

## REFERENCE

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### THE ONLINE DICTIONARY

Traditional reference works are evolving into resources that are not just digital versions of the books they replace. Their content and presentation now overcome some of the limitations of the hardcopy, such as indexing, linear design, distribution, space, size and format.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, however, the convenience and searchability of these digital reference works is offset by issues of price stability and ongoing subscription costs, licensing issues and archival resources, and the need for a reliable library computer infrastructure. On balance, the enhanced searchability and the currency of digital reference works makes them valued, if somewhat demanding, acquisitions.

#### *OED Online*

The launch of the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (OED Online) in March this year provides a major digital reference resource and is worth a place in today's law library.

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<sup>1</sup> Winter, Ken 2000, 'From wood pulp to the Web: the online revolution', *American Libraries*, vol. 31, no. 5, May, p. 70

It has long been part of the legal tradition in the English-speaking world to refer to the print *Oxford English Dictionary* to provide reputable definitions for both legal and non-legal terms. *OED Online* has been described as 'the Internet's biggest, most prestige-laden reference book' by *The Guardian* and the 'ultimate authority on the English language' by *The Times*.

The *OED Online* contains the complete text of the 20 volume second print edition, first published in 1989, together with its 3 volume Additions Series, published 1993-7. It traces the development of English from around 1150AD to the present day and includes many varieties of English: from the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Southern Africa, the Caribbean and South-East Asia. The evolution of words and their meanings is illustrated by quotations from this wide range of English-language sources.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its widespread reputation to the contrary the *OED* is not an arbiter of proper usage and is intended to be descriptive, not prescriptive. Its content should be viewed 'as an objective reflection of English language usage, not a subjective collection of 'dos and don'ts', although there is information on some well-known examples of incorrect usage.

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<sup>2</sup> *Guide to the Oxford English Dictionary*  
<http://dictionary.oed.com/public/guide/>

The structure is based on main entries and cross-references. Most entries contain information on spelling, pronunciation, derivation, meaning and usage. The usage of each word or idiom is documented using examples taken from printed texts of the past through to the present, or until the evidence suggests that the term is no longer used. It makes for fascinating reading, especially the facility for linking to related meanings with a simple click of the mouse!

*OED Online* is reasonably intuitive to use, although it is worth spending a short time to read the search hints contained in the well-laid out HELP function. There is so much information contained in this resource that an understanding of the structure of the entries ensures maximum returns.

The publisher proposes to completely revise the *OED* by 2010 and at least 1,000 new and revised entries will be added to *OED Online* each quarter. The project is anticipated to cost at least US\$55 million and is a complex undertaking because

There is no longer one English – there are many Englishes. Words are flooding into the language from all corners of the world. Only a dictionary the size of the *OED* can adequately capture the true richness of the English language throughout its history, and the developments in world English. Now that the online edition has been launched, I would be delighted to have a host of new readers helping us to map the past, the present, and the future of English.<sup>3</sup>

This appeal is a tradition established by Dr James Murray, the original editor of the *OED* for Oxford University Press. One of the most dedicated contributors was Dr William C. Minor. Simon Winchester has documented their relationship in his acclaimed work, *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*.<sup>4</sup>

The current editors are interested in gaining input from the legal profession, particularly during the drafting of entries for such terms as ‘murder’ and ‘motive’. They are prepared to offer a free subscription to the person, or their firm, who provides the most useful contribution. (See ‘Letters of the Law’, by John Simpson in this issue of *ALL*).

A single user licence is US\$550 per annum.

Network licences start at US\$1600 per annum (up to 500 staff)

Australian universities are eligible for special discounts as a result of a consortium deal arranged by the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL). The cost of network licences under this agreement varies from US\$950 for less than 2,500 EFTS to US\$3,200 for more than 15,000 EFTS. Prices are fixed for three years for those taking out a subscription before 31 March 2001.

Australian law libraries and law firms are currently being offered a free trial of *OED*

<sup>3</sup> John Simpson, Chief Editor. ‘Appeal for readers’ <http://dictionary.oed.com/public/readers/>

<sup>4</sup> Winchester, Simon 1998, *The Surgeon of Crowthorne*, Penguin.

*Online.* If you are interested complete the form at <http://oed.com/law>

### ***Australian Online Legal Dictionaries***

At the moment Butterworths provides two services:

- *Butterworths Encyclopaedic Australian Legal Dictionary* 250,000 legal words
- *Australian Legal Words and Phrases* 100,000 definitions from all Australian jurisdictions

These titles are available through *Butterworths Online* where they are interlinked and updated monthly. They have the obvious advantages of providing remote access to legal dictionaries (hard copies are not usually available for loan) as well as hypertext links from other research databases on *Butterworths Online*.

### ***Free Online Legal Dictionaries***

Browsing the Web reveals a number of free legal dictionaries with varying depth of content and subject focus. A sample includes:

***Findlaw Dictionary.*** *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law* ©1996  
<http://dictionary.findlaw.com:80/>

***Duhaime's Law Dictionary.*** Plain language law dictionary, accessible and browsable by letter. <http://www.duhaime.org:80/diction.htm>

***The 'Lectric Law Library's Legal Lexicon Law Dictionary*** features definitions and

explanations of legal terms, phrases and concepts <http://www.lectlaw.com:80/def.htm>

***Nolo's Everybody's Legal Dictionary.*** A searchable legal encyclopaedia for the layperson.

<http://www.wld.com:80/conbus/orans/Welcome.asp>

Or just visit the site *Free Online Legal Dictionaries* for links to more than 1000 general and specific legal dictionaries! [http://www.1000dictionaries.com/legal/dictionaries\\_1.html](http://www.1000dictionaries.com/legal/dictionaries_1.html) And

### ***Subject Dictionaries***

The Web provides immediate access to specialist subject dictionaries. Many are available free of charge and can be easily located using a search engine such as *Alta Vista* or *Google*.