In 1604 Robert Cawdrey produced the first dictionary of 3000 words. It had no “definitions.”

Dictionary Day is held in honor of Noah Webster, the man who is considered to have fathered the American Dictionary. 1758 was an auspicious year for the English language, and the first English lexicographer, or one whose craft is writing, editing, and compiling English dictionaries. The good man was born in Hartford, Connecticut to a family of some means, and his parents had the distinction of being both priest, farmer, Captain of the local militia, and the one who founded the local book society, something like a local library.

Dictionary Day encourages us to improve ourselves and the way we speak with others by enhancing our language in the study of the Dictionary.

- The earliest single-language dictionary in the English language was known as the “Table Alphabeticall.” Produced by a man named Robert Cawdrey in 1604, it contained around 3,000 words.
- It didn’t give “definitions” so much as synonyms; the author’s purpose, he wrote, was to introduce more complicated words to “ladies, gentlewomen, or any other unskillful persons,” so they could better understand scriptures and sermons.
- You might be surprised to learn what the most “complicated” word in English is—that is, the word with the largest number of separate definitions. And, well, there actually are a couple of answers. The current winner is technically “set,” and it’s held the title since 1989. In that edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, the word had... wait for it... 430 separate definitions.
- But in the next (print) edition of the OED, due out in 2037, there will be a new most complicated word in English, and a new champ. According to the editors, the word “run” has now amassed 645 separate meanings... for the verb form alone! It’s amazing to think that a three-letter word can carry so much meaning.
In 2020, for instance, Merriam-Webster added 550 words during the first cycle in April, and will announce even more during the second cycle. Of course, such additions are offset by dictionary words that go extinct, for better or worse.

Perhaps the most famous dictionary error of all time is “dord,” the imposter word. While editors were compiling words for the 1934 *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, a card for an abbreviation accidentally ended up in the pile of word cards. (The plan had been to keep abbreviations and words separate.) The abbreviation was “D or d,” a capital or lowercase D short for “density.” But since it ended up in the word pile, it was printed in the dictionary as “Dord,” meaning “density.” But no harm done; no one noticed the error for five years!

When the first edition of the Oxford English Dictionary debuted, in 1888, it was missing the word “bondmaid”—and forgot to include it for 50 years! An old-fashioned (even then) term for an enslaved girl, “bondmaid” had been in common use in the 16th century and was derived from a Biblical translation. You might find it remarkable that it took until the 1933 edition for the word “bondmaid” to finally appear, until you learn that it actually took 50 years for the second edition to come out.

Of all the words that have been mixed up with other words and had their meanings diluted over time, dictionary.com has declared one the most abused of all. Any guesses? It’s “ironic.” Their argument is that the word is almost never used correctly—you’ll most often hear it used to mean something that’s funny, coincidental, or unexpected.

Noah Webster (of dictionary fame) is the reason we have “British vs. American” spellings. Shortly after the Revolutionary War, the very pro-independence Noah Webster was adamant that America, officially its own country, should have a distinct way of spelling from the British.

Noah Webster was an odd duck, a famously fussy lexicographer who not only Americanized the English language but created the idea of American patriotism. He wrote the first real American dictionary, called, appropriately, *An American Dictionary of the English Language*, which took him 28 years to finish. His goal: to standardize American speech.

It included 70,000 words, and one in every six words had never been listed in a dictionary before. They included emerging Americanisms like squash, applesauce, hickory, chowder and skunk, as well as words of his own invention.

Webster personally counted all the houses in every town he visited. Traveling across America in 1785 and 1786, he tallied 20,380 houses in 22 cities. Webster exchanged that information with other people who counted houses.

Webster hated Shakespeare, complaining his language was ‘full of errors.’

He was often broke and in debt, though his wife was rich, his speller sold nearly 100 million copies and he landed America’s first blockbuster book deal, $42,000 over 14 years. He borrowed $1,500 from Alexander Hamilton so he could move to New York and start the country’s first daily newspaper, *American Minerva*.

To write his dictionary, he learned 26 languages, including Old English, German, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, French, Hebrew, Arabic and Sanskrit.

He was an 18th century sock puppet who anonymously praised his own work and trashed his critics. The phrase ‘sock puppet,’ meaning ‘false online identity,’ made it into Merriam-Webster in 2009.

After Webster died in 1843, George and Charles Merriam bought the rights to revise Webster’s *An American Dictionary of the English Language, Corrected and Enlarged*. The two brothers printed and sold books in Springfield, Massachusetts, and their intellectual property purchase paid off. In the fall of 1847, the Merriams issued the first revised Webster dictionary for six dollars.
After serving in World War I, J.R.R. Tolkien worked as an editor’s assistant on the OED (Oxford English Dictionary). His job was to research the etymologies of certain words that started with the letter \textit{w}.

- Tolkien also composed multiple drafts of definitions for words such as \textit{waggle}, \textit{walnut}, \textit{walrus}, and \textit{waistcoat}.
- After his time at the OED, Tolkien went on to work as an English professor and write \textit{The Lord of the Rings}.

Subsequently, the OED has added terms that Tolkien himself coined, such as \textit{hobbit}, \textit{mithril}, and \textit{mathom}.

Sources:

- Days of the Year
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