

# A tour of the dictionary

## Introduction

The video on the online version of *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* consists of 18 short explanations of various aspects of dictionary use and allows students to explore each of the aspects and to find the information described in the video.

## Procedure

- Aims:** to familiarize students with dictionary entries and improve their reference skills
- Timing:** 60-90 minutes
- Resources:** *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 10th edition* (book, app or website)  
1 worksheet per student  
1 copy of the videoscript  
computer and screen to display the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* website.

## Preparation

- Make a photocopy of the worksheet for each student
- Set up a computer and screen to display the video to the whole class

## Activity

Choose the Resources section of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* website. Click on 'Using the dictionary' and play the 'Tour of the dictionary' video, pressing pause when indicated in the script. Give the students time to look at the corresponding question on their worksheet and to find the answer in their dictionaries before restarting the video.

The continuation of the film will explain the answers – here for reference are the correct choices:

## Key

1 b 2 c 3 a 4 a 5 c 6 i) a ii) b 7 a 8 c 9 a 10 b  
11 c 12 b 13 b 14 b, c 15 a, b, c 16 b 17 b, c 18 b

# A tour of the dictionary

## How to find a word in the dictionary

Let's go on a whistle-stop tour of the dictionary!

A what? I hear you say? What does that mean, 'a whistle-stop tour'? And that's precisely the point where most people find they need a dictionary: they want to know what something means.

If you're using a print dictionary, you need to know where to look, using alphabetical order to find the first letter of the word you want – you can see the letters on the edge of the pages.

We can see from the words at the top of the page which the first and last words on those pages are.

Here's the page with the words beginning 'whis',

PAUSE

and here's whistle-stop.

It means 'visiting a lot of places in a very short time'. So if you go on a whistle-stop tour, you'll see lots of different things.

## How to find the right meaning of a word in the dictionary

Sometimes words surprise us. We think we know what a word means, and then we see it used in a surprising way. Learners of English know what a 'leg' is after a few weeks of lessons, but what about this sentence? *Keep this ticket for the second leg of your journey.*

Here, obviously something different is meant.

Let's check the dictionary entry.

PAUSE

Well, if we thought that 'leg' was just a part of the body, we're in for a surprise, because there are seven different meanings! But we don't have to read through all of this information to find what we're looking for, because there are words that will help us find the right place quickly – shortcuts.

We know we're not talking about the part of the body, or meat, or anything to do with trousers or tables, we haven't got the word '-legged', but we are talking about a journey, so this one, number 6, must be our meaning: a leg of something is 'one part of a journey or race'. So we need the ticket for the next part of our journey.

## Understanding dictionary definitions

Understanding words in a learner's dictionary is not difficult, because they are explained in simple terms. In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, the definitions use the 3000 word families known as the Oxford 3000. If you are familiar with these words, you should have no difficulty understanding the explanations in the dictionary. Say you get sent some complicated-looking documents when you book a journey. They have the heading *Conditions of conveyance*.

What on earth does this mean, **conveyance**?

Let's look at the entry.

PAUSE

Oh, it's just a formal way of saying 'the process of taking somebody or something from one place to another'. 'Process' is one of those words that are important to know when you are explaining meanings. You will find it a lot in dictionary definitions, along with words like 'substance', 'instrument', 'act', 'organization', 'state', or 'quality' - these are ways in which we categorize things and ideas, so they are very useful to know, not just for understanding definitions, but for explaining words to other people – perhaps when you can't remember the exact word yourself.

## Finding a word you don't know

How can you find a word you don't know in a monolingual dictionary? The best tactic is to start with a related word that you do know. Suppose you want to talk about driving here in your car and you've forgotten the word that means 'make a car go faster'. Start with a basic word that you do know: **car**.

PAUSE

Here you can see a 'Wordfinder' box with various words relating to the car, including one that sounds familiar – **accelerate**. That was what we were trying to remember – yes, if we check the entry, we can see that's right.

## Using the dictionary to find past tenses of verbs

People today travel much more than in the past. If I'm talking or writing about this, in my next sentence, I want to say something about how it was in the past, and to say how surprising the changes have been.

The word I want here is the past participle of **foresee**. But what is it? That's something that the dictionary can tell us.

PAUSE

It is irregular but we can see the past tense and the past participle given at the top of the entry.

The past participle is **foreseen**. And of course, the dictionary gives information about nouns with irregular plurals and adjectives with irregular comparatives and superlatives.

## Building your vocabulary with related words

When we look up one word in the dictionary, we can often learn more useful, related vocabulary. When you look at the entry for **foresee**, you find a synonym,

PAUSE

**predict**

That means you can vary your vocabulary when you are speaking or writing English and make your language less repetitive and more interesting. Notice that at the end of this entry you are also given a hint about another word that is related, **unforeseen**. This is an adjective from the same word family, so it's a good idea to learn it at the same time as the verb. Let's check out the entry.

Here's the definition: *that you did not expect to happen*, and there's another synonym, **unexpected**.

So it's easy to build your vocabulary by following up all the hints about related words.

## Building vocabulary using illustrations in the dictionary

A good way to build vocabulary is by using pictures. Illustrations in the dictionary not only help us to learn groups of words for similar things or parts of things, but can also help us to get a clear idea of what something is. Something that was introduced to try and help us get through the queues at passport control relied on iris recognition. But which part of the eye is the iris, exactly? Let's look at a picture.

PAUSE

We can see the pupil in the middle, and the iris is the coloured part around it.

## Using examples in the dictionary

We tend to use a dictionary to look up words we don't know the meanings of. But it can be very helpful to look up a word you do know to find other information about how to use it in a sentence, and to see how it is typically used in context. You can also see the words that are often used with it, for example the adjectives that collocate with a noun. If you want to describe a flight you've been on where there was a lot of turbulence, what's the right adjective to use? Let's look at the entry for **flight**.

### PAUSE

If we look at the examples that come after the definition of the word, we can see some important adjectives – highlighted in bold type – and the first example shows us ways of describing how comfortable it was. So a flight could be **smooth** (no!) **comfortable** (no!) or **bumpy** – yes, that's the word we were looking for.

Choosing the right word

In English there are often several words with similar meanings. Suppose you've been asked to go to a conference for work. What's the correct way to talk about this? There are lots of words to do with travel: *trip, journey, tour, excursion*. Can we find help in the dictionary to choose the right one?

Let's look at the synonyms note at **trip** and see what the differences are.

### PAUSE

We can see that **trip** usually means travelling from one place to another and usually back again, and the example 'a business trip' shows us that this is a common expression. A journey refers to travelling from one place to another, especially when they are a long way apart. So we can say 'I'm going on a business trip to the US, and the journey will take me ten hours'.

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## Finding names of places and using information about pronunciation

Imagine you have been asked to attend a conference in the Bahamas. You will be meeting members of this organization:

If you're not sure how this is pronounced, how can you find out? In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, there's a list of names of countries.

### PAUSE

The Bahamas is in the list here and next to it, the adjective with the transcription to show us how it's pronounced.

We can see that the second vowel sound is different in the adjective from the noun. You can find out how to pronounce any of the headwords in the dictionary using the phonetic transcriptions – or by listening to the digital versions.

So the adjective is pronounced /bə'heɪmiən/.

## Finding abbreviations

What we usually look for in dictionaries are whole words, but some of the things we might not understand are not whole words, but abbreviations. Suppose you've received an email like this.

So, you've arranged to go to a conference in the Bahamas, but there are some things you need to discuss. The email you get back suggests that you talk on the phone at 10.15 EDT. But what do they mean? To find an abbreviation in the dictionary, you treat it like any other word, so we will find EDT in its correct place in alphabetical order.

PAUSE

And so we can see that this is an abbreviation for the time zone that they're in in the Bahamas – Eastern Daylight Time – and we can find out details of exactly what that is in the entry.

## American English

If you are travelling to the United States, you will come across some different vocabulary from the words used in British English. If you're told before you travel 'You're only allowed one carry-on', what does it mean? Let's check the entry.

PAUSE

If a British speaker were using the word carry-on, they would mean something like a 'fuss', but that's not what's meant here. We can see in the meaning which is marked 'North American English' that it refers to a small bag or case that you can take on the plane with you. So the dictionary will explain when there's a difference in meaning, usage, spelling or pronunciation between British and American English.

## Understanding idioms

When you travel, do you like to take as little luggage with you as possible? There's an expression for that in English. But what is it? Let's check in the dictionary.

PAUSE

At the end of all the different meanings for the verb 'to travel', there's an idiom – clearly marked with this symbol **IDM**.

And we can see that to travel with very little luggage is to travel light.

## Finding out about the grammar of nouns from the dictionary

The dictionary is not just about meaning and spelling. It tells us a lot about the grammar of the language, too. For example, I can check whether it is correct to say 'How many baggages can I take?'

Let's look at the entry for **baggage**.

PAUSE

At the top of the entry we can see a 'u' in square brackets

This tells us that the noun is uncountable. That means we can't use it in the plural, and we can't use it with 'a'. So 'baggages' is not correct, and we couldn't say 'a baggage', either. We could say 'how much baggage', and we can talk about 'pieces of baggage'.

There are some more examples of this in the note about **baggage** and **luggage**, which behaves the same way.

## Finding out about the grammar of verbs from the dictionary

It is always worth looking up words in the dictionary, even when we know them, because there is information in the entries that helps us to use the words correctly. There's lots of grammatical information there, for example, the correct pattern for using a verb. If we're talking about a journey, we might want to use the verb **leave**, but what are the constructions we can use?

Is it correct to say 'When are you leaving?' like that, without an object? Let's look at what the dictionary can tell us.

### PAUSE

The code at the beginning of this meaning, [I,T], tells us the verb can be used intransitively – without an object – or transitively – with an object. So it's OK to use 'leave' on its own, without an object. The example *Come on, it's time we left* shows this, too, and so our sentence 'When are you leaving?' is fine. If we are talking about our destination, what's the preposition we need? Was it right to say 'We leave for Thailand tomorrow'? Let's look at the next part of the entry. We can see the construction 'leave for', and there's an example *The plane leaves for Dallas at 12.35*. So our sentence 'We leave for Thailand tomorrow' is also fine.

And if we've got an object, as in 'We leave Sydney'. Is that OK, too? Yes, we can see the construction 'leave something' and we have two examples *The plane leaves Heathrow at 12.35*, and *I hate leaving home*. So the dictionary has confirmed that our third sentence is also correct.

## Using the dictionary to find out about phrasal verbs

If we're talking about journeys, we might want several ways of talking about 'leaving'. One common expression for this is a phrasal verb, but which is it?

Because phrasal verbs can be hard to remember, it's useful to be able to check them in the dictionary. In the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* they have their own section after the main meanings of a word.

### PAUSE

**Leave** has 13 different meanings, then a section with some idioms using 'leave' with this symbol **IDM**.

and after that with this symbol, **PHRV**, the phrasal verbs with 'leave'.

**Leave off** exists, but it means 'to stop doing something', so that isn't what we want. Let's look at **set**. That's another word with many, many meanings, but we can go straight to the phrasal verb section and find **set off**.

Here we've found our meaning, 'to begin a journey'.

## Expressing yourself politely

Communicating involves more than just knowing the basic words – *how* you express yourself can make a real difference. When you travel to a new place, there will be lots of things that you don't know. You will need to ask people to help you, and to ask them for information. It's important to know how to ask in a polite and friendly way so that people are happy to help you. In the dictionary, special 'Express yourself' boxes give you models for situations just like this.

So if you're lost and need to find the station, how can you express your question more naturally and more politely?

### PAUSE

We can begin our question with 'Could you tell me', or we can put a polite phrase like 'I wonder whether you can help me' before our question. And if you're writing, Language Banks will also give you useful vocabulary for essays and reports, all in the context of sentences.

## Finding out what people really mean

Words convey meanings, but they also convey feelings and attitudes – the words people choose can tell what they really think about what they're talking about. So if you're planning a holiday somewhere and you read about various places on English-speaking websites or in an English guidebook, you need to know exactly what the writers are trying to tell you. If you read that a place is 'unspoiled' or 'unpretentious', is that a good thing? Let's check the dictionary entries.

### PAUSE

Before we get to the definitions, we are given a hint about how these words are used.

These words are used in an approving way – so 'not trying to appear more special than you really are' is something that has a positive feeling about it in English. If we look at the second quote, we can see that the resort is 'touristy'. Well, a holiday resort has to have all the facilities that tourists need – so can it be a good thing to be 'touristy'? Let's look.

Again, before we read the definition of the meaning, we are warned that this word is used in a 'disapproving' way. And the same is true for the words **gaudy** and **brash**.

# Worksheet

## A tour of the dictionary

- 1 Let's go on a **whistle-stop** tour! What does **whistle-stop** mean?
  - a very noisy and tiring
  - b visiting a lot of different places in a very short time
  - c long and slow
  
- 2 What does 'leg' mean in this sentence? *Keep this ticket for the next **leg** of your journey.*
  - a the section where you walk
  - b a day
  - c a part of the journey
  
- 3 What does the word **conveyance** in 'Conditions of Conveyance' mean?  
Is it:
  - a a process
  - b a quality
  - c a substance
  
- 4 What is the word for 'to start to go faster', especially when you are driving a car?
  - a accelerate
  - b brake
  - c commute
  
- 5 *People today travel much more than in the past. Even a hundred years ago, no one could have \_\_\_\_\_ the huge expansion in travel that happened in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*  
What is the correct form to fill the gap?
  - a foresaw
  - b foresawn
  - c foreseen
  
- 6 i) What is another word for **foresee**?
  - a predict
  - b forestall
  - c foreshadow  
ii) What adjective related to **foresee** can describe something that you did not expect to happen?
  - a non-foreseen
  - b unforeseen
  - c inforeseen
  
- 7 Which part of the eye is the **iris**?
  - a the coloured part of the eye
  - b the small round black area in the centre?
  - c the white part
  
- 8 How would you describe a flight when there was a lot of turbulence?
  - a lumpy
  - b humpy
  - c bumpy
  
- 9 When you go to the conference, it will be for work. What is the correct way to talk about this?
  - a a business trip
  - b a business tour
  - c a business excursion



- 10 Which of these words has the same sound as the middle 'a' in 'Bahamian'?
- a *cat*
  - b *say*
  - c *father*
- 11 You need to make a call to the organizers of a conference in the Bahamas. It is suggested that you ring at 10.15 EDT. What does this mean?
- a *around a quarter past ten*
  - b *at 10.15 in the morning*
  - c *at 10.15 Eastern Daylight Time*
- 12 If you are told 'You're only allowed one carry-on on the plane', does it mean:
- a *you can take a child in a cot*
  - b *you can only take one bag or small case*
  - c *you must keep calm*
- 13 When you take very little luggage with you on a journey, do you:
- a *travel easy*
  - b *travel light*
  - c *travel lightly*
- 14 Which of these sentences are correct?
- a *How many baggages can I take?*
  - b *How many pieces of baggage can I take?*
  - c *How much baggage can I take?*
- 15 Which of these sentences are correct?
- a *When are you leaving?*
  - b *We leave for Thailand tomorrow.*
  - c *We leave Sydney at 11 o'clock.*
- 16 What is another way of saying 'leave' or 'depart'?
- a *leave off*
  - b *set off*
  - c *break off*
- 17 You're lost. Which of these would be a polite way to ask someone the way?
- a *Where's the station?*
  - b *Could you tell me the best way to get to the station, please?*
  - c *I wonder whether you can help me. I'm looking for the station.*
- 18 Which of these descriptions would make you NOT want to stay in the place being described?
- a *'The hotel is in an unspoiled village and serves unpretentious, honest-to-goodness food.'*
  - b *'The décor in the hotel is gaudy and brash, and the resort touristy in the extreme.'*
  - c *'A swanky, stylish hotel in a leafy part of this cosmopolitan city.'*