

HOW-TO GUIDE

Exploring OED quotations



What is the purpose of an OED quotation?

Entries in the *OED* are supported by quotation evidence with real examples of words in use shown throughout the written record.

The primary function of *OED* quotations is to illustrate the way a word or sense is used through its history from its earliest use to the present day or, in the case of obsolete words and senses, the last period during which it was in use.

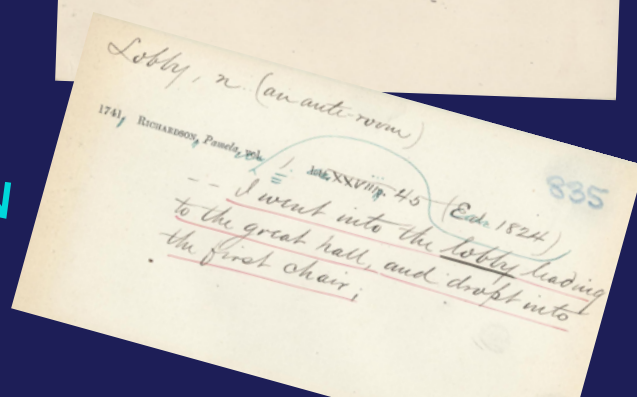
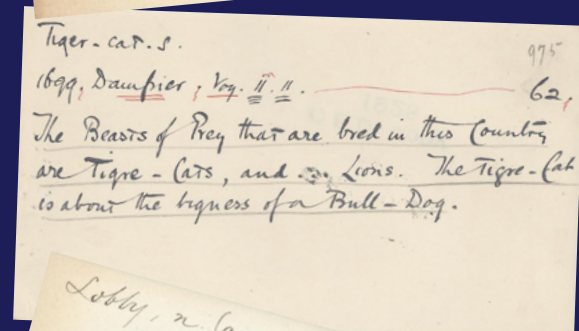
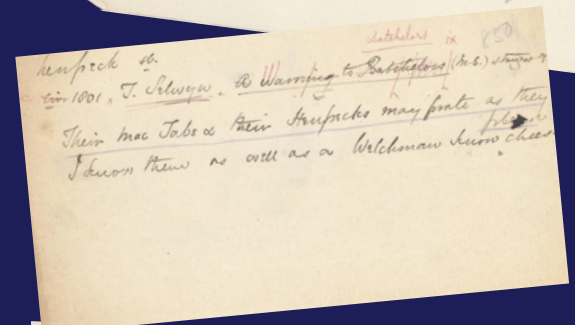
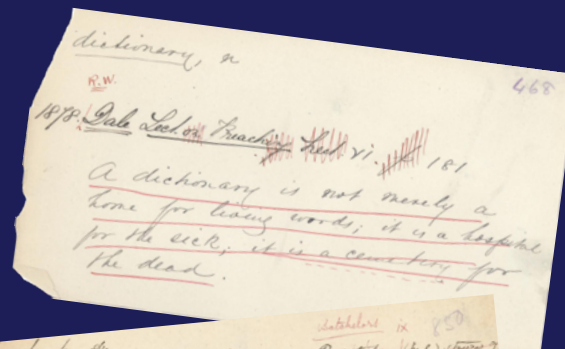
Where do OED quotations come from?

When researching evidence of a word's usage, *OED* editors gather information from lots of different sources, including:

- language corpora
- books and periodicals
- libraries and archives
- external online digitized text databases and websites
- examples cited by other historical dictionaries
- social media
- material produced by our own specialist reading programmes
- the *OED*'s historical slips files

Where possible corpus analysis is used to guide the selection of quotations (e.g. by establishing typical patterns of use), but there is no single corpus from which such information is drawn, nor one which acts as a default or preferred source for the examples chosen.

Examples of OED historical slips



What information does a quotation contain?

Almost every sense and lemma of every *OED* entry includes a set of quotations from a wide range of sources, to illustrate the uses being defined, and to show when, where, and how a particular term was used.

Each quotation includes a date, details of the source from which the quotation is taken, any relevant location details, as well as the quotation text itself.



b. Sport (originally *North American*). In plural. In an informal game played without different team colours: the members of the team who play in shirts to distinguish themselves from the opposing team who have removed them. Opposed to *SKIN* *n.* 22.

1930 E. M. DRAPER & G. M. SMITH *Intramural Athletics & Play Days* iii. 25 Four ways of meeting this problem are: 1. To have one team remove shirts. The game then becomes 'skins versus shirts' [etc.].

1994 I. BOTHAM *My Autobiogr.* vi. 112 We did not have any bibs so it was to be skins against shirts.

2006 *Winnipeg Sun* (Nexis) 6 Mar. s8 Shirts and skins on an Olympic-sized piece of pavement with regulation boards.

(Hide quotations)

Thesaurus »
Categories »

Sense 3.b. of the *OED* entry for *shirt*, *n.*

The typical format of a quotation taken from a book is:

- date of first publication, author's name (if there is one), short-title of work, date of publication of edition used (if there is one), location in text (often chapter and page), quotation text (original spelling)

Dotted underlining is a feature of *OED* Online and is used to indicate the dictionary headword, so that the reader can quickly identify the headword in the quotation. This is particularly useful when the original spelling differs from the headword spelling.

The typical format of a quotation from a periodical is:

- date of publication, short-title of work, date of issue, location in text, quotation text

The first quotation in any block of illustrative quotations is always the earliest example that was available to editors when the entry was prepared, so the first quotation you see here is the first known written use of 'shirt' in this sense.

Quotations are selected to show typical usage of a word or sense over the period of time it is in use, or fell out of use, and might also demonstrate:

- the geographical spread of the term
- the types of sources (genre, etc.) in which it occurs
- typical registers of use

Quotations are normally taken from the first edition of the work cited, though there are sometimes reasons for citing other editions.

The last quotation dates from the modern period, or the period at which a word is seen to fall into disuse.

What does the information mean?

Around an entire quotation

Square brackets ([]) around a quotation are used to indicate that a quotation is relevant to the sense but not directly illustrative of the word.

Within the quotation

Double dates:

Occasionally you may see two dates at the beginning of a quotation, as in this example:

?a1300 (▷ a1250) *Harrowing of Hell* (Digby) (1907) 98 (MED) Stille, satanas! Þe is fallen aumbesas [v.rr. ambes aas; amesas].

Here the first date indicates that this is a manuscript from probably before 1300 ; the symbol preceding the bracketed date indicates a date of composition, and in this case before the year 1250.

Often, double dates will typically be shown when we cite from the paperback edition of a book which will have come out later than the hardback version, and might have slightly different pagination:

2003 D. BROWN *Da Vinci Code* (2004) v. 49 His 14-carat gold bishop's ring with purple amethyst, large diamonds and hand-tooled mitre-crozier appliqué.

Words shown in italics:

Words within a quotation are shown in italics when they appear in italics in the original text.

Ellipses:

Sometimes a quotation is shortened by omitting words. This is indicated by the use of ellipses.

- a double dot ellipsis is used when the removal of the words still leaves a full English sentence (e.g. "I watched the film at the cinema and I really enjoyed it. But I did not enjoy the fact that the popcorn was so expensive" might become "I watched the film..and really enjoyed it")
- if it is broken in a way that makes it 2 sentences, three dots are used, followed by a space and a capital initial, even if the original had a lower case initial (e.g. "I watched the film at the cinema and I really enjoyed it...The popcorn was so expensive").

Symbols:

- [] surrounds an editorial insertion
- ~ indicates a hyphen introduced in the printing of the First Edition of the *OED*, which may not have been present in the cited text. These occur when a hyphen comes at a line break and it isn't always possible to tell whether it is there only because of the line break or whether it would be there even if not coming at a line break.

Viewing quotation source information:

Viewing quotation source information by clicking on the hyperlinked source text:

The screenshot shows the OED entry for 'shirt'. A pop-up window titled 'Citation details' is open over the entry. The pop-up contains the following information:

- Herbert George Wells · *The holy terror* · 1939.**
- London: Michael Joseph
- Herbert George Wells (1866–1946)**
- Novelist and social commentator
- » view article in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
- » more on this author in the OED
- » find more quotations by H. G. Wells
- » find more quotations from *Holy Terror*
- » Search for this in the WorldCat® library catalogue

The background shows the OED entry for 'shirt' with various citations. A dashed red arrow points from the 'shirt' entry to the pop-up window.

At sense 3.a of the *OED* entry for *shirt*, n. at 1939 quotation, H. G. Wells'

You will see that there is a faint line beneath the title of each quotation. If you hover your mouse over the source name, you will see that this text is hyperlinked. Click on the link to learn more about the source.

Useful links may also be provided—for example, to enable you to find more quotations from this particular author or source.

Viewing more context for a particular quotation:

The screenshot shows a list of quotations on the left and a 'Context' pop-up window on the right. The 'Context' window displays a full paragraph from Adam Smith's 'An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations'.

Context

Adam Smith
An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations
be nearly in proportion to their revenue. Their expence is taxed by taxing the consumable commodities upon which it is laid out.

Consumable commodities are either necessities or luxuries.

By necessities I understand, not only the commodities which are

indispensably necessary for the support of life, but whatever the custom of the country renders it indecent for creditable people, even of the lowest order, to be without. A linen shirt, for example, is, strictly speaking, not necessary of life. The Greeks and Romans [332] lived, I suppose, very comfortably, though they had no linen. But in the present times, through the greater part of Europe, a creditable day-labourer would be ashamed to appear in public without a linen shirt, the want of which would be supposed to denote that disgraceful degree of poverty, which, it is presumed, no body can well fall into without extreme bad conduct. Custom, in the same manner, has rendered leather shoes a necessary of life in England. The poorest creditable person of either sex would be ashamed to appear in public without them. In Scotland, custom has rendered them a necessary of life to the lowest order of men, and not to the same

Sense 1.1.a. of the OED entry for *shirt*, n

The OED's illustrative quotations are typically quite short: about fifteen words, on average. It's often useful to be able to see more of the context from which the quotation is taken. That's why the OED has always included detailed information about the source of the quotation: not only the author and title, but also chapter and page number, or equivalent.

You may see an open book graphic next to some quotations. If you click on the book, you will be able to see the quotation in context (the quotation itself is usually near the middle of the passage displayed). If you would like to view the full text from which the quotation came, there is also an option to click through to the text as it appears in [Oxford Scholarly Editions Online](#) (OSEO). Please note that a subscription to OSEO is required for this.

The OSEO edition of the text now also includes links back to points in the OED where the text is quoted. which are shown in the 'extras' panel to the right of the main text.

The source of a quotation helps to elucidate aspects of meaning, tone, nuance of the word being illustrated; or to glean more about why the author chose to use the word, what they may have been implying or alluding to, and so on: details and subtleties beyond the information that the dictionary entry itself may provide.

Extras

- ▲ 23. See OED sv **red gum**, n.1
- ▲ 25. See OED sv **taking**, n., sense 1.4c
- ▲ 32. See OED sv **attach**, v., sense II.8b
- ▲ 4. See OED sv **wish**, v., sense 1a(f)
- ▲ 10. See OED sv **sigh**, v., sense 3a
- ▲ 34. See OED sv **spirited**, adj., sense 3a

Additional Resources

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