Acronym

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For the <acronym> HTML tag, see HTML element § acronym.

For the use of acronyms on Wikipedia, see Wikipedia:Acronyms.

An acronym is a word or name formed as a type of abbreviation formed from the initial components of the words of a longer content such as of a name or phrase:

often with individual initial letters, as in NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) or scuba (Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus),

sometimes syllables, as in Benelux (Belgium, Netherlands and Luxembourg),

or a mixture of the two, as in radar (RAdio Detection And Ranging),

and sometimes with the letters of the acronym needing to be pronounced individually as with uses of AA (including in connection to various Automobile Associations and for Alcoholics Anonymous).

There are no universal standards for the multiple names for such abbreviations or for their orthographic styling. Acronyms result from a word formation process known as blending, in which parts of two or more words are combined to form a new word.

Acronyms flourished especially from the 20th century onwards; the distinction between abbreviation and acronym has been steadily eroded and acronym is commonly used for several types of abbreviation.

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Nomenclature

Whereas an abbreviation may be any type of shortened form, such as words with the middle omitted (for example, Rd for road or Dr for Doctor), an acronym is a word formed from the first letter or first few letters of each word in a phrase (such as sonar, created from sound navigation and ranging). Attestations for Akronym in German are known from 1921, and for acronym in English from 1940.[1]

Although the word acronym is often used to refer to any abbreviation formed from initial letters,[2] some dictionaries and usage commentators define acronym to mean an abbreviation that is pronounced as a word,[18] in contrast to an initialism (or alphabetism)‍—‌an abbreviation formed from a string of initials (and possibly pronounced as individual letters).[19] Some dictionaries include additional senses equating acronym with initialism.[20][21][22] The distinction, when made, hinges on whether the abbreviation is pronounced as a word or as a string of individual letters. Examples in reference works that make the distinction include "NATO" /ˈneɪtoʊ/, "scuba" /ˈskuːbə/, and "radar" /ˈreɪdɑːr/ for acronyms; and "FBI" /ˌɛfˌbiːˈaɪ/, "CRT" /ˌsiːˌɑːrˈtiː/, and "HTML" /ˌeɪtʃˌtiːˌɛmˈɛl/ for initialisms.[3][15][23][24] The rest of this article uses acronym for both types of abbreviation.

The distinction is not well-maintained. According to Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of English Usage:[2] "A number of commentators ... believe that acronyms can be differentiated from other abbreviations in being pronounceable as words. Dictionaries, however, do not make this distinction because writers in general do not. ... Initialism, an older word than acronym, seems to be too little known to the general public to serve as the customary term standing in contrast with acronym in a narrow sense." About the use of acronym to only mean those pronounced as words, Fowler's Modern English Usage (3rd ed.) states:[25] "The limitations of the term being not widely known to the general public, acronym is also often applied to abbreviations that are familiar but are not pronounceable as words. ... Such terms are also called initialisms."

A clearer distinction has also been drawn by Pyles & Algeo (1970),[2] who divided acronyms as a general category into word acronyms pronounced as words, and initialisms sounded out as letters.

There is no special term for abbreviations whose pronunciation involves the combination of letter names and words or word-like pronunciations of strings of letters, such as "JPEG" /ˈdʒeɪpɛɡ/ and "MS-DOS" /ˌɛmɛsˈdɒs/. There is also some disagreement as to what to call abbreviations that some speakers pronounce as letters and others pronounce as a word. For example, the terms "URL" and "IRA" can be pronounced as individual letters: /ˌjuːˌɑːrˈɛl/ and /ˌaɪˌɑːrˈeɪ/, respectively; or as a single word: /ɜːrl/ and /ˈaɪrə/, respectively.[citation needed]

The spelled-out form of an acronym or initialism (that is, what it stands for) is called its expansion.

Comparing a few examples of each type

Pronounced as a word, containing only initial letters

NATO: "North Atlantic Treaty Organization"

Scuba: "self-contained underwater breathing apparatus"

Laser: "light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation"

GIF: "graphics interchange format"

Pronounced as a word, containing a mixture of initial and non-initial letters

Amphetamine: "alpha-methyl-phenethylamine"

Gestapo: Geheime Staatspolizei (secret state police)

Radar: "radio detection and ranging"

Pronounced as a string of letters, containing syllable-initial but not necessarily word-initial letters

PMN: "polymorphonuclear leukocytes"

OCA: "oculocutaneous albinism"

PCM: "paracoccidioidomycosis"

Pronounced as a word or as a string of letters, depending on speaker or context

FAQ: (/fæk/ or ef-a-cue) "frequently asked questions"

IRA: When used for "individual retirement account", can be pronounced as letters (i-ar-a) or as a word /ˈaɪrə/

SQL: (/ˈsiːkwəl/ or ess-cue-el) "structured query language"

Pronounced as a combination of spelling out and a word

CD-ROM: (cee-dee-/rɒm/) "compact disc read-only memory"

IUPAC: (i-u-/pæk/ or i-u-pee-a-cee) "International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry"

JPEG: (jay-/pɛɡ/ or jay-pee-e-gee) "Joint Photographic Experts Group"

SFMOMA: (ess-ef-/ˈmoʊmə/ or ess-ef-em-o-em-a) "San Francisco Museum of Modern Art"

Pronounced only as a string of letters

BBC: "British Broadcasting Corporation"

OEM: "original equipment manufacturer"

USA: "United States of America"

VHF: “Very high frequency”

Pronounced as a string of letters, but with a shortcut

AAA:

(Triple-A) "American Automobile Association"; "abdominal aortic aneurysm"; "anti-aircraft artillery"; "Asistencia, Asesoría y Administración"

(Three-As) "Amateur Athletic Association"

IEEE: (I triple-E) "Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers"

NAACP: (N double-A C P or N A A C P) "National Association for the Advancement of Colored People"

NCAA: (N C double-A or N C two-A or N C A A) "National Collegiate Athletic Association"

Shortcut incorporated into name

3M: (three M) originally "Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company"

(ISC)²: (ISC squared) "International Information Systems Security Certification Consortium"[26]

W3C: (W-three C) "World Wide Web Consortium"

C4ISTAR: (C-four Istar) "Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance"[27]

E3: (E-three) "Electronic Entertainment Expo"

Multi-layered acronyms

AIM: "AOL Instant Messenger", in which "AOL" originally stood for "America Online"

NAC Breda: (Dutch football club) "NOAD ADVENDO Combinatie" ("NOAD ADVENDO Combination"), formed by the 1912 merger of two clubs from Breda:

NOAD: (Nooit Opgeven Altijd Doorgaan "Never give up, always persevere")

ADVENDO: (Aangenaam Door Vermaak En Nuttig Door Ontspanning "Pleasant by entertainment and useful by relaxation")[28][29]

GIMP: "GNU image manipulation program"

VHDL: "VHSIC hardware description language", where "VHSIC" stands for "very high speed integrated circuit" (a U.S. government program)

Recursive acronyms, in which the abbreviation refers to itself

GNU: "GNU's not Unix!"

Wine: "Wine is not an emulator" (originally, "Windows emulator")

These may go through multiple layers before the self-reference is found:

HURD: "HIRD of Unix-replacing daemons", where "HIRD" stands for "HURD of interfaces representing depth"

Pseudo-acronyms, which consist of a sequence of characters that, when pronounced as intended, invoke other, longer words with less typing[30] This makes them gramograms.

CQ: cee-cue for "seek you", a code used by radio operators

IOU: i-o-u for "I owe you"

K9: kay-nine for "canine", used to designate police units utilizing dogs

Abbreviations whose last abbreviated word is often redundantly included anyway

ATM machine: "automated teller machine" (machine)

HIV virus: "human immunodeficiency virus" (virus)

LCD display: "liquid-crystal display" (display)

PIN number: "personal identification number" (number)

Pronounced as a word, containing letters as a word in itself

PAYGO: "pay-as-you-go"

Historical and current use

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Acronymy, like retronymy, is a linguistic process that has existed throughout history but for which there was little to no naming, conscious attention, or systematic analysis until relatively recent times. Like retronymy, it became much more common in the 20th century than it had formerly been.

Ancient examples of acronymy (regardless of whether there was metalanguage at the time to describe it) include the following:

Acronyms were used in Rome before the Christian era. For example, the official name for the Roman Empire, and the Republic before it, was abbreviated as SPQR (Senatus Populusque Romanus). Inscriptions dating from antiquity, both on stone and on coins, use many abbreviations and acronyms to save space and work. For example, Roman first names, of which there was only a small set, were almost always abbreviated. Common terms were abbreviated too, such as writing just "F" for filius, meaning "son", a very common part of memorial inscriptions mentioning people. Grammatical markers were abbreviated or left out entirely if they could be inferred from the rest of the text.

So-called nomina sacra (sacred names) were used in many Greek biblical manuscripts. The common words "God" (Θεός), "Jesus" (Ιησούς), "Christ" (Χριστός), and some others, would be abbreviated by their first and last letters, marked with an overline. This was just one of many kinds of conventional scribal abbreviation, used to reduce the time-consuming workload of the scribe and save on valuable writing materials. The same convention is still commonly used in the inscriptions on religious icons and the stamps used to mark the eucharistic bread in Eastern Churches.

The early Christians in Rome, most of whom were Greek rather than Latin speakers, used the image of a fish as a symbol for Jesus in part because of an acronym—"fish" in Greek is ichthys (ΙΧΘΥΣ), which was said to stand for Ἰησοῦς Χριστός Θεοῦ Υἱός Σωτήρ (Iesous Christos Theou huios Soter: "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior"). This interpretation dates from the 2nd and 3rd centuries and is preserved in the catacombs of Rome. And for centuries, the Church has used the inscription INRI over the crucifix, which stands for the Latin Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum ("Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews").

The Hebrew language has a long history of formation of acronyms pronounced as words, stretching back many centuries. The Hebrew Bible ("Old Testament") is known as "Tanakh", an acronym composed from the Hebrew initial letters of its three major sections: "Torah" (five books of Moses), "Nevi'im" (prophets), and "K'tuvim" (writings). Many rabbinical figures from the Middle Ages onward are referred to in rabbinical literature by their pronounced acronyms, such as Rambam and Rashi from the initial letters of their full Hebrew names: "Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon" and "Rabbi Shlomo Yitzkhaki".

During the mid- to late 19th century, an acronym-disseminating trend spread through the American and European business communities: abbreviating corporation names —such as on the sides of railroad cars (e.g., "Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad" → "RF&P"); on the sides of barrels and crates; and on ticker tape and in the small-print newspaper stock listings that got their data from it (e.g. American Telephone and Telegraph Company → AT&T). Some well-known commercial examples dating from the 1890s through 1920s include "Nabisco" ("National Biscuit Company"),[31] "Esso" (from "S.O.", from "Standard Oil"), and "Sunoco" ("Sun Oil Company").

Another driver for the adoption of acronyms was modern warfare, with its many highly technical terms. While there is no recorded use of military acronyms in documents dating from the American Civil War (acronyms such as "ANV" for "Army of Northern Virginia" post-date the war itself), they had become somewhat common in World War I and were very much a part even of the vernacular language of the soldiers during World War II,[32] who themselves were referred to as G.I.s.

The widespread, frequent use of acronyms across the whole range of registers is a relatively new linguistic phenomenon in most languages, becoming increasingly evident since the mid-20th century. As literacy rates rose, and as advances in science and technology brought with them a constant stream of new (and sometimes more complex) terms and concepts, the practice of abbreviating terms became increasingly convenient. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) records the first printed use of the word initialism as occurring in 1899, but it did not come into general use until 1965, well after acronym had become common.

By 1943, the term acronym had been used in English to recognize abbreviations (and contractions of phrases) that were pronounced as words.[31] (It was formed from the Greek words ἄκρος, akros, "topmost, extreme" and ὄνομα, onoma, "name.") For example, the army offense of being absent without official leave was abbreviated to "A.W.O.L." in reports, but when pronounced as a word (awol), it became an acronym.[33] While initial letters are commonly used to form an acronym, the original definition was "a word made from the initial letters or syllables of other words",[34] for example UNIVAC from UNIVersal Automatic Computer.[35]