

## Project #1: Word History

100 pts

**Description:** Part 1: A word history of 250-500 words,

Part 2: an explanation of 750-1000 words that shows the significance of that history in comparison to that of other words.

### Due

**Goal:** To research and explain the etymology and historical development of a word that existed in Old English and consider how and why its development differs from that of other words.

**Assignment:** Many words went through some drastic changes as English developed, making for some varied meanings over the course of the history of the language. For this project you will write a detailed history of a word of your choice that was used during the OE period and then compare the changes it went through to those of other words studied by your classmates.

It is hard to say what exactly ought to go into a word history because what is interesting about a word's history is different for different parts of speech and for different individual words. Part 1 must address 1.) what the word looked like in Old English, 2.) what the original/early meaning(s) of the word were, and 3.) how/whether the meaning changed over time (explain this last part at least partially with the processes of semantic change we went over in class). You might also consider

- Were there any changes in pronunciation, morphological development, or new derivations?
- How have people used the word at various points in its history (look at representative quotations)? Has the word migrated from general English into slang or jargon or vice versa? Have any interesting compounds developed from the word?
- Are there any secondary meanings that exist alongside the primary meaning?
- Are there any controversies over the word's appropriate use?

For Part 2, you should explain what a comparison of these words can illustrate about linguistic change and the ways our language shifts: what similarities and/or differences do you see in the ways the words developed and what might account for them? Some specific questions you could explore are

- Were there historical events that changed the meaning or the cultural significance of the words?
- Do the words have any particular cultural or linguistic importance or value?
- Are there other words in Modern English that share some of the early meanings of the words?
- What about these words would make them more or less prone to change?

### Criteria for Evaluation:

- Part 1:
  - Accuracy: make sure your explanation of the history is correct (avoid homonyms that are not really instances of your word).
  - Completeness: be sure to explain any relevant changes to your word's meaning, pronunciation, and usage, *using the vocabulary about processes of semantic change that we learned in class*.
  - Detail: go into as much detail as you can about interesting developments in the word and/or historical significance of the developments. The best way to do this is to look at as many different sources as are relevant (see the following page for a list of possible sources). You are required to look at *three or more* sources, which must include *an OE dictionary and the OED*.
- Part 2:
  - Comparison: Compare the history of your word directly with multiple other words and explain the similarities and differences in the way it developed.
  - Explanation: Explain *why* your word may have developed as it did, giving an explanation for any similarities or differences you discuss in your comparison (you might not know for sure why the word developed as it did, but speculate based on what we have learned)

- Finishing: Error-free writing with correct citation and a proper works cited list in MLA format.

### Picking your word:

Here is a list of possible words. You can use one of these or you can find your own—any word that existed in OE will due. Everyone must have a different word, however. When you have picked a word, you should go to the Project #1 forum under discussions and start a new thread with your word as the title. This is considered reserving the word, so you may not choose a word that has already been posted. You will later post your word history there so that everyone will have access to all the word histories in order to complete part 2 of the assignment.

- |               |              |               |                                |
|---------------|--------------|---------------|--------------------------------|
| ▪ adder (N)   | ▪ earl (N)   | ▪ mild (adj)  | ▪ sore (adj)                   |
| ▪ ale (N)     | ▪ fee (N)    | ▪ mood (N)    | ▪ sound (the body of water; N) |
| ▪ awful (adj) | ▪ fiend (N)  | ▪ moody (adj) | ▪ stream (N)                   |
| ▪ bishop (N)  | ▪ folk (N)   | ▪ name (N)    | ▪ strength (N)                 |
| ▪ bread (N)   | ▪ glad (adj) | ▪ need (N)    | ▪ tongue (N)                   |
| ▪ dark (adj)  | ▪ greet (V)  | ▪ old (adj)   | ▪ tree (N)                     |
| ▪ deal (N)    | ▪ grow (V)   | ▪ on (prep)   | ▪ true (adj)                   |
| ▪ death (N)   | ▪ guilt (N)  | ▪ own (V)     | ▪ weird (adj)                  |
| ▪ debt (N)    | ▪ heave (V)  | ▪ play (V)    | ▪ will (N)                     |
| ▪ deep (adj)  | ▪ idle (adj) | ▪ quick (adj) | ▪ wit (N)                      |
| ▪ deer (N)    | ▪ in (prep)  | ▪ rich (adj)  | ▪ with (prep)                  |
| ▪ dim (adj)   | ▪ kin (N)    | ▪ skirt (N)   | ▪ wood (N)                     |
| ▪ doom (N)    | ▪ knight (N) | ▪ soothe (V)  |                                |

### Possible sources

Following is a list of the types of sources you can look at, with a few samples of each source. Don't feel limited to these samples; you should also consider going to the library and spending some time in the dictionary section (PE 1600-4000); there are many good resources there.

**GENERAL DICTIONARIES:** a good place to start, these will give you several definitions as well as an etymology for each word

*The Oxford English Dictionary* (access this through the databases section of the UNK library website): This will be your best source and where you should start for each word you are considering. This will give an etymology, many historical meanings, and long lists of sample sentences. You already know that it can be confusing, so give yourself some time to work with it.

*The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*: as far as commercial dictionaries go, this is one of the better ones. It will give you not only good definitions and etymologies, but also historical notes and usage panels for select words.

**HISTORICAL DICTIONARIES:** these are specifically geared to a particular time. They will help with words that have a long history. Because the words are alphabetized under their older forms, you will have to look up the word in the OED to find the historical form to look up (especially with the OE dictionaries)

*An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, edited by Bosworth and Toller: this will provide detailed definitions of words in Old English.

*The Dictionary of Old English* (available at <http://doe.utoronto.ca/pages/index.html>; you will have to register – it's free, but you'll only get 20 logins). This dictionary is going to replace Bosworth and Toller's as the definitive Old English dictionary, but they are currently stuck on H. Use it if your word is early enough in the alphabet.

*A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, edited by John R. Clark Hall: this is similar to Bosworth and Toller's dictionary, but it is slightly shorter. This means it will have less information, but will also be more straightforward.

*The Middle English Dictionary* (available through the *Middle English Compendium*, online: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mec/>): this source will also provide a detailed definition from an earlier time. It can also provide quotes of every time a word is used in ME. Again, the OED will be able to give you the spelling you will need.

*Dictionary of the English Language*, ed Samuel Johnson: this is the first dictionary of English. It does not have nearly as many words as we are used to in a dictionary, but it can provide an interesting insight if your word is included.

**SPECIALIZED DICTIONARIES:** many dictionaries exist for specialized portions of the language, such as regional dialects or slang. These can be helpful if you have chosen a word that has become part of a specific dialect or one that can now be used as slang.

*The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang* (access on-line through the library catalogue): good for slang in particular.

*The Oxford American Dictionary of Current English* (access on-line through the library catalogue): good for words as they have developed differently in the US, separate from England.

*English Dialect Dictionary*: This is older than some, but it can often supply the missing link to a word's history.

**WORD HISTORY BOOKS:** these books provide a short narrative for the development of numerous words, similar to the ones you are going to write. They are a good source for information, but be careful not to just repeat the history given in the book: you will need to add more information from other sources as well.

*Word Mysteries & Histories: from Quiche to Humble Pie* (available at the library): not complete by any means, but gives short narratives about numerous words

*Word Histories and Mysteries: from Abracadabra to Zeus* (access on-line through the library catalogue): a later follow-up to the previous book; it does much the same with different words.

**WEB SOURCES:** do not consult web-original dictionaries and encyclopedias as authorities—Wikipedia, Wiktionary, the Urban Dictionary all have their good points, but they are not substitutes for research in print sources (or print sources that have been posted to the web). They can provide folk definitions and etymologies worth considering and even including in your paper, but you will never find sound etymological conclusions in them unless you can also find the conclusions in the traditional dictionaries. Information on the web can be useful, though, to either find folk etymologies that need correction or to

find out what people are saying about the word. Some other good word-oriented websites include Wordspy.com, wordorigins.com, WorldWidewords.com, and Double-Tongued Word Wrestler (doubletongued.org).