

Dictionary

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For other uses, see [Dictionary \(disambiguation\)](#).



A multi-volume Latin dictionary by [Egidio Forcellini](#).

A **dictionary** (also called a **wordbook**, **lexicon** or **vocabulary**) is a collection of [words](#) in one or more specific languages, often listed [alphabetically](#), with usage information, [definitions](#), etymologies, phonetics, pronunciations, and other information;^[1] or a book of words in one language with their equivalents in another, also known as a [lexicon](#).^[1] According to [Nielsen](#) (2008) a dictionary may be regarded as a [lexicographical](#) product that is characterised by three significant features: (1) it has been prepared for one or more functions; (2) it contains data that have been selected for the purpose of fulfilling those functions; and (3) its lexicographic structures link and establish relationships between the data so that they can meet the needs of users and fulfill the functions of the dictionary.

A broad distinction is made between general and [specialized dictionaries](#). Specialized dictionaries do not contain information about words that are used in language for general purposes—words used by ordinary people in everyday situations. Lexical items that describe concepts in specific fields are usually called terms instead of words, although there is no consensus whether [lexicology](#) and [terminology](#) are two different fields of study. In theory, general dictionaries are supposed to be [semasiological](#), mapping word to [definition](#), while specialized dictionaries are supposed to be [onomasiological](#), first identifying [concepts](#) and then establishing the terms used to designate them. In practice, the two approaches are used for both types.^[2] There are other types of dictionaries that don't fit neatly in the above distinction, for instance [bilingual \(translation\) dictionaries](#), dictionaries of [synonyms](#) ([thesauri](#)), or [rhyming](#) dictionaries. The word dictionary (unqualified) is usually understood to refer to a monolingual general-purpose dictionary.^[3]

A different dimension on which dictionaries (usually just general-purpose ones) are sometimes distinguished is whether they are [prescriptive or descriptive](#), the latter being in

theory largely based on [linguistic corpus](#) studies—this is the case of most modern dictionaries. However, this distinction cannot be upheld in the strictest sense. The choice of [headwords](#) is considered itself of prescriptive nature; for instance, dictionaries avoid having too many taboo words in that position. Stylistic indications (e.g. ‘informal’ or ‘vulgar’) present in many modern dictionaries is considered less than objectively descriptive as well.^[4]

Although the first recorded dictionaries date back to Sumerian times (these were bilingual dictionaries), the systematic study of dictionaries as objects of scientific interest themselves is a 20th century enterprise, called [lexicography](#), and largely initiated by [Ladislav Zgusta](#).^[3] The birth of the new discipline was not without controversy, the practical dictionary-makers being sometimes accused of "astonishing" lack of method and critical-self reflection.^[5]

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History

The oldest known dictionaries were [Akkadian Empire](#) cuneiform tablets with bilingual [Sumerian–Akkadian](#) wordlists, discovered in [Ebla](#) (modern [Syria](#)) and dated roughly 2300 [BCE](#).^[6] The early 2nd millennium BCE [Urra=hubullu](#) glossary is the canonical [Babylonian](#) version of such bilingual Sumerian wordlists. A [Chinese dictionary](#), the ca. 3rd century BCE [Erya](#), was the earliest surviving monolingual dictionary; although some sources cite the ca. 800 BCE [Shizhoujian](#) as a "dictionary", modern scholarship considers it a calligraphic compendium of [Chinese characters](#) from [Zhou dynasty](#) bronzes. [Philitas of Cos](#) (fl. 4th century BCE) wrote a pioneering vocabulary *Disorderly*

Words (Ἄτακτοι γλῶσσαι, *Átaktoi glôssai*) which explained the meanings of rare [Homeric](#) and other literary words, words from local dialects, and technical terms.^[7] [Apollonius the Sophist](#) (fl. 1st century CE) wrote the oldest surviving Homeric lexicon.^[6] The first [Sanskrit](#) dictionary, the [Amarakośa](#), was written by [Amara Sinha](#) ca. 4th century CE. Written in verse, it listed around 10,000 words. According to the [Nihon Shoki](#), the first [Japanese dictionary](#) was the long-lost 682 CE *Niina* glossary of Chinese characters. The oldest existing Japanese dictionary, the ca. 835 CE [Tenrei Banshō Meigi](#), was also a glossary of written Chinese.

[Arabic](#) dictionaries were compiled between the 8th and 14th centuries CE, organizing words in rhyme order (by the last syllable), by alphabetical order of the [radicals](#), or according to the alphabetical order of the first letter (the system used in modern European language dictionaries). The modern system was mainly used in specialist dictionaries, such as those of terms from the [Qur'an](#) and [hadith](#), while most general use dictionaries, such as the *Lisan al-'Arab* (13th c., still the best-known large-scale dictionary of Arabic) and *al-Qamus al-Muhit* (14th c.) listed words in the alphabetical order of the radicals. The *Qamus al-Muhit* is the first handy dictionary in Arabic, which includes only words and their definitions, eliminating the supporting examples used in such dictionaries as the *Lisan* and the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).^[8]

The earliest modern European dictionaries were bilingual dictionaries. In 1502 appeared the *Cornucopia* of [Ambrogio Calepino](#), which in fact was a multilingual glossary. In 1532 [Robert Estienne](#) published the [Thesaurus linguae latinae](#) and in 1572 his son [Henri Estienne](#) published the [Thesaurus linguae graecae](#), which served up to the nineteenth century as the basis of Greek [lexicography](#). In 1612 was published the first edition of the *Vocabolario dell'Accademia della Crusca*, for [Italian](#), which also served as the model for similar works in French, Spanish and English. In 1690 in [Rotterdam](#) was published, posthumously, the *Dictionnaire Universel* by [Antoine Furetière](#) for [French](#). In 1694 appeared the first edition of the [Dictionnaire de l'Académie française](#). Between 1712 and 1721 was published the *Vocabulario portugez e latino* written by [Raphael Bluteau](#). The [Real Academia Espanola](#) published the first edition of the [Diccionario de la lengua espanola](#) in 1780. The [Totius Latinitatis lexicon](#) by [Egidio Forcellini](#) was firstly published in 1777, it has formed the basis of all similar works that have since been published.

The first edition of [A Greek-English Lexicon](#) by [Henry George Liddell](#) and [Robert Scott](#) appeared in 1843; this work remained the basic dictionary of Greek until the end of the XX century. And in 1858 was published the first volume of the [Deutsches Wörterbuch](#) by the [Brothers Grimm](#); the work was completed in 1961. Between 1861 and 1874 was published the *Dizionario della lingua italiana* by [Niccolò Tommaseo](#). [Émile Littré](#) published the [Dictionnaire de la langue française](#) between 1863 and 1872. In the same year 1863 appeared the first volume of the [Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal](#) which was completed in 1998. Also in 1863 [Vladimir Ivanovich Dahl](#) published the [Explanatory Dictionary of the Living Great Russian Language](#). The [Duden](#) dictionary dates back to 1880, and is currently the [prescriptive](#) source for the spelling of German. In 1898 was

printed the first volume of the [Svenska Akademiens ordbok](#), whose publication is still in progress.

English Dictionaries

See also: [The Earliest English Dictionaries](#)

The earliest dictionaries in the English language were glossaries of French, Italian or Latin words along with definitions of the foreign words in English. An early non-alphabetical list of 8000 English words was the *Elementarie* created by [Richard Mulcaster](#) in 1592.^{[9][10]}

The first purely English alphabetical dictionary was *A Table Alphabeticall*, written by English schoolteacher [Robert Cawdrey](#) in 1604. The only surviving copy is found at the [Bodleian Library](#) in [Oxford](#). Yet this early effort, as well as the many imitators which followed it, was seen as unreliable and nowhere near definitive. [Philip Stanhope, 4th Earl of Chesterfield](#) was still lamenting in 1754, 150 years after Cawdrey's publication, that it is "a sort of disgrace to our nation, that hitherto we have had no... standard of our language; our dictionaries at present being more properly what our neighbors the Dutch and the Germans call theirs, word-books, than dictionaries in the superior sense of that title."^[11]

It was not until [Samuel Johnson's](#) *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) that a truly noteworthy, reliable English Dictionary was deemed to have been produced, and the fact that today many people still mistakenly believe Johnson to have written the first English Dictionary is a testimony to this legacy.^[12] By this stage, dictionaries had evolved to contain textual references for most words, and were arranged alphabetically, rather than by topic (a previously popular form of arrangement, which meant all animals would be grouped together, etc.). Johnson's masterwork could be judged as the first to bring all these elements together, creating the first 'modern' dictionary.^[12]

Johnson's *Dictionary* remained the English-language standard for over 150 years, until the [Oxford University Press](#) began writing and releasing the *Oxford English Dictionary* in short [fascicles](#) from 1884 onwards. It took nearly 50 years to finally complete the huge work, and they finally released the complete *OED* in twelve volumes in 1928. It remains the most comprehensive and trusted English language dictionary to this day, with revisions and updates added by a dedicated team every three months. One of the main contributors to this modern day dictionary was an ex-army surgeon, [William Chester Minor](#), a convicted murderer who was confined to an asylum for the criminally insane.^[13]

American Dictionaries

In 1806, American [Noah Webster](#) published his first dictionary, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language*. In 1807 Webster began compiling an expanded and fully comprehensive dictionary, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*; it took twenty-seven years to complete. To evaluate the etymology of words, Webster

learned twenty-six languages, including [Old English](#) (Anglo-Saxon), German, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Hebrew, Arabic, and [Sanskrit](#).

Webster completed his dictionary during his year abroad in 1825 in Paris, France, and at the [University of Cambridge](#). His book contained seventy thousand words, of which twelve thousand had never appeared in a published dictionary before. As a [spelling reformer](#), Webster believed that English spelling rules were unnecessarily complex, so his dictionary introduced [American English](#) spellings, replacing "colour" with "color", substituting "wagon" for "waggon", and printing "center" instead of "centre". He also added American words, like "skunk" and "squash", that did not appear in British dictionaries. At the age of seventy, Webster published his dictionary in 1828; it sold 2500 copies. In 1840, the second edition was published in two volumes.

Austin (2005) explores the intersection of lexicographical and poetic practices in American literature, and attempts to map out a "lexical poetics" using Webster's definitions as his base. He explores how American poets used Webster's dictionaries, often drawing upon his lexicography in order to express their word play. Austin explicates key definitions from both the *Compendious* (1806) and *American* (1828) dictionaries, and brings into its discourse a range of concerns, including the politics of American English, the question of national identity and culture in the early moments of American independence, and the poetics of citation and of definition. Austin concludes that Webster's dictionaries helped redefine Americanism in an era of an emergent and unstable American political and cultural identity. Webster himself saw the dictionaries as a nationalizing device to separate America from Britain, calling his project a "federal language", with competing forces towards regularity on the one hand and innovation on the other. Austin suggests that the contradictions of Webster's lexicography were part of a larger play between liberty and order within American intellectual discourse, with some pulled toward Europe and the past, and others pulled toward America and the new future.^[14]

For an international appreciation of the importance of Webster's dictionaries in setting the norms of the English language, see Forque (1982).^[15]

General dictionaries

In a general dictionary, each word may have multiple meanings. Some dictionaries include each separate meaning in the order of most common usage while others list definitions in historical order, with the oldest usage first.^[16]

In many languages, words can appear in many different forms, but only the [undeclined or unconjugated](#) form appears as the [headword](#) in most dictionaries. Dictionaries are most commonly found in the form of a book, but some newer dictionaries, like [StarDict](#) and the [New Oxford American Dictionary](#) are dictionary software running on [PDAs](#) or [computers](#). There are also many online dictionaries accessible via the [Internet](#).

Specialized dictionaries

According to the *Manual of Specialized Lexicographies* a [specialized dictionary](#) (also referred to as a technical dictionary) is a lexicon that focuses upon a specific subject field. Following the description in *The Bilingual LSP Dictionary* [lexicographers](#) categorize specialized dictionaries into three types. A [multi-field dictionary](#) broadly covers several subject fields (e.g., a [business dictionary](#)), a [single-field dictionary](#) narrowly covers one particular subject field (e.g., law), and a [sub-field dictionary](#) covers a singular field (e.g., constitutional law). For example, the 23-language [Inter-Active Terminology for Europe](#) is a multi-field dictionary, the [American National Biography](#) is a single-field, and the [African American National Biography Project](#) is a sub-field dictionary. In terms of the above coverage distinction between "minimizing dictionaries" and "maximizing dictionaries", multi-field dictionaries tend to minimize coverage across subject fields (for instance, [Oxford Dictionary of World Religions](#)) whereas single-field and sub-field dictionaries tend to maximize coverage within a limited subject field ([The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology](#)). See also [LSP dictionary](#)

Glossaries

Another variant is the [glossary](#), an alphabetical list of defined terms in a specialised field, such as medicine or science. The simplest dictionary, a [defining dictionary](#), provides a [core glossary](#) of the simplest meanings of the simplest concepts. From these, other concepts can be explained and defined, in particular for those who are first learning a language. In English, the commercial defining dictionaries typically include only one or two meanings of under 2000 words. With these, the rest of English, and even the 4000 most common English [idioms](#) and [metaphors](#), can be defined.

Pronunciation

Main articles: [IPA chart for English dialects](#) and [Pronunciation respelling for English](#)

Dictionaries for languages for which the pronunciation of words is not apparent from their spelling, such as the English language, usually provide the pronunciation, often using the [International Phonetic Alphabet](#). For example, the definition for the word *dictionary* might be followed by the phonemic spelling [/ˈdɪkʃənəri/](#). American dictionaries, however, often use their own [pronunciation spelling](#) systems, for example *dictionary* [dɪk·shə·nār·ē](#), while the IPA is more commonly used within the British Commonwealth countries. Yet others use a respelling system; for example, *dictionary* may respelled [DIK-shə-nair-ee](#). Some on-line or electronic dictionaries provide recordings of words being spoken.

 This section requires [expansion](#). (June 2008)

Variations between dictionaries



This section **does not** [cite any references or sources](#). (December 2009)

Prescription and description



A dictionary open at the word "[Internet](#)", viewed through a [lens](#)

Lexicographers apply two basic philosophies to the defining of words: [prescriptive or descriptive](#). [Noah Webster](#), intent on forging a distinct identity for the American language, altered spellings and accentuated differences in meaning and pronunciation of some words. This is why [American English](#) now uses the spelling *color* while the rest of the English-speaking world prefers *colour*. (Similarly, [British English](#) subsequently underwent a few spelling changes that did not affect American English; see further at [American and British English spelling differences](#).)

Large 20th-century dictionaries such as the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) (OED) and [Webster's Third](#) are descriptive, and attempt to describe the actual use of words. Most dictionaries of English now apply the descriptive method to a word's definition, and then, outside of the definition itself, add information alerting readers to attitudes which may influence their choices on words often considered vulgar, offensive, erroneous, or easily confused. [Merriam-Webster](#) is subtle, only adding italicized notations such as, *sometimes offensive* or *nonstandard* (nonstandard.) [American Heritage](#) goes further, discussing issues separately in numerous "usage notes." [Encarta](#) provides similar notes, but is more prescriptive, offering warnings and admonitions against the use of certain words considered by many to be offensive or illiterate, such as, "an offensive term for..." or "a taboo term meaning..."

Because of the widespread use of dictionaries in schools, and their acceptance by many as language authorities, their treatment of the language does affect usage to some degree, with even the most descriptive dictionaries providing conservative continuity. In the long run, however, the meanings of words in English are primarily determined by usage, and the language is being changed and created every day.^[17] As [Jorge Luis Borges](#) says in the prologue to "El otro, el mismo": "*It is often forgotten that (dictionaries) are artificial repositories, put together well after the languages they define. The roots of language are irrational and of a magical nature.*"

Major English dictionaries

- [*A Dictionary of the English Language*](#) by [Samuel Johnson](#) (prescriptive)
- [*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*](#)
- [*Black's Law Dictionary*](#), a [law dictionary](#)
- [*Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*](#)
- [*Canadian Oxford Dictionary*](#)
- [*Century Dictionary*](#)
- [*Chambers Dictionary*](#)
- [*Collins English Dictionary*](#)
- [*Concise Oxford English Dictionary*](#)
- [Longman](#)
- [*Macquarie Dictionary*](#), a dictionary of [Australian English](#)
- [Merriam-Webster](#)
- [*New Oxford Dictionary of English*](#)
- [*Oxford Dictionary of English*](#)
- [*Oxford English Dictionary*](#) (descriptive)
- [*Random House Dictionary of the English Language*](#)
- [Noah Webster's](#) *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (prescriptive)
- [*Webster's Dictionary*](#) (descriptive)
- [*Webster's New World Dictionary*](#)

Dictionaries of other languages

Histories and descriptions of the dictionaries of other languages include:

- [Chinese dictionaries](#)
- [Dutch dictionaries](#)
- [French dictionaries](#)
- [German dictionaries](#)
- [Japanese dictionaries](#)
- [Scottish Gaelic dictionaries](#)
- [Scottish Language Dictionaries](#)

Dictionaries for Natural Language Processing

On the contrary of traditional dictionaries which are designed to be used by human beings, dictionaries for [Natural Language Processing](#) are built to be used by computer programs. The final user is a human being but the direct user is a program. Such a dictionary does not need to be able to be printed on paper. The structure of the content is not linear, ordered entry by entry but has the form of a complex graph. Because most of these dictionaries are used to control [machine translations](#) or [CLIR](#) (cross-lingual information retrieval) the content is usually multilingual and usually of huge size. In order to allow formalized exchange and merging of dictionaries, an ISO standard called [LMF](#) has been defined and used among the industrial and academic community.

Online dictionaries

There exist a number of websites which operate as online dictionaries, usually with a specialized focus. Some of them have exclusively user driven content, often consisting of [neologisms](#). Some of the more notable examples include:

- [Double-Tongued Dictionary](#) (user generated content)
- [Free On-line Dictionary of Computing](#)
- [LEO \(website\)](#)
- [Logos Dictionary](#)
- [Pictual \(website\)](#)
- [Pseudodictionary](#) (exclusively user-defined neologisms, with humorous intent)
- [Reference.com](#)
- [Urban Dictionary](#) (much of the content ephemeral slang terminology, some with sources)
- [Wiktionary](#) (multilingual dictionary, a [Wikipedia](#) project)
- [WWJDIC](#) (online Japanese dictionary)

See also

- [Artistic dictionary](#)
- [Advanced learner's dictionary](#)
- [Bilingual dictionary](#)
- [Centre for Lexicography](#)
- [COBUILD](#), a large [corpus](#) of English text
- [Comparison of English dictionaries](#)
- [Corpus linguistics](#)
- [DICT](#), the dictionary server protocol
- [Dictionary Society of North America](#)
- [DictionaryForMids](#)
- [Electronic dictionary](#)
- [Encyclopedia](#)
- [Encyclopedic dictionary](#)
- [Fictitious entry](#)
- [Foreign language writing aid](#)
- [Lexical Markup Framework](#)
- [Lexicographic error](#)



- [Lexicography](#)
- [Lexigraf](#)
- [List of online dictionaries](#)
- [Machine-readable dictionary](#)

- [Medical dictionary](#)
- [Monolingual learners' dictionaries](#)
- [Phonetic dictionary](#)
- [Reverse dictionary](#)
- [Rhyming dictionary](#)
- [Thesaurus](#)
- [Visual dictionary](#)
- [WordNet](#)

Notes

1. [^] [a b](#) Webster's New World College Dictionary, Fourth Edition, 2002
2. [^] Sterkenburg 2003, pp. 155–157
3. [^] [a b](#) Sterkenburg 2003, pp. 3–4
4. [^] Sterkenburg 2003, p. 7
5. [^] R. R. K. Hartmann (2003). [Lexicography: Dictionaries, compilers, critics, and users](#). Routledge. p. 21. [ISBN 978-0-415-25366-6](#).
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11. [^] [Jack Lynch, "How Johnson's Dictionary Became the First Dictionary" \(delivered 25 August 2005 at the Johnson and the English Language conference, Birmingham\)](#) Retrieved July 12, 2008
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14. [^] Nathan W. Austin, "Lost in the Maze of Words: Reading and Re-reading Noah Webster's Dictionaries", *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 2005, Vol. 65 Issue 12, p. 4561
15. [^] Guy Jean Forgue, "The Norm in American English," *Revue Francaise d'Etudes Americaines*, Nov 1983, Vol. 8 Issue 18, pp 451–461
16. [^] <http://www.tsl.state.tx.us/ld/pubs/corereference/internal/chd.html>
17. [^] Ned Halley, *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Modern English Grammar* (2005) p. 84


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External links

 Look up [dictionary](#) or [wordbook](#) in Wiktionary, the free dictionary.

- [Dictionary](#) at the [Open Directory Project](#)
- [Glossary of dictionary terms](#) by the [Oxford University Press](#)
-  Texts on Wikisource:
 - "[Dictionary](#)". *Collier's New Encyclopedia*. 1921.
 - Chisholm, Hugh, ed. (1911). "[Dictionary](#)". *Encyclopædia Britannica* (11th ed.). Cambridge University Press.
 - "[Dictionary](#)". *New International Encyclopedia*. 1905.
 - [Wikisource:Languages](#) (directory of language-related works on Wikisource – includes dictionaries)

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