

SAMPLE OED EXERCISE

I routinely assign exercises in the *Oxford English Dictionary* for my classes, and I intentionally leave the assignments as wide-open as can be: when I grade them, I'm looking for intelligence and curiosity, rather than any specific list of facts. Consider this an example rather than a set of strict rules on what I'm after. But if you want to see the kinds of information that can be interesting and the way you might report on it, these samples will show you what I hope to see.

There's only one hard-and-fast rule: *never simply copy things you don't understand*. So, for instance, when I see things like this—

16– *abreuvoir*, 17 *abbevoir*, 17 19– *abrevoir*, 17–18 *abbreuvoir*. From French *abreuvoir*, †*abbreuvoir* (13th cent. in Old French as *abreveors* in sense 2, 1690 in sense 1) < Old French *abrever* (13th cent.; Middle French, French *abreuver*), variant (with metathesis) of Anglo-Norman *abeiverer*, *abeverer*, *abuverer*, Anglo-Norman and Old French *abevrer*, Old French *abeuvrer* to cause (a person or animal) to drink copiously (c1100 in Anglo-Norman with reference to a person (originally in figurative use), beginning of the 13th cent. with reference to an animal), to drench (the earth, a towel, etc.) (second half of the 12th cent.; < an unattested post-classical Latin form **abbiberare* < classical Latin *ad-ad-* prefix + post-classical Latin *biber* drink, beverage (6th cent.; < classical Latin *biber*, syncopated form of *bibere* to drink)) + *-oir*

—I get grumpy. There's little point in listing spellings, and unless you have some idea what *metathesis* and *syncopated forms* are, there's no point in copying them down. (If you care to take the trouble to figure out what these terms mean, I'll be delighted, but it's beyond the call of duty.) Your job is to try to sort through the dense and often complicated information presented in the *OED*, and to extract enough information that you can tell a story about the word and then bring that knowledge to bear on the readings.

Notice that most of the examples below are common words, not really obscure ones. Words like *adscititious* and *obnubilate* rarely have interesting histories: they usually have a single meaning, and have been used only a handful of times in history. It's the common words with long histories—words like *poet*, *vanity*, *experiment*, and *condition*—that produce the most interesting reading.

I usually assign just three or four words for each exercise, but I've included more here, to give you some ideas about the ways entries can work.

Poet entered English from French, but it originally came from a Greek word meaning “maker.”

It has relatives in many European languages. The most common meaning, “A person who composes poetry,” arrived in the Middle English period, showing up in a translation of the Bible from before 1382. A broader sense showed up not many years later: “A person who composes works of literature; a writer” is attested from around 1400, when Langland identified Plato as a “poete.” This sense is now obsolete; the *OED* gives the last sense from Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language*. A third meaning is “emphatic”: “a writer of verse distinguished by particular insight, inspiration, or sensibility,” first seen in 1530, and, more generally, “an imaginative practitioner of any of the fine arts,” first seen only in 1839. A poetic meaning, “A singing bird,” was available from 1730, though *OED* calls it “Now rare.”

Vanity dates from the Middle English period, with the first quotation from around 1230. It

comes from the Latin *vanitas*, which passed into French as *vanité*; there are related words in other Romance languages, including Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese. All its senses seem to be related to futility or emptiness, though it has many shades of meaning. Its early meanings are related to “That which is vain, futile, or worthless,” which is attested through the present. A related sense, now obsolete, is “The quality of being foolish or of holding erroneous opinions,” which was used from 1386 (Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*) through 1660; that suggests this meaning was out of use by the eighteenth century. The more familiar modern sense—“The quality of being personally vain; high opinion of oneself; self-conceit and desire for admiration”—first appeared before 1340, and appears in works by Gower,

Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton.

Welkin is from the Old English *wolcen*, and similar forms show up in most of the Germanic languages. It first appeared in English in *Beowulf*, when it had meaning 1 in the *OED*, “a cloud.” That meaning is now obsolete, and doesn’t show up after 1205. But the second meaning, “The apparent arch or vault of heaven overhead,” is listed as still in use as late as 1857 (by Longfellow), and figuratively as late as 1868, so it was still current when the *OED* was compiled. The word also survived in a number of “phrases descriptive of loud sounds” and “the asseveration [or oath] *by the welkin*,” and is sometimes used for “the upper atmosphere” as late as 1880, so it may still be current. (If so, it must be rare, because it doesn’t seem to show up in much writing today.) The second is probably Swift’s meaning in “Description of a City Shower.” The *OED* notes that after the sixteenth century, it was “only literary (chiefly *poet.*),” meaning Swift was probably intentionally using an old-fashioned poetic word; and since the poem is so disgusting, he is probably using the old-fashioned and dignified word ironically.

Experiment, from Latin by way of French, has been part of the English language since late in the Middle English period, first showing up in 1362 in Langland’s *Piers Plowman*. Its earliest meaning seems to be scientific—“An action or operation undertaken in order to discover something unknown, to test a hypothesis, or establish or illustrate some known truth”—a sense that survives to the present day. But it very quickly acquired a second sense, less scientific: “The action of trying anything, or putting it to proof; a test, trial.” Both meanings

were current at the time of Sprat's *History*.

Lust comes from a Germanic root, and there are similar words in other Germanic languages. It has more distant relatives in both Greek and Sanskrit. It shows up very early in the history of the English language, in 888, when it was used by King Alfred. At that time, its only meaning was "Pleasure, delight," a sense that seems to have died out early in the seventeenth century (the last recorded use is Shakespeare's *Timon*, 1607). A closely related meaning, "Desire, appetite, relish or inclination for something," developed not long after the original (before 900), and was used until the middle of the seventeenth century. A religious meaning, "Sensuous appetite or desire, considered as sinful or leading to sin," first developed before 1000, and is apparently still in use. Likewise the most important modern meaning, "Sexual appetite or desire," which was first used around the year 1000. All these meanings developed early in the word's history, though most of them dropped out by the seventeenth century. Only one meaning arose after Malory: "Lawless and passionate desire *of* or *for* some object" first showed up in 1678-79.

Condition comes from Latin: *con* means "together," and *dicere* means "to declare, tell, or say." It first appears in English around 1315, meaning "a provision, a stipulation" (the same as the original Latin meaning). But when Haywood says "persons of condition," she means "of position, rank, or 'quality,'" a sense that first appeared in 1673, in a book called *Rules of Civility*. It was therefore a relatively new meaning in Hanwood's day. It was used often during the eighteenth century, but it is now considered "archaic." This meaning seems to

be related to several others: “A particular mode of being of a person or thing; state of being” (first used in 1340, and used through the present), and “State in regard to wealth, circumstances; hence, position with reference to the grades of society; social position, estate, rank,” first used by Chaucer in 1384, and also in use in the eighteenth century (Pope used it in 1731). Other meanings appeared only after Hanwood’s death: “the concurring antecedent circumstances viewed as contributory causes of a phenomenon” showed up in 1817 (in Coleridge); “The whole affecting circumstances under which a being exists” was first used by Emerson in 1856.

Engender comes into English from French *engendrer*, and ultimately from Latin, and is related to the words *genus* and *generate*. The first recorded instance in English is around 1325, when it referred to a male parent begetting a child; not long after it was used for a female parent bearing a child, and by 1393 for both parents. (The more specific senses are marked as obsolete, although *OED* says the third sense is still current, with an example from 1830.) Around 1400 it gained a more general sense, not only having to do with bearing children, but with having sex generally. This sense, too, is marked as obsolete, but it was still current into the early nineteenth century, and was used by Milton in 1667. The word also had a less biological sense, “To produce by natural processes, develop, generate” (dating from the late fourteenth century and lasting through the late eighteenth), and sense 5b, its most common modern sense, “To give rise to, produce (a state of things, a disease, force, quality, feeling, etc.),” which dates from 1340 and was still current in 1863. Rochester, writing in the late seventeenth century, would have had all these senses available to him, since none of the

meanings listed in the *OED* had disappeared by then. It seems that in “Song” he’s using it primarily in sense 5b, related to “producing” in general, but given the bawdy context, it’s likely Rochester was invoking the more sexual sense.

Element entered English from Old French, and ultimately comes from Latin. The meaning of the Latin word is unknown (the *OED* suggests it’s a translation of a Greek word), but it seems to mean something like “constituent part of a complex whole.” It first appeared in English before 1300. The general meaning includes a number of sub-senses, including the earth, water, air, and fire of ancient philosophy and alchemy, or the elements we know from chemistry today (although “more than seventy are now known” to the *OED* compilers, whereas today the number of elements is well over a hundred). These definitions were current in Marvell’s day, but don’t seem to fit his meaning. (There are also many mathematical definitions as well, but these didn’t enter the language until the nineteenth century, long after Marvell died.) More fitting is sense 10a, “The sky,” or 10b, “One of the ‘heavens’ or celestial spheres of ancient astronomy.” This last meaning also dates from before 1300, and the last example of *element* as “sky” dates from 1714, which means it was available to Marvell. Probably most fitting, though, is sense 12, “That one of the ‘four elements’ which is the natural abode of any particular class of living beings; said chiefly of air and water,” a meaning dating from 1598 and continuing through the present. This suggests Marvell is treating the drop of dew as a “living being.”