

Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*: Key Facts

- Published in London in 1755.
- Johnson was commissioned to write the *Dictionary* in 1746 by a group of booksellers who paid him 1,500 guineas.
- Johnson compiled the *Dictionary* over a period of nine years, mostly in the house at 17 Gough Square, London. He was assisted by six amanuenses that we know of—but they were not all around at the same time.
- Before Johnson started the compilation process he wrote and published his *Plan of a Dictionary* in 1747. This laid out his intentions to create a fairly prescriptive dictionary. The actual *Dictionary* did not turn out quite as Johnson planned however.
- The *Dictionary* contains over 42,000 definitions which are supported by over 110,000 quotations from literature.
- The *Dictionary* includes a Preface, a History of the English Language and a Grammar. The Preface is particularly interesting for the study of language change, especially when compared with Johnson's *Plan*.
- The first edition was published in two folio volumes and cost £4 10 shillings. Over the years it appeared in various abridgements and became more affordable.
- There is no manuscript, but scraps of Johnson's working papers and some of his revisions are extant. Johnson continued to work on revising and editing the *Dictionary* —particularly the 4th edition (1773) when he made about 15,000 changes.
- Johnson's was the main dictionary in use in Britain and many British colonies for over 100 years.
- Johnson's was **not** the first dictionary. There had been English dictionaries of sorts since 1604 and other European nations had produced comprehensive dictionaries in their Academies. However, Johnson's was the first *comprehensive* English dictionary and had a huge impact on lexicography.



Samuel Johnson: Key Facts

- Johnson was born in 1709 in Lichfield, Staffordshire. He spent his youth in Lichfield, was educated at the local grammar school and helped in his father's bookshop. It was there that he developed his love of reading and an early knowledge of literature.
- He attended Pembroke College, Oxford for one year. However his family could not afford the fees and he left without a degree.
- After university he tried to find work as a translator and a teacher in the Midlands. However his ventures were not successful.
- In 1737 Johnson moved to London to begin a career as a writer. He worked as a Grub Street hack for about 10 years, writing reports for Parliament, essays, and articles for publications such as the *Gentleman's Magazine*. He struggled for money.
- In 1746 Johnson was commissioned by a group of seven booksellers to write an English dictionary. He was paid 1500 guineas and agreed to complete the project in 3 years. He published his *Plan* in 1747 and moved to 17 Gough Square in c. 1748.
- After an overrun of 6 years, the *Dictionary* was published in 1755. It made Johnson's name, but not his fortune. He had to leave Gough Square in 1759 due to lack of funds.
- In 1762 Johnson was granted a pension by King George III. Although controversial, Johnson accepted and this money allowed him to live a more comfortable lifestyle of socialising, chatting and travelling. He became a famous society wit and conversationalist.
- In 1763 Johnson met James Boswell. The two became good friends and Boswell started collecting material for his biography of Johnson early into this friendship. In 1765 Johnson met Hester Thrale and spent a lot of time with her family. It was also in this period that Johnson formed his Literary Club.
- After Johnson's death many biographies were published, including the most famous one by James Boswell. These biographies cemented Johnson's fame and reputation.



Writing the Dictionary: Key Facts

- Johnson had high hopes for his *Dictionary*. He wanted the *Dictionary* to purify the language and prevent change, which he generally viewed as decay and erosion. He planned to trace the etymology of each word and standardise spelling and punctuation as much as possible. He also wanted to clearly define the various senses of meaning of each word and include a quotation from 'the best authors' to show how the word was used in context.
- Johnson used earlier dictionaries, but soon found them flawed when collecting his words. He collected many more by reading through 'the best authors' and also works of science, natural history and other books that came his way. Johnson would mark a passage to be used as a quotation. An amanuensis would then copy out the passage onto a slip of paper. These were filed alphabetically. The idea was that the quotations would be collated later and Johnson would go back and write in his definitions and etymologies afterwards.
- Initially Johnson had believed the language would fit into a system where each word would have seven different senses of meaning. However, as time passed he found the language far more complex. After three years, under pressure to meet his deadline, he began getting a manuscript ready for the printer. However when he came to write his definitions into the spaces between quotations in the large notebooks there was not enough room. The copy was so messy the printer could not read it and Johnson had to start again. At this point he rethought his ideas and became more flexible in his approach, recording the common usage of the language rather than trying to systematise it.
- Johnson's *Dictionary* was innovative in its use of quotations. He aimed for these passages to not only illustrate the word in question, but to be generally useful. The most quoted authors are 16th and 17th century writers— the Bible, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden. Johnson would often use the quotation to supplement, or even replace his own definition, particularly with more technical terms.
- Johnson's was also the first dictionary to list all the senses of meaning of a word in full. Etymologies had been included by previous lexicographers, but their dictionaries were often more like glossaries. For example Robert Cawdrey's 1604 dictionary rarely gives more than a synonym. Nathan Bailey in his 1721 work believed that the etymology would give the 'true' meaning of the word and that was the one that should be included.
- Johnson indicated the part of speech and etymologies for each word. There are occasional comments about pronunciation or spelling, but this is not consistent. In fact there are inconsistent spellings in the dictionary itself eg *author/author*. However Johnson's *Dictionary* was an important part of the process of standardisation during the period.



O B D

- O A'Y.** *adj.* [from *oar*.] Having the form or use of oars.
His hair transforms to down, his fingers meet,
In skinny films, and shape his *oary* feet.
Addison
The swan with arched neck,
Between her white wings mantling, proudly rows
Her slate with *oary* feet.
Milton
- OAST.** *n. s.* A kiln. Not in use.
Empty the bin into a hog-bag, and carry them immediately to the *oaf* or kiln, to be dried.
Mortimer
- OATCA'KE.** *n. s.* [*oat* and *cake*.] Cake made of the meal of oats.
Take a blue stone they make haver or *oatcakes* upon, and lay it upon the cross bars of iron.
Peacrum
- O A'TEN.** *adj.* [from *oat*.] Made of oats; bearing oats.
When shepherd's pipe on *oaten* straws,
And merry larks are ploughmen's clocks.
Shakespeare
- OATH.** *n. s.* [*oath*, Gothick; *ad*, Saxon. The distance between the noun *oath*, and the verb *swear*, is very observable, as it may shew that our oldest dialect is formed from different languages.] An affirmation, negation, or promise, corroborated by the attestation of the Divine Being.
Read over Julia's heart, thy first best love,
For whole dear sake thou then did'st rend thy faith
Into a thousand *oaths*; and all those *oaths*
Descended into perjury to love me.
Shakespeare
He that strikes the first stroke, I'll run him up to the hilt as I am a soldier.
- An *oath* of mickle might; and fury shall abate.
Shakespeare
We have consultations, which inventions shall be published, which not; and take an *oath* of secrecy for the concealing of those which we think fit to keep secret.
Bacon
Those called to any office of trust, are bound by an *oath* to the faithful discharge of it: but an *oath* is an appeal to God, and therefore can have no influence, except upon those who believe that he is.
Swift
- O A'THABLE.** *adj.* [from *oath*. A word not used.] Capable of having an oath administered.
You're not *oathable*,
Altho' I know you'll swear
Into strong shudders th' immortal gods.
Shakespeare
- OATHBREA'KING.** *n. s.* [*oath* and *break*.] Perjury; the violation of an oath.
His *oathbreaking* he mended thus,
By now fortwearing that he is forsworn.
Shakespeare
- O A'TMALT.** *n. s.* [*oat* and *malt*.] Malt made of oats.
In Kent they brew with one half *oatmeal*, and the other half barley-malt.
Mortimer; *Hugh*
- O A'TMEAL.** *n. s.* [*oat* and *meal*.] Flower made by grinding oats.
Oatmeal and butter, outwardly applied, dry the scab on the head.
Arbuthnot *in* *Aliment*.
Our neighbours tell me oft, in joking talk,
Of adzes, leather, *oatmeal*, bran, and chalk.
Gay
- O A'TMEAL.** *n. s.* An herb.
Ainsworth
- OATS.** *n. s.* [scen, Saxon.] A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people. It is of the grafs leaved tribe; the flowers have no petals, and are disposed in a bootle panicle: the grain is eatable.
Miller
The meal makes tolerable good bread.
Shakespeare
It is bare mechanism, no otherwise produced than the turning of a wild *oatbeard*, by the insinuation of the particles of moisture.
Locke
For your lean cattle, fodder them with barley straw first, and the *oat* straw last.
Mortimer's *Haybandy*.
His horse's allowance of *oats* and beans, was greater than the journey required.
Swift
- O A'THISTLE.** *n. s.* [*oat* and *thistle*.] An herb.
Ainsworth
- OBAMBULA'TION.** *n. s.* [*obambulatio*, from *obambulo*, Latin.] The act of walking about.
Dicit
To **ORBU'CE.** *v. a.* [*obducere*, Latin.] To draw over as a covering.

O B E

- God should be so *obdurate* as yourselves.
How would it fare with your departed souls?
Shakespeare
Women are soft, mild, pitiful, and flexible;
Thou stern, *obdurate*, flinty, rough, remorseless.
Shakespeare
To convince the proud what signs avail,
Or wonders move th' *obdurate* to relent;
They harden'd more, by what might more reclaim.
Milton
My dying prayers, and grant my last request.
Dryden
2. Hardened; firm; stubborn.
Sometimes the very custom of evil makes the heart *obdurate* against whatsoever instructions to the contrary.
Hooker
A pleasing forcery could charm
Pain for a while, or anguish, and excite
Fallacious hope, or arm th' *obdurate* breast
With stubborn patience, as with triple steel.
Milton
No such thought ever strikes his marble, *obdurate* heart,
but it presently flies off and rebounds from it. It is impossible for a man to be thorough-paced in ingratitude, till he has shook off all fetters of pity and compassion.
South
3. Harsh; rugged.
They joined the most *obdurate* consonants without one intervening vowel.
Swift
- OBDU'KATELY.** *adv.* [from *obdurate*.] Stubbornly; inflexibly; impudently.
- OBDU'RATENESS.** *n. s.* [from *obdurate*.] Stubbornness; inflexibility; impudence.
- OBDU'RATION.** *n. s.* [from *obdurate*.] Hardness of heart; stubbornness.
- What occasion it had given them to think, to their greater *obdurate* in evil, that through a forward and wanton desire of innovation, we did constrainedly those things, for which conscience was pretended?
Hooker, *b. iv.*
- OBDU'RED.** *adj.* [*obduratus*, Latin.] Hardened; inflexible; impudent.
This law his hapless foes, but stood *obdur'd*,
And to rebellious fight rallied their pow'rs
Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *b. vi.*
- OBE'DIENCE.** *n. s.* [*obediencia*, Fr. *obediencia*, Latin.] Obedi- quousness; submission to authority; compliance with command or prohibition.
If you violently proceed against him, it would shake in pieces the heart of his *obediencia*.
Shakespeare's *K. Lear*.
Thy husband
Craves no other tribute at thy hands,
But love, fair looks, and true *obediencia*.
Shakespeare
His servants ye are, to whom ye obey, whether of sin unto death, or of *obediencia* unto righteousness.
Rom. *vi. 16.*
It was both a strange commission, and a strange *obediencia* to a commission, for men so furiously assailed, to hold their hands.
Bacon's *War with Spain*.
Nor can this be,
But by fulfilling that which thou didst want,
Obediencia to the law of God, impos'd
On penalty of death.
Milton's *Paradise Lost*, *b. xii.*
- OBE'DIENT.** *adj.* [*obediens*, Latin.] Submissive to authority; compliant with command or prohibition; obsequious.
To this end did I write, that I might know the proof of you, whether ye be *obediens* in all things.
2 Cor. *ii. 9.*
To this her mother's plot
She, seemingly *obediens*, likewise hath
Made promise.
Shakespeare, *M. W. of Windsor*.
He humbled himself, and became *obediens* unto death.
Phil. *ii. 8.*
Religion hath a good influence upon the people, to make them *obediens* to government, and peaceable one towards another.
Tillotson, *Serm.* *3.*
The chief his orders gives; th' *obediens* band,
With due observance, wait the chief's command.
Pope.
- OBE'DIENTIAL.** *adj.* [*obediencialis*, Fr. from *obediens*.] According to the rule of obedience.
Faith is such as God will accept of, when it affords solu-

