Using the OED in GCSE and A level assignments

TIPS AND THINGS TO REMEMBER

• The OED and the Historical Thesaurus are great tools for developing vocabulary and reading comprehension.

• They can be particularly useful if you are looking to include an additional or alternative meaning of a specific word or phrase in a quotation in order to provide two interpretations of your text (especially useful in poetry). These tools are particularly helpful when building an understanding of what a writer is trying to say based on the vocabulary of the time.

• Looking at the history and development of words over time allows you to discover what a specific word meant in the time that a text was written.

The Historical Thesaurus can be used to find historical synonyms of a word. This means you can compare other words that could have been used in a text when it was written, and analyse why an author chose that particular word. It can also help to prevent anachronisms in writing.

It can also be used to trace common themes in vocabulary such as terms of endearment or the language used to describe children.

Access the Historical Thesaurus link from the OED homepage.

Enter the word for which you want to find historical synonyms.

Browse through the thesaurus classes, and select the one that best reflects the way you want to use the word (is it a verb, noun, or adjective? Which thesaurus class best matches it?). Then click the red link for the best-fitting use of the word.
You can filter your search further using the map to the left of the page. You can also organize the thesaurus entries on the right side of the page by date, to see how a concept has changed over time, or alphabetically.

Select the one most fitting for your work, or find out more about a word by clicking the red headword. The year to the right of each word tells you its first recorded use.

You can then scroll through the senses of your selected word, exploring the definitions, origins, and changes of its meaning over time. There are also several quotations for each sense to help you to understand exactly how the word has been used.

In revised entries, looking at the latest quotations can help to assess whether the word is quite what you’re after.
If you want to look for different or older definitions of a certain word to help strengthen your argument, provide an alternative interpretation, or disagree with a critic, you can do this simply by using the quick search feature on the homepage.

E.g. Quick search results for ‘silly’ show that the word originally meant ‘worthy, good’, although you are likely more familiar with the later meaning of ‘lacking in judgment or comment sense; foolish, thoughtless, empty-headed’.

In the 16th and 17th centuries silly was very extensively used in senses A. 2 – A. 5, and in a number of examples it is difficult to decide which shade of meaning was intended by the writer. In modern use the dominant adjectival sense is sense A. 6.

A. adj.
1. Senses relating to worthiness or blessedness.
   In quot. slily chunky man probably has the sense ‘goodman, husband’.

So, if you are puzzled by the meaning of a specific quotation, look up the word in the OED to see if it meant something else during the time of writing. The semantic history of a word shown in an OED entry can also provide you with further insights into the time period you are writing about.

From examples like the following, it is easy to see how passages can be misunderstood if the wrong sense of the word is assumed.

A “cute remark” back in Victorian England was a quick-witted one. So was the “cute man” in Dickens’ 1841 book Barnaby Rudge. And so was a ‘cute girl’. In 1882, the Manchester Evening Mail ran a piece defending the typical American young woman as being just “as cute as the masculine Yankee,” by which it meant she was equally sharp and spirited.

Aldous Huxley wrote of a “tiny boy … looking almost indecently cute in his claret-coloured doublet and starched ruff.”

By the time Boyz II Men were singing about their “cutie pie” and websites devoted to “cute little kittens” were springing up, cute had become a receptacle for all these related ideas: aesthetic charm, minuteness, childhood, femininity—with a lingering hint of wiliness thrown in for good measure.

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However, it is important to be cautious, and there are several points to remember when using the OED in this way:

- A word might have meant something completely different 200 years ago, but you need to keep in mind when the text you are analysing was written; it’s no good relying on usage of a word from 100 years ago if your text was written in 2010. Think of the evolution of a word as a way to understand a little bit more about the time period in which your text is set or written.

- When the OED is being used with regards to current vocabulary it needs to be used with more caution, precisely because it contains such a lot of words of different registers and from different varieties of English throughout history.

- When using a word, it pays to notice its:
  1. Labelling (is it rare, regional, or historical?)
  2. Frequency band (How common is it in current English?)

You can find out more about frequency bands here: https://public.oed.com/how-to-use-the-oed/key-to-frequency

Making the most of the OED: putting it into practice

1. In small groups, take a quotation from a text you are studying.

2. Ask the group next to you to write down their interpretation of your quotation without using the OED or any other contextual resources, focusing on particular words in the quotation. What argument would they make for that interpretation in an essay?

3. In your group, use the OED quick search tool to find words from your quotation, and look at the evolution of their senses to see what the words meant when the book was published, what they meant when the book was set, and what they mean now compared to their very first recorded usage in the OED.

4. Use this information and the historical thesaurus to write a detailed interpretation of your quotation.

5. Compare your researched answer with that of the group who wrote down their initial thoughts on your quotation. This can be done in front of the rest of the class, or with your teacher at your desks.

6. If the group next to you mentioned one of the same definitions or uses as you, or the same argument for your interpretation of a word, they get one point for each match. If you get any definitions or ideas they didn’t think of, you get a point for each one, and vice versa.

   Note: Just because a sense of a word exists in a particular time, it doesn’t mean it’s at all likely it meant that. Decide which group has the most likely interpretation of the quotation, bearing in mind the surrounding text and the context in which it was written. The team with the most likely interpretation receives a bonus two points.

7. The winning team is the team with the most points.

8. In the event of a tie between groups, your teacher will host a game of ‘how old is this word?’ With a point going to the closest answer for each word’s earliest recorded usage. Play the best of five to decide the winning group.