

Working with the online version of the *Oxford English Dictionary*

by T. T. L. Davidson

School of Modern Languages & Cultures

[Department of Linguistics & Phonetics](#)

University of Leeds

Leeds

LS2 9JT

(Part of the undergraduate module LING 1050 Sources and Methods in Linguistics.)

Table of Contents

- [1. What is the *OED*?](#)
- [2. What can it do for you?](#)
- [3. Using this worksheet](#)
- [4. Accessing the dictionary](#)
 - [4.0. *OED Online*'s Help system](#)
- [5. Searching](#)
- [6. 'Find Word' searching](#)
 - [6.0. The two editions](#)
 - [6.1. Entry Map](#)
 - [6.2. *strived/striven* - *strove/strived*?](#)
 - [6.3. Using wildcards](#)
- [7. 'Find Word' assignments](#)
 - [7.0. Linguistics jargon](#)
 - [7.1. Spelling choices](#)
 - [7.2. Use of derivational morphemes](#)
 - [7.3. Irregular verbs](#)
- [8. Using the **Search** button for more sophisticated searches](#)
 - [8.0. Investigating *grotty*](#)
 - [8.1. Searching the dictionary 'apparatus'](#)
 - [8.2. Australian slang](#)
- [9. Assignments using the **Search** button](#)
 - [9.0. Rhyming slang](#)
 - [9.1. English vocabulary from other languages](#)
 - [9.2. Collocational relationships](#)
- [10. The interrelatedness of definitions and meanings](#)
 - [10.0. Step 1: Select the lexicon](#)
 - [10.1. Step 2: Identify the relevant senses for each word](#)
 - [10.2. Step 3: Compare the definitions](#)

[10.3. Step 4: Draw a map](#)

[11. Assignment on tracing sense networks](#)

[12. Searching for morphological elements again](#)

[13. Assignment on morphological elements](#)

[14. Studying meaning changes](#)

[14.0. The *OED* and controversial usage - *disinterested*](#)

[14.1. Sudden change in context](#)

[14.2. A word 'field'](#)

[14.3. Do we really need a thesaurus rather than a dictionary?](#)

[15. Assignment in discriminating senses](#)

[16. Dates and meanings](#)

[17. Assignment on quotation dates](#)

[18. And yet more searches...](#)

[19. Creating printed and file output](#)

[19.0. Printing](#)

[19.1. Saving files](#)

[20. Leaving *OED Online*](#)

[21. References](#)

1. What is the *OED*?

The *Oxford English Dictionary* is the most comprehensive dictionary of English. In printed form it comprises 20 volumes and takes up 4 feet on the library shelf. It is the parent of a large family of smaller dictionaries more familiar on people's shelves, such as the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*. It is popularly viewed as the most authoritative source of information on word meanings in English, for example when judges wish to clobber witnesses or counsel with 'ordinary' meanings of words in court. It is not, in fact, a very convenient tool for what is possibly the commonest use of a dictionary - to look up a word's spelling. It contains a great deal more information than most unreflective dictionary users, or users of smaller dictionaries, realise, but because of its basic principles it is not the easiest dictionary to use. However, as a tool for students of the English language, it is unrivalled, and in its electronic form it can be used much more flexibly than in the case of the paper form.

It is a dictionary *on historical principles*, in its original editors' famous phrase. That is to say, it is intended to display in a historically ordered form the changes, including growth and shrinkage, of the meanings of all the non-technical Standard English vocabulary from early Middle English to the present day. It contains many words and many meanings of words which are obsolete, and it arranges its account of meanings in a historically ordered way - earliest meanings first. This is not necessarily the easiest way for a modern user to find the information on the present-day senses of a word. The word's very oldest senses may still be alive, and also the more recent ones, but along the way there may be several marked with the little dagger symbol † which tells you the meaning is obsolete.

The other very important principle of the *OED* is that, following Dr Johnson's *Dictionary* of 1755 (which it was intended to replace), the editors gave generous *citations*, that is, examples of the words in use from a wide range of written texts, mainly literary, but, especially in the modern Second Edition, from newspapers, magazines and many other sources (though not spoken ones such as news broadcasts).

2. What can it do for you?

I shall assume that anyone might want to use the *OED* to do the following:

- Look up the meanings of a word and how they have developed

- Look up when words and meanings were first used
- Find out the etymological source of a word

If you are a student of *language and linguistics* you can use the *OED* for the following tasks:

- To find parts of words (e.g. the uses of prefixes such as *pre-*, *arch-*, or *peri-*, or suffixes such as *-ology*, *-nik*, or *-ate*) and generally to investigate word formation in English
- To find out how far the *OED* systematically records relationships between words such as synonyms (e.g. the relevant senses of *reel* and *spool*)
- To secure some support for the ideas that speakers have about likely *collocations* of words (e.g. that we can say *notable collector* and *distinguished collector*, but only *notable frequency* and not **distinguished frequency*)
- To examine the details of processes in English such as the emergence of 'zero-derivation' forms such as when *paper* started being used as a verb, presumably having been around for some time as a noun¹.

Students of *literature* have for the better part of a century used the *OED* for:

- Digging out meanings of words which poets might have been using when the poem was written but which have since disappeared (as William Empson did in his celebrated *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930, revised in 1953))
- Trying to recreate the vocabulary 'fields' of political and social discourses of the past
- Finding out what contribution particular writers have made to the development of new words and meanings

The aim of this worksheet is to open up some of the possibilities of the online form of the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a language research tool. It is much more than a place where you look up meanings, spellings, etc. In its electronic form, it makes possible certain kinds of exploitation which were impossible with the paper form, and is an enormous source of information about many aspects of English.

[Berg \(1993\)](#) is the ultimate guide to using the *OED*, and explains every feature intelligibly and with profuse and fascinating illustration.

3. Using this worksheet

This is the first version of this worksheet. Every so often after a new major feature of *OED* has been covered with examples, you will find an assignment.

4. Accessing the dictionary²

Using a web browser, go to the *OED*'s [home page](#).

A page will open, in a suitably Oxfordy³ dark blue, and you will see a button at the bottom left marked **Enter OED Online**. This is actually the *OED* publisher's front page, and there is much here that you can read at a later date about the various editions of *OED*, current developments, and so on. However, press on to hit the **Enter OED Online** button. You should then see what appears below:

OED Online - Welcome - Netscape

File Edit View Go Communicator Help

Back Forward Reload Home Search Netscape Print Security Stop

Bookmarks Location: <http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl>

Oxford English Dictionary **FIND WORD**

Welcome to *OED Online*

How to search:

If you want to find *OED's* definition of a word or phrase, enter it in the box at the top right of each page, labelled Find Word. Alternatively, full-text searching of all *OED's* definitions, etymologies, and quotations is available through the Search function at the bottom left of each page.

To find out more about the *OED*, and how to use *OED Online*, click **HELP**. To see a quick reference guide to using *OED Online* (in PDF format), click [here](#).

What's new:

Each quarter, a batch of new and revised entries is added to the New Edition. The most recent additions are as follows:

SEARCH **LIST BY ENTRY** **LIST BY DATE** **ENTRY MAP** **PRINT** **MAIL** **HELP**

SUBSCRIBER: Oxford English Dictionary **SIGN OUT**

Document: Done

If you now try to type a word in the **Find Word** box to start a search you may be taken to the word or you may see a results list giving all the *OED* entries matching your search term.

4.0. *OED Online's* Help system

The **Help** button at the bottom right-hand corner of the window, *and* in the main screen area just in case you miss it, is worth drawing your attention to at the outset. Clicking on this button brings up a new browser window showing the Help text. You should spend a little time looking into this, possibly starting with the FAQs (frequently asked questions), the answers to which are things every *OED* user ought to know. When you want to get back to the main *OED* search page, close or minimize the Help text window.

5. Searching

Searching in *OED Online* can be done in two ways.

There is a basic search procedure, which assumes you have a word which you wish to look up, as one would with a paper dictionary. This is called a **Find Word** search and uses the box at the top right of the initial screen.

The other type is a **Full Text** search, offering many more ways of searching, which can be started by clicking on the **Search** tab at the bottom left-hand corner of the window. This is covered later, starting in '[Using the Search button for more sophisticated searches](#)'.

6. 'Find Word' searching

Look up the word *strive*. This will introduce you to the following features of the *OED*:

- How to look at information about pronunciation, spellings, etymology, quotations and the date chart
- The ordering and layout of senses in a typical, fairly simple, entry

The linguistic point of this example is to see if the *OED* can help to throw light on the usage of this verb in the Past Participle, where modern speakers sometimes want to say *striven* and sometimes *strived*. What would you use if required to put this verb in the past tense, *strove* or *strived*? Asking a group of students in class usually gets a minority for the former and a majority for the latter. But can the *OED* help us disentangle the history of this verb?

Type *strive* in the Find Word box and click to start the search. The screen will shortly show

The screenshot shows the Oxford English Dictionary search interface. At the top left is the logo 'Oxford English Dictionary'. To its right is a search box containing the word 'strive' and a magnifying glass icon with the text 'FIND WORD'. Below the search box, there are two buttons: a red one labeled '2e' and a blue one labeled 'NEW'. The text next to the '2e' button says 'SECOND EDITION: 2 results', and the text next to the 'NEW' button says 'There are no results in the New Edition'. To the right of this text is a dropdown menu set to '10 per page' and a 'SHOW' button. Below this information, there are two search results listed in blue text: '1 [strive, v.](#)' and '2 [strive](#)'.

6.0. The two editions

At top left you will see that this word has been found twice in the Second Edition (1989) but not in the New Edition. What does this mean?

OED Online contains everything that is in the published Second Edition, but in addition the editors are producing a completely revised New Edition, which is being published in parts online. No New Edition material exists as yet for the word *strive*.

The screen shows two links, in blue, to

A close-up of the search results from the screenshot, showing two blue links: '1 [strive, v.](#)' and '2 [strive](#)'.

Go at once to the verb entry, and you will then see:

OED Online - strive, v. - Netscape

File Edit View Go Communicator Help

Back Forward Reload Home Search Netscape Print Security Stop

Bookmarks Location: type=alpha&edition=2e&first=1&max_to_show=10&search_id=VTJL-Rxcy0h-926

Oxford English Dictionary

strive

FIND WORD

RESULTS

strive, v. SECOND EDITION 1989

PRONUNCIATION SPELLINGS ETYMOLOGY QUOTATIONS DATE CHART

strip-teaser
stripulose
stripy, a.
strit, v.
strit
stritch¹
stritch²
strite
strithe
strivable, a.
strive, v.
strive
strived, ppl. a.
striveling
striver

1. *intr.* To be in a state of variance or mutual hostility.
? *Obs.*

*a*1225 *Ancr. R.* 84 þus ha beoð bisie i þisse fule mester, & eider mid oðer striueð her abuten. 1297 *R. GLOUC.* (Rolls) 623 þe king miȝte segge þat in a luper time he striuede wiþ his wiue. 1338 *R. BRUNNE Chron.* (1810) 293 With his barons he striued, with him wild non go. A kyng þat striues with hise, he may not wele spede. 1340 *HAMPOLE Pr. Consc.* 1470 Now lofe we, now hate, now saghtel, now strife. 1340 *Ayemb.* 154 Vor þe scele ssel by ase a trewe arbytres be-tuene þe goste and þe ulesse þet byeþ alneway striuinde. *c*1386 *CHAUCER Somn. T.* 278 And therefore Thomas.

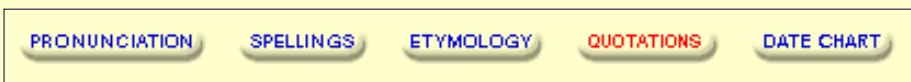
SEARCH LIST BY ENTRY LIST BY DATE ENTRY MAP PRINT MAIL HELP

SUBSCRIBER: Oxford English Dictionary SIGN OUT

By default this kind of search displays the headword, the start of the sequence of sense definitions and the quotations to illustrate the sense which comes first.

An important point about the *OED* will be apparent at once. The first sense that appears is not the sense in common use today, but a possibly defunct one (the ? *Obs.* tells us that). This is a reminder that the dictionary orders the sense definitions on broadly historical lines - earliest first.

Look at the row of buttons across the top of the screen and click on each in turn:



Pronunciation brings up the pronunciation of the headword in IPA transcription. Unfortunately this material cannot be searched in this version of the *OED*.

Spellings brings up a long list of various spellings from many periods, including lots which are not current. You will be able to see whether anything like the forms *strived*, *strove* and *striven* have existed at any time.

Etymology brings up information about the sources of the word.

Quotations is in red, to show that it is already active. Clicking **Quotations** will turn the quotations off.

Before using **Date Chart**, scroll down using the right hand scroll bar to see later definitions and quotations. You will find that this word has quite a long list of definitions, many of them for dead usages.

Now click the **Date Chart** button. It adds a time-line in front of each set of quotations to show how the dates of the various quotations are spread through history. One should be able to see from this if there is a thick clustering of citations at a particular date, and also if the dates continue up to the present or near-present (bearing in mind that many entries in the Second Edition were completed between 1884 and 1928). One can get an impression here of the period within which a particular sense of a word might have been available.

6.1. Entry Map

At the bottom left-hand corner of the window are several buttons. We shall be using most of these later, but it is worth trying one now, the one labelled **Entry Map**. The screen shown above positions *strive* v. in an alphabetical sequence of words on the left of the screen. This is known as **List by entry** order. This allows you to click on a nearby word easily. You might (but don't try it yet!) want to see what on earth *strivable* means. However, this side frame also allows you to display a 'map' of the numbered senses of the word you are looking at. The usefulness of this will be more apparent if we turn off all the buttons showing pronunciation, etc. (even quotations). Just leave the senses showing. Then click on **Entry Map** and here is what you will see:

OED Online - strive, v. - Netscape

File Edit View Go Communicator Help

Back Forward Reload Home Search Netscape Print Security Stop

Bookmarks Location: type=alpha&edition=2e&first=1&max_to_show=10&search_id=VTJL-Rxcy0h-926

Oxford English Dictionary **FIND WORD**

RESULTS **strive, v.** **SECOND EDITION 1989**

P
S
E

1
2
b
3
b
c
d
e
f
4
5

PRONUNCIATION **SPELLINGS** **ETYMOLOGY** **QUOTATIONS** **DATE CHART**

1. intr. To be in a state of variance or mutual hostility.
? Obs.

2. To quarrel, wrangle. Now *rare (poet.)*.

†b. To bandy words with a superior; to behave mutinously. *Const. with, against. Obs.*

3. To contend, carry on a conflict of any kind; *esp.* to contend with another or each other *for* (the possession of) something or *for* (a cause or principle).

SEARCH **LIST BY ENTRY** **LIST BY DATE** **ENTRY MAP** **PRINT** **MAIL** **HELP**

SUBSCRIBER: Oxford English Dictionary **SIGN OUT**

The first five senses now show clearly. The screen shows as far as **3b**. But the map at the left tells you that there is further to go. If you scroll down on the right hand scroll bar you will see the later sense definitions. If you want to go direct to a sense, use the links in the **Entry Map**. Each letter or number takes you at once to one or other of the sense definitions.

This facility is handy if you want to look closely at the organisation of the senses. In a short dictionary the senses will probably be unnumbered. *OED* editors have clearly put a lot of work into relating senses. For a fuller explanation of this see [Berg \(1993\)⁵](#). It can be useful when you are looking at a word with a very long list of senses (e.g. *drive* v.).

For the moment concentrate on the fact that **3b** to **3f** are all regarded as later developments of sense **3**. This means that sense **4** might have come into the language at a date before **3b**, **c**, **d**, **e** or **f**. You will need to turn on the quotations and the Date Chart again to check this. So remember that numbers in an *OED* list of senses are in historical order, but lettered subsenses may start a separate dating sequence. Thus **3b** is an older sense than **3c** and so on.

6.2. *strived/striven* - *strove/strived*?

So what can we conclude about the parts of this verb? The list of spellings we saw earlier tells you which spellings occur in the citations under the various senses. If you want to look quickly at all the examples of *striven*, say, then you can just use your browser's **Find** function (click in the entry frame, then select **Find** from the **Edit** menu at the top of the browser window). This will allow you to look at each example of *striven* in turn. Then do the same for *strived* and *strove*.

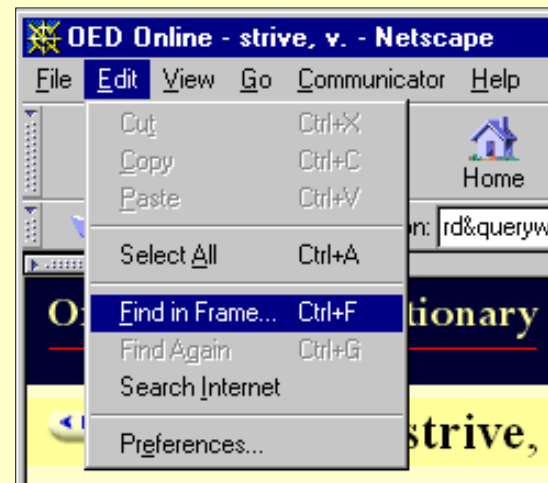
It becomes clear that all forms have been used. The verb was originally a 'strong' one (with forms like *strove* and *striven* which undergo alterations of form) but has increasingly come under pressure to regularise and use the form *strived*.

6.3. Using wildcards

The scope of Find Word searches can be expanded considerably by using wildcard elements in searches. The two wildcard characters are:

- * (any number of letters including none)
- ? (any single letter)

So type in **osis* in the Find Word box and up will come no less than 610 items in a display which looks like this:



OED Online - search results - Netscape

File Edit View Go Communicator Help

Back Forward Reload Home Search Netscape Print Security Stop

Bookmarks Location: http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/findword?query_type=word&queryword=*osis

Oxford English Dictionary FIND WORD

2^e SECOND EDITION: results 1-10 of 610
NEW There are also results in the New Edition

10 per page **SHOW**

- 1 [acanthosis, n.](#)
- 2 [acchymosis](#)
- 3 [accident neurosis](#) found in [accident, n.](#)
- 4 [acidosis](#)
- 5 [acrocyanosis](#) found in [acro-, comb. form](#)
- 6 [actinobacillosis](#)
- 7 [actinomycosis](#) found in [actinomyces](#)
- 8 [adiposis](#)
- 9 [aerobiosis](#) found in [aerobe](#)
- 10 [agranulocytosis](#) found in [agranulocyte](#)

MORE beginning at

SEARCH **LIST BY ENTRY** **LIST BY DATE** **ENTRY MAP** **PRINT** **MAIL** **HELP**

SUBSCRIBER: Oxford English Dictionary **SIGN OUT**

Document: Done

Showing in the window are 10 headwords which match the pattern. You can scroll to the remainder using the **More** button. If you look top right you will see that you can opt to change the number of items displayed, and personally I find it quicker to go the maximum of 100 items per page (remember to click **Show** to alter the display).

We now have a useful way of searching for English derivational morphology. You should check through at least some of the headwords to see that you are not getting items which only accidentally conform to the pattern. [Later](#) we shall explore a way of searching a little more precisely for morphological elements. In the case of this suffix, which is not readily confusable with anything else, the 610 is probably a good estimate of the number of such words in English. Not surprisingly they are mostly scientific terms.

This kind of search proves the worth of the electronic version. You can find out easily how many words in English begin with the prefix *hetero-* in either the paper or the online version of *OED* (though the latter does the counting for you), but looking for suffixes can only be done electronically.

7. 'Find Word' assignments

Here are some tasks based on the features you have covered so far.

7.0. Linguistics jargon

What can you learn about the history of linguistics terminology using the *OED*? Try Find Word searches on the list of words below, noting the dates of first use of each word, and any cases where you think the term may be obsolete. In some cases (e.g. *accent*) the word will have lots of other uses, so you may have to look hard for the linguistic uses.

- accent (more than one sense relevant in linguistics)
- analogy
- dialect
- glottology (and glossology)
- homonym
- linguist (in the sense 'practitioner of linguistics')
- linguistics
- morpheme
- philology
- phoneme
- phonology
- synonym

7.1. Spelling choices

Use the *OED* to find out what you can about the status of *-eled* and *-elled* spellings. Standard textbooks tell you that UK English prefers *travelled*, for example, to US *traveled*, but how many words does this kind of problem arise in and what does the *OED* story tell you about whether British usage has always preferred the *-elled* spelling?

(Doubling of written consonants at the end of verbs is one of the trickier corners of English spelling. If you want to probe further, find out what the *OED* says about *biased/biassed*.)

7.2. Use of derivational morphemes

Use the *OED* to find out how many words in English exist which are built up on the pattern of initial *ex-*, *dis-*, and *re-*, and ending with *-ify* (e.g. *exemplify* or *reify* would match). These are all basic word formation elements, but the *OED* allows you to check what has been produced using these elements. Be careful to check your lists to see that all the words found truly fit into the patterns.

7.3. Irregular verbs

Look into the forms of the verb *dive* to see what you can find out about the form *dove*, usually cited as US usage nowadays.

8. Using the Search button for more sophisticated searches

The **Search** button opens up various types of more elaborate search. When you do a Find Word search you look up only a list of 'headwords', the words on which each dictionary entry is hung. Full Text searching means that you can look for a word in any part of the dictionary in fact in any of the information 'fields' in the entries such as the definition text, the quotation text, the etymology and so on. Not all fields are searchable - pronunciation, for example, or symbols such as ¶ which *OED* uses to mark 'mistaken' forms of words - but most are.

Starting at the beginning of a session and then pressing the **Search** button reveals the following screen:

The screenshot shows the Netscape browser window displaying the OED Online homepage. The browser's address bar contains the URL `http://dictionary.oed.com/entrance.dtl`. The page header includes the title "Oxford English Dictionary" and a search box labeled "FIND WORD". Below the header, the main content area features a large heading "Welcome to *OED Online*". A search filter menu is open, showing a list of search options: "full text", "definitions", "etymologies", "quotations", "quotation date", "quotation author", "quotation work", and "quotation text". The "full text" option is currently selected. To the right of the menu, the text "How to search:" is followed by instructions on how to use the search function. At the bottom of the page, there are several navigation buttons: "SEARCH", "LIST BY ENTRY", "LIST BY DATE", "ENTRY MAP", "PRINT", "MAIL", "HELP", and "SIGN OUT". The browser's status bar at the bottom indicates "Document: Done".

I have opened up the list of possible choices in the second box down on the left. You can look for a word in any of the listed 'fields'. Most of these are self-explanatory. 'Full text' means that every single field is searched. 'Quotation work' means that you can search the abbreviated titles of works from which quotations come (e.g. to find out how often a particular book is quoted). This button and its options are what you use if you want to find the maximum number of occurrences of a word in the entire dictionary.

8.0. Investigating *grotty*

To show the differences between a Find Word search and a Full Text search, do a Find Word search for the word *grotty*.

You will be taken straight to the headword *grotty a*. You will find that it is classed as a slang word, and that it is first cited in 1964. The connection to Beatlemania is not brought out as explicitly as it might be, but nevertheless its usage is pretty well illustrated.

Now click on **Search** and fill in the **Search for...** box with *grotty* and select **full text** in the menu box below. Then click on **Start Search**. You will get the following display:

OED Online - search results - Netscape

File Edit View Go Communicator Help

Back Forward Reload Home Search Netscape Print Security Stop

Bookmarks Location: http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/search?query_type=fulltext&queryword=grotty&search_spec=fulltext

Oxford English Dictionary

2^e SECOND EDITION: results 1-10 of 17
 NEW There are no results in the New Edition

10 per page SHOW

SEARCH FOR... LISTED BY ENTRY NAME LIST BY DATE

grotty

IN full text

START SEARCH MORE OPTIONS

1	grody, a.	1965	English. Cf. grotty a.]
2	grody, a.	1965	688/1 Groaty, grotty .., slovenly, ugly. Teenage use.
3	grot, a.	1967	form of grotty a.
4	grot, a.	1967	Grot, from grotty , itself derived from grotesque.
5	grotty, a.	1964	grotty , a.slang.
6	grotty, a.	1964	They're dead grotty ! Marshall stared. ' Grotty
7	grotty, a.	1964	felt dead grotty .
8	grotty, a.	1964	match ' grotty ' which seemingly means disappointing.
9	grotty, a.	1964	sound pretty grotty when they're scrambled.
10	grotty, a.	1964	ruin-dirty, really grotty , but with obvious potential.

SEARCH LIST BY ENTRY LIST BY DATE ENTRY MAP PRINT MAIL HELP

SUBSCRIBER: Oxford English Dictionary SIGN OUT

Document: Done

Using a term which is not 'OED-speak', but commonly used in the database world, you will get no less than seventeen 'hits'. The first 10 items in the list of headwords and brief contexts appear in the main bit of the screen. Seventeen is a lot better than 1, but do not be over-impressed. No less than eight of these hits turn out to be located in the entry for *grotty* which you have already read, and two more occur under the word *grot*, which you *might* have thought of looking for by scrolling a little higher in the alphabetic listing shown to the left of the entry. However, that still leaves seven occurrences which you can explore by clicking on the links. You will find your knowledge of sixties slang much expanded by the experience! A particularly gorgeous quotation turns up in an extract from a *Porridge* script - 'you are a grotty, nurkish git'. It would be harder to find a more telling indication of the contexts in which you might use *grotty*!

To summarise, using a Full Text search is likely to produce more contexts of use for a word than you will find in the illustrative quotations under just the headword alone. If you are lucky you will get many more. This is something which could only happen by accident in the paper version of the dictionary. Only the availability of an electronic index to pretty well every word in the *OED* makes this possible, and it increases the usefulness of the electronic dictionary enormously.

At once you will see that you could repeat searches you have already done and get more results. I will leave it to you to do a Full Text search for such forms as *strived*, *striven*, *strove* and *dove*. You will find what you looked at before, plus other instances scattered throughout the dictionary and occurring in quotations for other headwords.

8.1. Searching the dictionary 'apparatus'

So far all your searches have involved searching for words, parts of words, etc., which you believe are in the dictionary, but the full power of the **Search** button is perhaps appreciated if you think about the dictionary's technical language. You need to spend some time looking at how entries are organised in order to appreciate what you can get out of this type of search.

Let us dive in with a question about slang. True, the *OED* is not a slang dictionary as such, but it contains an enormous amount of information about slang. If you do a Full Text search for *slang* you will be overwhelmed by 14553 hits, which is impossible to deal with, so we shall be more selective.

8.2. Australian slang

Many commentators on English in the last half century have noted the growing importance of Australia as a source of creative usage in English. This is reflected in the considerable presence of Australian slang. So how do we winkle out the Australian slang? First take some time to look up one or two items of Australian slang you know, for example *cobber* or *dinkum*. Notice carefully how the items are labelled in the entries. You will soon see that the *OED* uses both *Aust.* and *Austral.* to mark Australian items (one of many such inconsistencies - read the Abbreviations table in Help very carefully!) Look at where the term *slang* occurs. Does it tend to come just before or just after the national indicator? Once you know what to look for you can start your search. Any 'let's find out what's in there' searches should be planned out in this way.

Click on **Search** and then on **More options**. You will find that you can do searches for two items (words or word patterns involving wildcards) at a time at varying distances apart (1 word, 2 words or less, 5 words or less, 10 words or less). Do the search illustrated on the right.

SEARCH FOR...

IN


▼

▼

before



after

before or after

 **START SEARCH**

This will pick up 967 examples in the Second Edition and more in the New Edition. This is still probably too long a list to look through, but if you scan a sample of the cases which come up you will see that the amount of 'dross' (i.e. items which are not really Australian slang) is quite low.

How do you know which field(s) to search for the best results? Experience will give you confidence. I tried the following earlier versions of this search:

SEARCH FOR... <input type="text" value="slang"/> IN <input type="text" value="etymologies"/> <input type="text" value="10 words or fewer"/> <input type="radio"/> before <input type="radio"/> after <input checked="" type="radio"/> before or after <input type="text" value="aust *"/> 	SEARCH FOR... <input type="text" value="slang"/> IN <input type="text" value="definitions"/> <input type="text" value="10 words or fewer"/> <input type="radio"/> before <input type="radio"/> after <input checked="" type="radio"/> before or after <input type="text" value="aust *"/> 
--	---

You will find that looking in the definition only is quite productive, with 404 hits in the Second Edition, but very well known items such as *abo* are missed by this search. Looking in the etymologies field only was not very productive, adding only 2 hits.

As you can see, 'full text' captures more than any other option, but usually produces more dross.

It is usually safer to look in 'full text' mode. There are many inconsistencies in the way data has been entered in *OED*, reflecting its long production history, so that you cannot count on the information you are seeking being entered precisely the same way every time. A label like 'slang' may be placed at the start of an entry, or it may be tied to only one of a series of definitions. Searching only one field may miss items of interest.

9. Assignments using the Search button

You should be able to work out how to perform the following tasks.

9.0. Rhyming slang

You should be able to dig out quite a lot of rhyming slang. Start by looking up entries for *titfer* and *plates of meat*. (The last one is a phrase, but just do a Find Word search.) How many rhyming slang expressions did you find? How many of those are in current use?

9.1. English vocabulary from other languages

The *OED* contains numberless words from French, Latin and Greek, but it is worth looking for some other languages. How far have we absorbed vocabulary from Portuguese and Dutch, languages of great seafaring countries? And what about Malay, Urdu, and other languages which reflect colonial experiences? Start by looking up some words you know are from foreign sources (try *mango*, *rattan*, *ketchup*, *weltschmerz* or *satsuma* if you feel stuck at this point) then check carefully in the [Abbreviations table](#) (in Help) to get a few language abbreviations which you can then look for. Give a report on the languages and numbers of words you have found. If the number of words is manageable, try to summarise what kind of vocabulary items they are (e.g. relating to business, social life, academic worlds, etc.). Some of the words you find may be marked with a tramline || to signify that the word is not (yet) nativized in English according to the *OED* editors. Watch for this feature and see if you agree. Unfortunately there is no way of searching for this symbol⁶.

In relation to words of Indian origin some care is needed. Quite a lot of terms which came through the colonial experience are labelled *Anglo-Indian*. This term in itself has a complex history and is worth looking up. Often a specific language is indicated as well. Apart from Urdu try Hindi, Hindustani and Marathi.

9.2. Collocational relationships

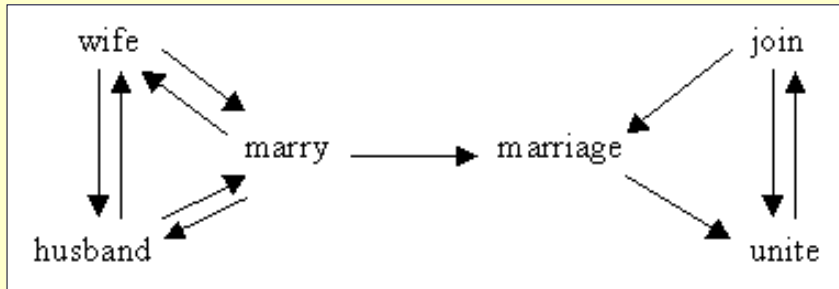
The words *large* and *big* are similar in meaning, but not identical in their distribution in expressions. You all know *big deal* and *large size*, but **large deal* is not at all OK. Maybe you feel doubtful about *big size*. We are looking at the *collocational patterning* of two common size adjectives⁷. The *OED* can help us find out more about these relationships - with care. The main precaution is that you have to look carefully at the dates of quotations in which you find. Find out whether the *OED* helps you to verify that *big money* is an English expression while *large money* is not. Check out some of the earlier expressions, and think of other common collocates of *big* or *large* which you could test out. You should be able to figure out how to use the **Search** facilities to find evidence.

10. The interrelatedness of definitions and meanings

Lexical semantics teaches students that word meanings can, up to a point, be systematically described. Concepts such as *synonymy*, *antonymy*, and *hyponymy* have been used to describe the 'sense relations' which words can enter into⁸. Standard exercises involve students in deciding which of the following are examples of the larger category *vehicle*: *car*, *train*, *plane*, *bicycle*, *scooter*, etc., or in investigating the different kinds of 'oppositeness' represented by *hot/cold* and *give/take*.

How much of this systematic lexical information is built into a dictionary? These relationships are, after all, important for foreign learners of a language. However, the task of specifying the many interrelationships within the dictionary is so huge that for native speakers most of it is taken for granted. But dictionary definitions have to be written in a form which is compact and dependent on other words in the language. Would you expect, for example, that a dictionary should make it clear that a *tulip* is a kind of *flower*, possibly by incorporating the word 'flower' in the definition? This is explored in [Hurford & Heasley \(1983\)](#) and they demonstrate that one of the smaller Oxford dictionaries does, in fact, build a certain amount of information into definitions.

Here is an example from [Hurford & Heasley \(1983 p179\)](#) of how you might trace the interconnectedness of definitions in a dictionary. The definition of *husband* mentions *wife* and *vice versa* in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, so an arrow runs each way in the diagram.



You might expect that a definition of *tulip* or *daffodil* would include the word *flower* in the definition, thus recognizing the relationship of hyponymy. But does the dictionary actually spell out this information, or does it rely on native speakers already possessing all this knowledge before they use the dictionary?

You can use *OED* to investigate sense relationships.

10.0. Step 1: Select the lexicon

First, select a not too long list of words. For this example I shall use some 'human locomotion' verbs, which is a rich lexical set in English: *run*, *walk*, *stroll*, *toddle*, *trudge*, *tramp*, *march* will do to start with. The idea is to explore how the more specialised words relate to *walk*, and to note any other cross references in the definitions.

10.1. Step 2: Identify the relevant senses for each word

Go to each of these verbs in turn and find the relevant sense. This may take a little time, but you are looking for the 'central' human locomotion sense. When you find that sense note down the definition. (If you have *Word* running at the same time, you can copy and paste just the sense into the document.)

10.2. Step 3: Compare the definitions

Find and mark any cross-referring words in the definitions.

10.3. Step 4: Draw a map

Try to draw a 'map' like the Hurford & Heasley example to demonstrate where the links between definitions are.

Here is the list of most relevant senses for the wordlist:

march

1. a. intr. To walk in a military manner with regular and measured tread; of a body of men or troops, to walk in step, to go forward with a regular and uniform movement. Also, to begin to walk in step; to start on a march, to set out from quarters. Also with advbs., as *away, forth, forward, off, on, out, past*.

run

1. a. To move the legs quickly (the one foot being lifted before the other is set down) so as to go at a faster pace than walking; to cover the ground, make one's way, rapidly in this manner.

stroll

2. a. To walk or ramble in a careless, haphazard, or leisurely fashion as inclination directs; often simply to take a walk.

toddle

2. To walk or run with short unsteady steps, as a child just beginning to walk, an aged or invalid person; also said of a similar walk or run of any animal.

tramp

1. intr. To tread or walk with a firm, heavy, resonant step; to stamp.

trudge

1. intr. To walk laboriously, wearily, or without spirit, but steadily and persistently; 'to jog on; to march heavily on' (J.). Sometimes merely an undignified equivalent of 'walk', 'go on foot'.

walk

II. intr. To journey, move about, esp. on foot.

In this case, the goal is to see whether the general term *walk* occurs in the definitions, since they might all be conceived to be different kinds of *walking*. In fact *walk* occurs in all definitions (except *walk* itself) in two forms *walk* and *walking*.

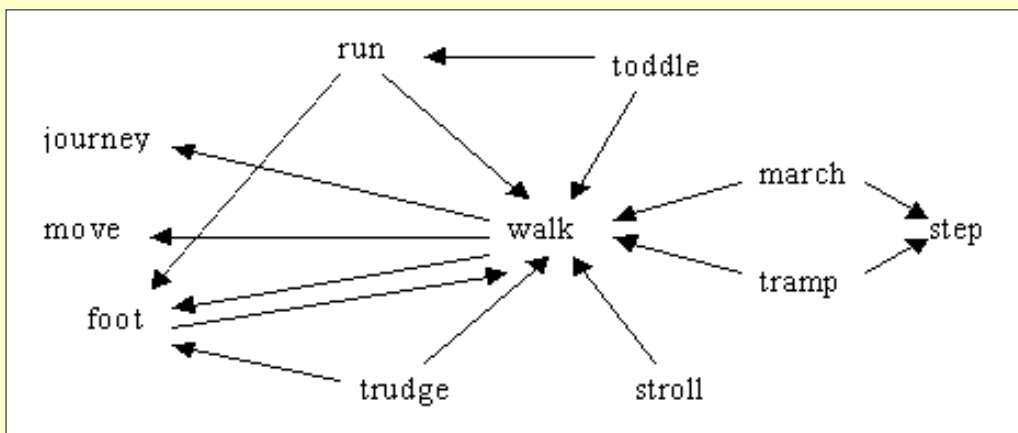
run occurs in the definition of *toddle*.

foot links *walk* with both *run* and *trudge*.

As far as *walk* itself is concerned, this is defined in terms of *move* and *journey*, which link to more general level vocabulary elements.

The relationship to *tread* needs to be investigated further. It was not in my original list, but it comes up under *tramp*.

Here is one way of diagrammatizing the relationships:



As you can see there is confirmation of my feeling that the words for special kinds of walking should include *walk* in the definition. To that extent hyponymous relations are recognised, though without the term being used. But in addition other features of a typical dictionary are used, mainly the occasional uses of (near) synonyms.

The sensible conclusion must be that a dictionary can only informally represent the formal structures which semanticians might want to set up for studying lexical relations.

11. Assignment on tracing sense networks

Now try to investigate a word-set of your own, following the above method. Try the set of words such as *fat*, *plump*, *chubby*, etc., or words for buildings and their parts - *roof*, *wall*, etc.

12. Searching for morphological elements again

Does the full **Search** menu open up other possibilities of looking for morphological elements? To some extent, yes.

This time we will try to look for words containing final *-kin*. This is a piece of English morphology which has been used to form words with diminutive meanings such as *mannikin* and *munchkin*. How many such words are there in English? Are any of them recent? First choose a Find Word search, typing in the pattern **kin*. You will end up with a list of 729 hits in the Second Edition alone, but with quite a lot of dross. You will find quite a lot of compounds with *skin*, which are irrelevant.

Now try searching for *kin* in the etymology field using the **Search** button. The results are many fewer, 169, and the quality is much better. You may be missing a few examples, because the *OED* sometimes puts information about morphological structure in the definitions field. In my earlier examples, I compensated by doing a Full Text search, but if you do this with *kin* you will get lots of dross because the word *kin* = 'relatives' will turn up very frequently.

Once again, note that it would be good to be able to search specifically for *-kin* or *+kin*, which *OED* uses in the etymologies, but the absence of symbol searching renders this impossible.

13. Assignment on morphological elements

Now try looking for words ending in *-nik*. This suffix came into English from Russian by detachment from the 50s loanword *sputnik*. The suffix may now have died, but how many words has it helped to create? You will find that the suffix itself has a good entry. First use a Find Word search, then use the **Search** button and look in fields where this morphological element might be found.

14. Studying meaning changes

The *OED* is the best source for studying changes of meaning. It is a popular illusion that dictionaries are instruments for creating word meanings, or at any rate for holding the fort against the 'decay' of meanings through the careless practices of inattentive speakers. A popular view of language has it that we are all, deep-down, Mrs Malaprops, misunderstanding the 'true' meanings

of words - or at any rate of the more upmarket words - and causing confusion thereby. The dictionary is therefore seen to be a prescriptive and even a proscriptive instrument, in the same way that a grammar book is thought to contain 'laws' of the language which we ought to obey. The *OED* is particularly likely to be seen as an enforcer of standards rather than as a mere recorder of meanings. Actually, it has in practice to steer a subtle course between these two extremes of recording what actually happens to meanings and trying to provide a guide to lexical usage in standard English. It does not claim to specialize in slang and colloquial usage, though in fact it contains a great deal of information about these aspects of English.

As mentioned earlier, the original editors planned to make the *OED* record the history of English vocabulary. In that respect they showed the predominantly historical motivation of many branches of Victorian learning. It can therefore be very useful for finding out about how word meanings have changed and developed.

14.0. The *OED* and controversial usage - *disinterested*

If you think that the *OED* ought to tell users the correct senses of words, then you might like to look at how it deals with one of the words over which arguments often break out - *disinterested*. Eager defenders of good English claim that this word is widely misused to mean 'uninterested in' and therefore condemn uses such as *Harry was disinterested in computers*. They feel that if the word is 'allowed' to be used in this way a meaning distinction is being lost and therefore the language will in some sense be poorer. (Such people feel the same about pairs of words which often cause confusion such as *perceptive* and *percipient*. English has a lot of word sets like this.)

To use the *OED* to throw light on this problem, you will need to look up and read carefully the entries for both *uninterested* and *disinterested* (and for a number of related words as well if you have time). You will find that the editors do mention the usage problem - though they distance themselves from the simple-minded view outlined above that *disinterested* never ought to be allowed to mean 'uninterested in'. In fact you will find that this confusion about *disinterested* goes a long way back and the supposedly incorrect (the editors allow the term 'loose') meaning is, in fact, the earliest one mentioned! Even more interesting, there is evidence for *uninterested* at one time having been used to mean 'not having a financial or other stake in' - precisely what the usage defenders tell us is the 'proper' meaning of *disinterested*! In other words, you can see that there has been a long-term confusion affecting *two* words and not just one. If you think about it this is hardly surprising because both *un-* and *dis-* are used as negative prefixes in English. Which one becomes combined with a following adjective can be somewhat arbitrary (*unhappy*, **dishappy*, *disagreeable*, *?unagreeable*).

14.1. Sudden change in context

Word meanings do not change very quickly, but sometimes words do seem to alter their usage in a few years. A good example of this is the history of *gay*, which has undergone rapidly a process of semantic restriction. It has come to be used to mean 'homosexual' virtually to the exclusion of older (and for some die-hard speakers still perfectly useful) senses such as 'bright and cheerful'. The *OED* gives an indication of how this might have come about. In particular you will see that the now dominant modern sense was, in fact, lurking about probably from the 1930s. There is also evidence that the word has meant 'loose/immoral' since the 1660s and been linked to prostitution since the 1820s.

14.2. A word 'field'

Because dictionaries are organised for alphabetic looking up, with headwords printed in bold type, they tend to encourage another simple-minded view of language, that each word is a unique little island of meaning. Nothing could be further from the truth. The vocabulary is just as much a structured set of relations as the rest of language.

You can get a feel for this if you look up the entries for transport words, a large set of items which underwent enormous changes from the 1820s up to today. I suggest you look at the entries for *car*, *carriage*, *coach*, *lorry*, *train*, *truck*, and *van* to start with. All of these were words which existed before the modes of transport we now associate them with existed. If you read the citations, you will see how English speakers struggled to find new terms to name the technological innovations which came along first with steam and later with the internal-combustion engine. You will see, for example, that early on we got *train* by shortening the expression *train of carriages*, which is how a journalist attempted to describe the strange new sight of the Stockton to Darlington railway. Later on, when motorised transport came in, you will see how innovation in the UK and the USA led to the *lorry/truck* split in usage. At present, is *lorry* actually on the way out, to be displaced in the end by US usage?

14.3. Do we really need a thesaurus rather than a dictionary?

By this point we are perhaps pressing on the limits of a dictionary. In order to make sense of the meanings for a set of words, you need to sit with a large piece of paper, with dates in decades down one side, marking in when particular senses emerge for each word in the set. This is not easy for more than a word or two. The other familiar lexical tool is the *thesaurus*. This is as much misunderstood as the dictionary, being thought of as a place to find ingenious synonyms. The principles of a thesaurus are, however, to show more clearly than a dictionary can how sets of words are related semantically. A historical thesaurus would tell us more, but the huge effort of producing such a description of the vocabulary does not come within the plans of even a big international lexicography publisher as the Oxford University Press. For many years, however, the Glasgow University English Department has been working on a historical thesaurus of some areas of English vocabulary.

15. Assignment in discriminating senses

Try investigating the word fields of *film* and *tank*, following the example of *train* etc. above.

Take some areas of 'faulty' usage, e.g. confusions between *flaunt* and *flout*, *apprise/appraise*, *parameter/perimeter*, and see whether the *OED* does anything explicitly to clear up confusions of usage.

16. Dates and meanings

The **Search** button allows you to search for quotation dates by specifying individual dates, or ranges of dates as follows:

1970	1970 only
1970-	From 1970 onwards
-1970	Up to 1970
1970-1980	Between 1970 and 1980

The date or date range is typed into the **Search for...** box, and the 'quotation dates' field is selected. If you wanted to find all the quotations illustrating usage in the early seventies you might put in 1970-1973. This would bring up no less than 44283 quotations.

Unfortunately, it is not yet possible to combine quotation date searches with other types of search, e.g. to find out how many quotations from 1970 onwards contain words which end in *-osis*.

The search illustrated on the right can be used to find 1970s quotations containing words ending in *-osis*, but note that the field selected is *quotations* rather than either 'quotation dates' or 'quotation text', since only the 'quotations' field will contain both items. The use of this field has a couple of consequences:

1. A wildcard can be used in the date, but date ranges cannot be used (so we can find 1970s quotations with **197?**, or 20th-century quotations with **19??**, but not quotations from 1970 onwards except by doing separate searches with **198?** and **199?**).
2. There could be a small amount of dross in the search results. For example, a match for **197?** might not be the date of the quotation - it could be a page number. Similarly, a match for ***osis** might not occur in the text of the quotation - it could occur in the title of the work being cited.

SEARCH FOR...

IN


▾

▾

before

after

before or after

 **START SEARCH**

17. Assignment on quotation dates

Using the method just shown, see if you can find out anything about post-1970 quotations illustrating words ending in *-mania* and *-holic* (and any other word parts which you think have been used in creating English lexicon recently).

18. And yet more searches...

There are many more uses the *OED* could be put to, but the ones I have covered should be more than enough to get you started. Here are one or two more suggestions. For both you will probably need to check the **Abbreviations** material in **Help** so that you know exactly what you are looking for.

If you do a **quotation author** search, you will find out how many times that author is cited as exemplifying a usage. It is not worth looking for Shakespeare, because he is mentioned so many times but you might like to try to look for Raymond Chandler, P. G. Wodehouse and John Lennon, each in his way a minor cultural icon of the twentieth century. You might also look to see how often female novelists (e.g. Jane Austen, George Eliot, Mary Wollestonecraft-Shelley, Iris Murdoch, etc.) get in as opposed to male ones (Charles Dickens, W. M. Thackeray, D. H. Lawrence, etc.).

A variant of this is a **quotation work** search, to see, for example, whether quality newspapers, (*Times*, *Daily Telegraph* (usually cited '*Daily Tel.*'), etc.) have been cited more often than popular ones (*Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Sun* (?!?!)).

19. Creating printed and file output

You may want to hold on to bits of what you find in your searches, if only to paste into reports. You must read the licensing conditions very carefully (on the [legal notice](#) link at the start of a session) because the legitimate uses of the *OED* material are limited, but you are allowed to print out material which you find and to save portions of the *OED* electronically.

19.0. Printing

Do NOT use the browser's **Print** function first, but the **Print** button in the bottom right-hand corner of the window. This transforms the normal screen display into a slightly differently structured HTML document which can then be sent to a printer by using the browser's **Print** function⁹. You can print individual word entries, or lists of hits when you are doing the more complicated searches.

Read the [Help material about printing](#).

19.1. Saving files

When in the **Print** viewing state, open up the browser's **File** menu and select **Save As**. This will offer the opportunity to save the file to a certain directory. This file could then be incorporated for quoting in a document, but please respect the *OED* copyright markers.

You will find that you can save as plain text also, if you force the file extension to **.txt** instead of **.htm**. This creates a fairly plain text file which might be more useful for incorporating into another document.

In both cases the maximum number of hits you can copy at a time is 100, the maximum number you can display. This means that if you have a list of over 100 items you will have to save it in bits and then reassemble it later.

20. Leaving *OED Online*

Use the **Sign Out** button to leave *OED Online* gracefully.

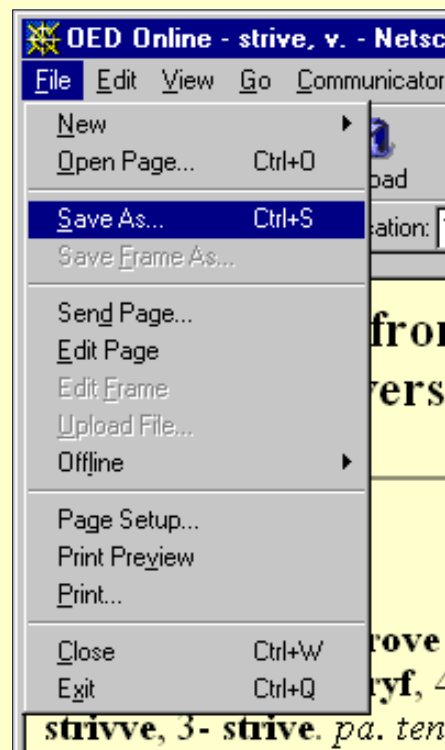
21. References

Berg, Donna Lee (1993) *A Guide to the Oxford English Dictionary* Oxford/New York, Clarendon Press.

Cruse, Alan (1986) *Lexical Semantics* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Hurford, James R & Heasley, Brendan (1983) *Semantics: a coursebook* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Stubbs, Michael (1993) *Text and Corpus Analysis* Oxford, Blackwell.



Footnotes

1. 1341 for the noun and 1594 for the verb, as it happens.
2. The full details of accessing the dictionary vary between institutions. For example, the dictionary may be accessible via a menu item on a network. This section describes the general method of gaining access.
3. Quite soon you can test whether this is an established word or a 'nonce form' I have made up!
4. See the opening *OED* web pages for information about the current history of the [editions of the OED](#), especially the [current state of the 'New Edition'](#).
5. Briefly, senses are numbered in arabic numbers **1**, **2**, etc. Subsenses within these are marked **a**, **b**, etc., though often **a** is implied as in the above examples. Where a word has very divergent sense groups (look at the noun *watch*, but it will take you some time to go through the meanings carefully), major divisions are numbered in large roman **I**, **II**, etc. Where an entry covers two different parts of speech, the senses are divided **A**, **B**, etc. For example, **A** might contain the noun senses and **B** the verb senses.
6. The tramline symbol has been abandoned in the New Edition, replaced by a comment "Not fully naturalized in English" (or a variant on this) in the etymology. So you can search for, say, "naturalized in English" in the 'etymologies' field to find these entries in the New Edition.
7. On collocation see [Stubbs \(1996\)](#).
8. See for example [Cruse \(1986\)](#) on lexical semantics.
9. In the normal form of entry display, the headword and definition are in different frames, which cannot both be printed together on the same sheet.