

Myth-busting the OED

Words come into the English language in all manner of ways. The *Oxford English Dictionary's* mission is to record all of these word stories, capturing their development as they continue to unfold.

Learn about the journey of OMG from invention to inclusion in the OED with our interactive feature: <https://public.oed.com/how-words-enter-the-OED/graphic/>

“The first quotation for a sense is the first time that the word was ever used, and the author of the first quotation invented the word”

WRONG

The first quotation for a sense is the first recorded use that we could find. Usually, a word will have been used in speech before it made its way into print (see the entry for *Croggie*, n. for example) or exist in earlier sources which we haven't yet found. There are very few words for which we can be confident that the author of the first quotation actually coined the word (although *scientist* n., *quark* n.2, and *cromulent* adj. are among them).

“The OED decides which words are classed as real words”

WRONG

The *OED* is a descriptive dictionary. This means we record how words are used, not how we think they should be used. This means that the *OED* contains offensive words (which are marked as such) or deprecated usages (e.g. the figurative sense of 'literally'). Interestingly, words which seem uncontroversial now may have been objected to at some point in their history (see, for instance, *reliable* adj. and *talented* adj., which Coleridge called a 'barbarous vocable').

OED editors do not invent the words we use today. Instead, editors record the words that are being used in the English language. A word is only included in the *OED* once widespread general usage has been established. For instance, when looking at a current word, we could look on Twitter (amongst other resources) to see if it has sustained and significant usage over several years.

“Only books are used as evidence in the OED, and the OED only chooses iconic sources like Shakespeare to cite in entries”

WRONG

Our most commonly cited sources are printed books, newspapers, periodicals, and magazines. Before the invention of technologies such as sound recording, film, and the internet, print and manuscript were the only means by which words could be recorded.

Our most cited book is the Bible (in many different translations and versions) and our most cited author is Shakespeare, but we cite over 400,000 different works from many different types of source and text, including ancient and modern manuscripts, fiction (from famous works of literature to self-published e-books), non-fiction (on any subject and at all levels), letters, diaries, farm and factory account books, children's books, national and local newspapers, academic periodicals, popular magazines, acts of parliament, government reports, gravestones, a stained-glass window, posters and labels, poetry, plays, songs, films, TV and radio broadcasts, cartoon captions, websites, blogs, social media posts, and many others.

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Examples of some non-print sources:

Inscription on a stained glass window in a church in Oxfordshire, around 1445: Greete, richlyng, greete. (richling, n., first quot.)

Television programme: *The Simpsons*, 1996: [Mrs. Krabappel] Embiggens? Hm, I never heard that word before I moved to Springfield. [Ms. Hoover] I don't know why. It's a perfectly cromulent word. (cromulent, adj., first quot.)

Song by Jay-Z, *Hard Knock Life (Ghetto Anthem)*, 1998: I'm from the school of the hard knocks; we must not let outsiders violate our blocks. (school, n.1)

Twitter, 2018: He's spilt some of the illest if not the illest ish I've ever heard and I've been a hip hop head since day 1! (hip-hop, n.)

"The *OED* only includes British English" **WRONG**

Ever since its beginnings, the *OED* has included English words from all around the world, including those from North America, the Caribbean, Australian, South Africa, India and beyond.

In a recent update, for instance, we added many South African English words to the *OED*:
<https://public.oed.com/blog/south-african-additions-oed/>

"The *OED* doesn't include slang" **WRONG**

There is plenty of slang in the *OED*. Some words start as standard speech and develop slang senses (tool, n.), while others start as slang and become standard over time (snide, adj.), and yet others remain slang for centuries (duds, n.1. c.1440).

Recent slang words to go in the *OED* include *fam*, *bruv*, *bare*, and *meh*.

You can find out more by listening to our recent webinar: <https://forum.oxforddictionaries.com/en/discussion/497/oxford-english-dictionary-building-dictionaries-with-crowdsourcing#latest>

"The *OED* would never consider words that my friends and I use" **WRONG**

The *OED* is about everyone's language. Our aim is to describe English as used worldwide by people of all ages and backgrounds. You can help us record the language of today, either by submitting your words using our online forms or through our word appeals.

Appeals call for anything from antedating evidence for a particular word that we're working on to submissions for new words in a particular category, such as our youth slang appeal or our hobby words appeal.

New words and evidence submitted to appeals are researched by our editors, and may end up in the *OED*.

You can find out more about some of the recent appeals here: <https://public.oed.com/appeals/>

Our blog publishes progress updates from recent appeals: <https://public.oed.com/blog/>

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“Once an OED entry is written, it will never change” **WRONG**

Just as the English language is constantly changing, the *OED* is updated to reflect present changes as well as maintaining its record of each word’s history. A sense or word won’t be taken out of the *OED*, but when the entry is revised it may be reworded or moved to a different part of an entry (or sometimes an entry on its own) so that it makes sense to a reader today.

The full-scale revision of the entire Dictionary is a fascinating process that will provide readers with many new insights into word meanings and the history of the English language.

Why have some words fallen into disuse?

Did famous authors such as Shakespeare and Chaucer really invent as many words as they are given credit for, or were these words used before?

Which words have fallen out of use since the original Dictionary was published?

These are just some of the questions we can answer as the revision proceeds.

You can find out more about the revision of entries here:

<https://public.oed.com/history/rewriting-the-oed/>