of the definition. Are there any words which you recognise? Are there any unfamiliar or obsolete words? You could look at: **gay** (merry → homosexual) or **nice** (foolish → pleasant). ⇒ Is it possible to see a transition through time from an early meaning to a later one? In other words, can you see how one sense is connected to another? Or in some cases do words coin new definitions that are apparently unrelated? If when viewing an entry you choose Outline, you will see only the meanings and dates; if you choose Full Entry, you will be able to read the illustrative quotations.
2. Click on **About this entry** in the column to the right.

- In order to get a better idea of the way different senses have occurred and developed over time, it can be helpful to use visual aid. **About this entry** gives a timeline for each sense and maps onto them the dates for the cited quotations, illustrating the timeframe for which a sense is/was in use. It also gives a summary of the entry, including a list of entries linked to and from it.

3. Etymology

Etymology concerns itself with tracing out the meaning of a word and how it has been derived.

- Do a **Quick search** for **text**, *n.1* (ie, homonym 1 for the noun "text"). Near the top appears the beginning of the etymological information for "text", with a click more option if you would like to see the full etymology. The word derives from the Latin (L.) word *textus* meaning "that which is woven", from the verb *tex-ere* to weave. ⇒ This gives us the word "textile" for woven cloth. ⇒ How do you think this relates to "text" as in "book"? A word may have entered the English language from any number of sources. For instance:
 - Ancient languages - such as Latin, Ancient Greek, Old English
 - Foreign languages - such as French and German, and varieties of English such as American and Australian
 - Authors - from Shakespeare to J.K. Rowling
- Click on the **Advanced search** link at the top of the screen. This search allows you to do more than the **Quick search**, with varying degrees of specificity. It is used to search for other things than the entry word (or *headword*) itself, so is useful when you can't think of the word you want but you know (at least something about) what it means.
- Type **OE** in the top left box, and select **Etymology** in the drop-down box to the right of it. In the boxes below the search box, select **Case-sensitive**. Click **Search** ⇒ You have asked the database to find words with etymological roots in Old English. Are they all familiar to you? In order to find out that the *OED* uses **OE** to mean Old English, it is useful to know where to find a full list of abbreviations used in the Dictionary. These can be found here: <http://www.oed.com.vezproxy.stmarys-ca.edu.2048/public/abbreviations>.
- Another **Advanced search** Type **Shakespeare** in the first (top left) box, and select **first quotation** in the drop-down box to the right. Click **Search**. ⇒ You have asked the database to find words for which the earliest recorded usage is amongst the works of Shakespeare. What are some of those words?
- And another **Advanced search**: Type the year of your birth (eg, **1987**) in the first (top left) box, and select **first quotation** in the box to the right. Click **Search**. ⇒ What are some of the new words that came into common usage the year you were born?
- Yet another **Advanced search** Type **Hindi** in the first (top left) box, and select **language** in the drop-down box to the right. Click **Search**. ⇒ "Bangle", "guru", and "yoga" are among the words in that have originated in the Hindi language but have entered common usage among English-speakers. How many words in total?
- One more **Advanced search** Type **1997** in the first (top left) box, and select **first quotation** in the drop-down box to the right. In the 2nd row down, type **Rowling** in the left-hand box, and select **quotation author** in the drop-down box to the right. Click **Search**. ⇒ You will get 1 hit in the results list! What is it?

4. Language growth

New words enter the English language all the time. In consequence, the *OED Online* is updated every 3 months. Every day the editors at the *OED* consider a number of potential new entries and endeavour to determine whether or not each one has become a word in common usage that can go into the dictionary. There is no strict set of criteria that a word must fulfil in order to qualify - the job of sorting out which words make it and which do not is not an easy one.

Going back to the search for words that were first recorded in the year of your birth, did you notice *how many* new words entered the language (according to the *OED*) in that year?

- Do a search for all the new words that entered the language in the last century. Select **first quotation** from the drop-down box. Then, in the box marked **Date of entry**, type 1900-1999. This gives a list of the words for which the first recorded use is in the twentieth century ⇒ How many new words?
- Let's examine the rate of growth of the English lexicon over an arbitrary period of time. This will involve performing a series of searches similar to that above, because in order to get a thorough picture it is better to limit the date ranges to, say, a decade at a time.
 - Let's span 3 centuries this time: from the start of the 17th to the end of the 19th
 - Start with **1600-1609** in the first box and choose first quotation from the drop-down box (keep that the same throughout this exercise).
 - Repeat this for **1610-1619**, then **1620-1629**, **1630-1639** and so on to **1890-1899**. Note all your results in a table.
- ⇒ Plot these results onto a graph. What do you notice? Does it appear to you that the 1700s were, in general, not fruitful years for language growth if we compare them with the early 1600s and 1800s? ⇒ Any ideas why?
- It is interesting to investigate what kinds of sources have been instrumental in recording new words in English. It can give us an idea of influential media over different periods in history. ⇒ The definition of **Muggle**, *n.4* begins "In the fiction of J. K. Rowling". The definition of **hobbit** begins "In the tales of J. R. R. Tolkien".
- Do some **Advanced searches** for phrases such as the following occurring in **definition**
 - in the novel/novels of
 - in the story/stories of/by
 - in the tales of
 - in the fiction of
 - in the works of
- There will not be many results for each one, and some will include the phrase you searched for, but will not refer to a specific author or title as intended. Look at the dates as well: when your results list appears, click on the date link at the top of the list instructing it to list by entry date.

5. Language borrowing

The English Language has acquired vocabulary from all over the world throughout history. Some subjects, for example, food and drink, are more multicultural than others. Consider how often these days we see the words "spaghetti", "pizza", "tortilla", "taramosalata", "popadam", "cappuccino", "vodka".

But the nationality of some words can be rather more surprising.

- Do a **Quick search** for **Blighty**, *n*. Now look at the **Etymology** Interestingly enough, our word "Blighty" was acquired by troops on foreign active service in the First World War. What language does the word derive from?
- To get an idea of just how many words English had adopted from foreign tongues, try the following kinds of searches, bearing in mind the results list may contain words that will not be relevant:
 - "from India" in definition**
 - "French name" in definition**
 - "N.Y. Times" in first quotation** (for some Americanisms)
 - "music" in definition AND Italian in etymology**
- It is interesting to refine your search with particular **quotation authors** that you know to have been influenced by foreign cultures. ⇒ Do an **Advanced search** for **Shakespeare in first quotation and Italian in etymology** and see how many results you get. ⇒ Try **Kipling** (Rudyard, author of *The Jungle Book*) as **quotation author** and **Indian in etymology**.

6. Patterns of word formation

A *prefix* is an element of a word, occurring at the beginning, which qualifies the meaning of the word as a whole. For example:

- *un-* in "untie", "unkind", and "undone" where *un-* expresses negation
- *pre-* in "prepared", "pretext", and "pre-empt" where *pre-* means 'before'

A *suffix* is similar but it occurs at the end of a word. For example:

- *-ness-* in "happiness", "worthiness", and "emptiness" where *-ness* makes the word into an abstract concept
- *-less* in "homeless", "pointless", and "endless" where *-less* means 'without'

Let's look at a suffix that is less common than these two and more recent.

1. Type ***aholic** in the **Quick search** box. The asterisk is a wildcard operation that allows you to ask for all words that end in **-aholic**. ⇒The results include **shopaholic**, **workaholic**, and **rageaholic** ⇒Click on **-aholic**, which is the *OED* entry for the suffix itself.
2. When did the trend of putting *-aholic* on the end of words to mean some kind of addict begin? What country started it?
3. What sorts of words have *-aholic* appended to them? i.e., what part of speech is the original word? (nouns, verbs, adjectives, all different sorts, etc.)
4. What part of speech are words ending in *-aholic*? i.e., what parts of speech are the finished words? You might also be interested in looking at words ending in *-phobia*, *-philia*, or *-mania*. What is a blend word? A word derived from a corruption of two other words. There are several that are so commonplace these days that the original blended components are forgotten.
 - motor + hotel = *motel*
 - breakfast + lunch = *brunch*
 - Bombay + Hollywood = *Bollywood*
5. Do an **Advanced search** for **blend of** occurring in **etymology OR in definition**. ⇒There are well over 300 blend words in all, although some will be used in specialist areas such as the chemical names used in medicine. ⇒What do you think of them? What makes one example cleverer than another? Which ones are a bit tenuous or clumsy? ⇒Is it always obvious what the blend is derived from? If not, does that affect your liking for that word? Have a go at making up your own blend word. For example, think of a name for a group of people who go outside together for a cigarette break (fagarazzi?)

7. Information or instruction?

Does a dictionary tell us how the language is or how it ought to be?

The aim for the *OED* is to record the language as it is, as accurately as possible. It tries to be descriptive rather than prescriptive. The reason for including quotations is quite simply to illustrate how a word is used, because that is what its meaning depends on.

On the one hand, you expect a dictionary to tell you how to spell a word correctly, or how to use a word in its 'proper' sense. But on the other hand, language changes naturally all the time, and a formerly 'incorrect' usage will often merit a new sense entry in the *OED* because it has become part of common usage.

⇒20 years ago, a stickler for good grammar would have been appalled to hear **access** being used as a transitive verb. You could *gain access to* something, but not until the advent of computer technology could you laconically *access a file*.

Definitions depend on usage, and usage depends on context.

1. Do a **Quick search** for **china**. There are surprisingly many senses for this word. Select **china, n.1 and adj.** The phrase "my old china" would probably mean different things in the idiosyncratic languages of each of the following:
 - A person born in Beijing reminiscing fondly about the home country
 - A person serving lunch on crockery they bought in the 70s rather than their new Wedgwood
 - A person selecting which tea to have from a selection of Twinings boxes
 - A cockney Londoner talking about his/her friend

2. Match each of the above with the sense of **china** that they are most likely to use. If it is pertinent to the definition of a word, the *OED* gives information relating to the contextual status in which it is commonly used.
3. Do an **Advanced search** for any/all of the following occurring either in **full text** or in **definition**:
 - **contemptuous**
 - **derogatory**
 - **dial.** - dialectal
 - **literary**
 - **slang**
 - **offensive**
 - **vulgar**

Suggested discussion topics or essay questions:

1. "A dictionary has no right to say that the word *ain't*[v2 in *OED*, meaning 'have not'] is vulgar. It's not there to make social judgements". "A dictionary has an obligation to point out that some words are taboo, because swear words are not part of polite conversation." How far do you agree with these points of view?

A dictionary such as the *OED* has a duty to record uses of words which some people might find offensive on ethnic or religious grounds. How could the Dictionary handle this issue? (A court case was once held on just such an issue, and found that the entry for the word should remain, because the word was proved to be in common usage and that is the sole basis for inclusion in the *OED*.)