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HOW A WORD EARNS ITS ENTRY

THE APPEAL FOR EVIDENCE

In 1879 James MURRAY took charge of a dictionary project in Oxford that had drifted for two decades, and his first act was not to write definitions but to beg for evidence. His printed appeal asked ordinary readers across the English-speaking world to comb through books and mail him examples of words in actual use, each copied onto a small paper CITATION slip carrying the word, its date, and the sentence around it. Slips arrived by the sackful. Murray sorted them into PIGEONHOLES lining the SCRIPTORIUM, the corrugated-iron shed in his garden where the Oxford English Dictionary was assembled letter by letter.

SPELL Spell: CITATION

CITATION

SPELL Spell: PIGEONHOLES

PIGEONHOLES

KNOWN The corrugated-iron shed in Murray's garden, where the Oxford English Dictionary was assembled letter by letter, was called what?

SCRIPTORIUM

KNOWN What was the last name of the editor who took charge of the Oxford dictionary in 1879 and begged readers for evidence?

MURRAY

OPEN If you were mailing Murray a slip of your own, which word would you copy out for him?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

MATH James Murray took charge of the Oxford English Dictionary in 1879, and its first complete edition was finished in 1928. How many years passed between those two dates?

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READING FOR CITATIONS

That method never fundamentally changed. The modern LEXICOGRAPHER - the editor who researches and writes DICTIONARY entries - still depends on the citation: a dated instance of a word used in ordinary published writing by someone who is not defining it or showing it off. Publishers run reading programmes whose readers work steadily through NOVELS, NEWSPAPERS, CATALOGS, MENUS, and song LYRICS, marking anything UNFAMILIAR and logging where and when it appeared. Millions of such slips accumulate in a publisher's files. A word with no citations has no case at all; a word with a handful has only a hint of one.

SPELL Spell: UNFAMILIAR

UNFAMILIAR

SPELL Spell: DICTIONARY

DICTIONARY

KNOWN What is the term for an editor who researches and writes dictionary entries?

LEXICOGRAPHER

SEMI_OPEN Name two of the kinds of published writing that a reading programme's readers work through.

NEEDS 2 OF NOVELS / NEWSPAPERS / CATALOGS / MENUS / LYRICS

OPEN What word have you encountered recently that seemed unfamiliar enough to be worth a slip of its own?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

WHAT A CORPUS SHOWS

Citations prove that a word exists; a CORPUS shows how it behaves. A corpus is a large machine-readable collection of text - billions of running words of journalism, fiction, transcribed speech, and web writing - searchable in seconds. A monitor corpus keeps ingesting new material, so editors can watch a candidate's TRAJECTORY rather than guess at it. Counts are gathered under the LEMMA, the single dictionary form that absorbs a word's INFLECTIONS, so that texted, texting, and texts all feed one total. The numbers then yield FREQUENCY, DISPERSION across independent sources, REGISTER, and the COLLOCATES a word habitually travels with.

SPELL Spell: INFLECTIONS

INFLECTIONS

SPELL Spell: TRAJECTORY

TRAJECTORY

KNOWN What is the term for a large machine-readable collection of text, billions of running words of journalism, fiction, speech, and web writing, that can be searched in seconds to show how a word behaves?

CORPUS

KNOWN What is the term for the single dictionary form that absorbs a word's endings, so that texted, texting, and texts all feed one total?

LEMMA

SEMI_OPEN Which two measures does a corpus supply about a candidate word?

NEEDS 2 OF FREQUENCY / DISPERSION / REGISTER / COLLOCATES

OPEN A monitor corpus keeps taking in new writing every day. Which new word do you predict it will catch rising fastest this year?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

WHICH NEW WORDS SURVIVE

Most coinages die young. A NEOLOGISM - a newly minted word - typically appears once and never again; PHILOLOGISTS call such a solitary appearance a hapax legomenon, and reading programmes turn them up constantly. A NONCE word, invented for a single occasion by a novelist or a headline writer, is doing its job precisely by being disposable. So editors do not count enthusiasm. They test whether the use is SUSTAINED across years rather than months, WIDESPREAD among writers with no link to whoever coined it, and MEANINGFUL - carrying real information rather than decorating a sentence.

SPELL Spell: NONCE

NONCE

SPELL Spell: PHILOLOGISTS

PHILOLOGISTS

KNOWN What is the term for a newly minted word that has just entered use?

NEOLOGISM

SEMI_OPEN Which two qualities must a new word's use show before editors will admit it?

NEEDS 2 OF **SUSTAINED / WIDESPREAD / MEANINGFUL**

OPEN If you invented a word for one single occasion, what would you want it to mean?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

DORD AND THE MOVING RECORD

Evidence fails in the other direction too. In 1934 the second edition of Webster's New International Dictionary printed dord, defined as density in physics and chemistry. Nobody had ever used it: a slip reading D or d, the abbreviations for density, had been misfiled as a single solid word. An editor noticed the missing etymology in 1939, yet PRINTINGS carried that GHOST word until 1947. Established entries are provisional as well. ANTEDATING - the discovery of evidence earlier than anything already on record - routinely pushes a word's first known use back by decades and forces the entry to be rewritten.

SPELL Spell: **ANTEDATING**

ANTEDATING

SPELL Spell: **PRINTINGS**

PRINTINGS

KNOWN What is the term for a dictionary entry, admitted through a misreading, for a word nobody ever actually used?

GHOST

OPEN Dord sat in the dictionary for thirteen years because nobody checked. What is something you have taken as real just because it was printed?

Open response - use practitioner judgment

MATH Webster's second edition printed the entry dord in 1934, and it stayed in printings until 1947. For how many years did dord appear in the dictionary?

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WHO DECIDES

None of this makes a dictionary the GATEKEEPER you were told about in school. PRESCRIPTIVISM treats the book as an authority that licenses correct words and rules everything else out of bounds; DESCRIPTIVISM, the working stance of nearly every major dictionary today, treats it as a record of how people demonstrably write and speak. Publishers now invite you to submit candidates directly, and your submission is a lead for an editor, not a ballot. The word you and your friends have used for two years gets in when its evidence does - dated, published, widespread - exactly as it did in Murray's pigeonholes.

SPELL Spell: DESCRIPTIVISM

DESCRIPTIVISM

SPELL Spell: PRESCRIPTIVISM

PRESCRIPTIVISM

SPELL Spell: GATEKEEPER

GATEKEEPER

OPEN The dictionary is a record, not a gatekeeper. What rule about words were you taught that you no longer follow?

Open response - use practitioner judgment