

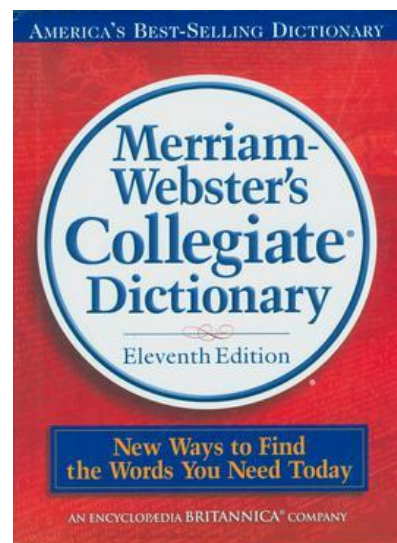
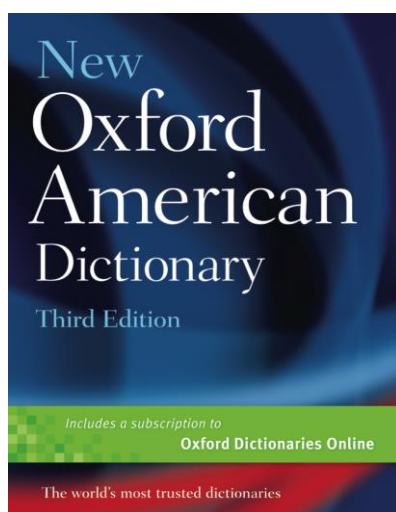
How to Use a Dictionary

Using a dictionary is a skill that many people assume that everyone has because it is taught once in primary school. In reality many year 12s struggle with using dictionaries and some do not know the first steps. Primary school instructions rely on the most basic dictionaries and given practical knowledge rarely survives in the memory for years without habitual use or relearning.



Some students feel like this with dictionaries

Dictionaries divide up into different types by what they do. Some are lexicons. These focus on a particular topic and often provide longer explanations than dictionaries give. They could be *A Lexicon of Nautical Terms*, or *Australian Law: A Beginner's Lexicon*. Others list foreign words or phrases and give translations, for example *A Russian-English Dictionary* will list a Russian word first then give its English meaning.



A good dictionary can help you in many ways.

It tells you...

...how to use words in sentences,

...from what language a word comes,



...words of similar meaning,

and words of opposite meaning.

Fortunately for dictionary users most words in English start with letters that resemble the way they sound. For example: *assuage*, *liberal*, *argument*, *ancestors*, *hammer*, *colossal*, *marmalade*, *barracks*, *soccer*. Let us use the first word as an example, *assuage*. With both spelling and meaning it presents difficulties, being uncommon. However in using the dictionary to get both spelling and meaning right and then finding other words developed from it, this word (like most) is fairly easy if we take the following steps.

Step 1: When the word is spoken the first syllable consists of three letters which are clear. “Ass” With most words when the first three letters are known, likely or found the word is almost always close. One possible problem here is that the double letter might be uncertain: they are usually used to show emphasis, but sometimes single letters can also do this. Keeping this problem in mind solves many spelling problems: if you cannot find a word because it may have a single or double letter try each possibility.

Step 2: Do not scan quickly through the dictionary page which has the “as” entries and then **assume** that the word is not there. Look carefully. It may be that your dictionary is too basic for your needs, but quick scans are the usual explanation.

Step 3: Once you have found the word, memorise all of the word’s spelling and then read the meaning and ask yourself if this was what you thought it meant.

Step 4: Dictionary entries not only tell you spelling and meaning, they show you different shades of meaning, correct syllabic emphasis in speaking, pronunciation through the international phonetic alphabet, the origins and development in meaning and words that have developed from the original word.

Step 5: Often a word will have different shades of meanings with examples given. These will be indicated by different numbers: Look at this example which is a basic entry:

Assuage (verb) **1** To make less severe; ease *to assuage grief* **2** to fill the needs of ; satisfy: to assuage appetite, thirst, ect. **3** to calm, pacify.

This is the basic entry. A more detailed entry such as that in *The Oxford English Dictionary* will give extra information. It first pronunciation using the International Phonetic Alphabet. It then shows that the word is a verb, then gives when it came into the English language (Middle English era) and its development through Old French and origins in Latin, where it initially meant 'sweet.' *The Oxford English Dictionary* then gives synonyms, the use of assuage in examples and derived words from the noun.

This is a lot of information, so to save space abbreviations are used.

Verb becomes *v.*

Middle English becomes ME.

Old French becomes OFr.

With used abbreviations a list of the abbreviated full words and terms are at the front of the dictionary and can be found on the contents page.

Step 6: Look for any derived words. Usually the most commonly used word is a noun and is therefore listed first. Verbs, adjectives, and adverbs flow from it and are sometimes shown thus if in the same word classification *-suaged, -suaging*. These are verbs in the past and present tense. There is also the rarely used adjective *assuasive*. Here the headword is a verb and the rare noun form is shown last *assuagement n.* with an n following to show it is a noun. The dictionary is useful not only for words that exist but for those that do not: there is no *assuagic, assuagedly, or assuagingately*. Dictionary users know not to make such words up.

Step 7: Look at the abbreviations: they show us the word's origins and development. ME stands for Middle English. This means the word came into English language usage between 1000 and 1500 OF stands for Old French, which shows where and when it developed. L is for Latin, which shows its origins and the word *sweet* shows the original meaning of assuage.

Now look up *liberal, argument, ancestors, hammer, colossal, marmalade, barracks, soccer*.

What about the difficult words which aren't spelt the way we say them?

The best solution is to know that they exist and to know that there is a common pattern. Here are some common types.

The silent B in debt, doubt, bomb, redoubtable. Others?

The silent K in knot, knowledge, knell, knead, knuckle. Others?

The silent G in gnat, gnome, gnaw, Others?

The silent P in pneumatic, pneumonia, psychology, physics Others?

Ph in Greek derived words is pronounced as an f as in Phillip, phenomenon, pharmacy, phase, physical, philosopher Others?

Ps in Greek derived words is pronounced as an s as in psyche, psychology, psalms, psuedo, psychic. Others?

K or C? in many words they have the same sound. Check if the word has a k sound.

S or C K or C? in many words they have the same sound. Check if the word has a k sound.

Make a personal list of the words you find difficult. Memorise them as you need.

