

## On Dictionaries and Other Helps for Teaching Vocabulary and Spelling

**Finding Words Containing the Same Element.** To make lists of words with the same element, as described in the article “Words and Some of Their Ways,” there are textbooks that compile such lists for you, usually vocabulary and reading textbooks. But the following are the sources that I have found most useful:

The first and third through fifth editions of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* provide a very helpful appendix of Indo-European roots that is cross-referenced to the regular etymologies in the main dictionary. Let's say that you are interested in words that contain the base *+fect*, as, for instance, in the word *perfect*. You look up *perfect* in the main dictionary. At the end of the etymology for *perfect* you are referred to the root *\*dhe-* in the Indo-European appendix. You turn to *\*dhe-* in the appendix and there you find, among many other historically related words, *affect, confection, defect, effect, infect, perfect, pluperfect, prefect, refectory*. Then you look up each of these words in the main part of the dictionary (or better yet, you have the students look them up), looking for related words. Following the word *affect* in the main part of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, for instance, you find *affected, affecting, affects, affecter, affectation, affection, affectional, affectionally, affectionate, affectionately, affectionateness, affective*. And thus it goes. If you looked up *affect* in a unabridged dictionary, like *Webster's Third International Unabridged*, you'd find even more *affect*-words: *affectability, affectibility, affectable, affectible, affectate, affectedly, affectedness, affectingly, affectionated, affectioned, affectivity, affectuous, affectuously*.

In the second edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, for reasons known only to their accountants and marketing people, Houghton-Mifflin removed the appendix of Indo-European roots, and in general weakened what till then was in my opinion the best college-level desk dictionary of American English. However, by way of replacement, the Indo-European appendix was reprinted in a paperback called *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* by Calvert Watkins (Houghton Mifflin, 1985, 2000, 2011), which includes several roots not in the *AHD*. The appendix was put back in in the third and subsequent editions of the *AHD*.

Other sources are Eric Partridge's *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary* (Macmillan, 1958, 1959), Joseph Shipley's *The Origins of English Words* (Johns Hopkins, 1984), or Mario Pei's *The Families of Words* (St. Martins, 1974), all of which group related words according to shared Indo-European roots. And the Lexis database on this website makes it easy to compile quite exhaustive lists of words with any one of the 18,093 bases in the database.

Lists of words with the same prefix are listed alphabetically together in any standard dictionary. Also if you look up a prefix in most dictionaries, they will give you the different assimilated forms of the prefix, so you will know where to look in the dictionary for more words that start with the various assimilated forms of that prefix. The Lexis database also makes it possible to search for words that contain any one of the database's 252 prefixes.

Suffixes are harder. Hans Marchand's *The Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word-Formation* (Beck'sche, 1969) is helpful. Another good source, though a bit hard to find, is *The English Word Speculum, Volume 4*, which is a reverse word list. That is, it is an alphabetized list of words spelled backwards. Thus, if you want to find words that end with the suffix *-ity*, you look under <yti>, and there you find the reversed spellings of all the words ending in the suffix *-ity*. (They also give you words spelled right way to.) *The English Word Speculum* was compiled by J. L. Dolby and H. L. Resnikoff and published in 1967 by Mouton and Company. Partridge's *Origins* contains an extensive list of suffixes, as does Lawrence Urdang's *Suffixes and Other Word-Final Elements of English*, though like his *Prefixes and Other Word-Initial Elements of English* (both Verbatim, 1998), it is not particularly useful for compiling lists of words. The Lexis database allows you to search for words with any of the database's 1,168 suffixes.

The CD-ROM and on-line versions of dictionaries usually allow you to do wild card searches for words with the same string of letters, which often (though not always!) will be the same element. The ones I've used most are *Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged* (which allows you to print the results list); the *American Heritage Talking Dictionary* (which allows you to copy the results list); the *Oxford English Dictionary (Second Edition) on Compact Disc* (which has a programming language that allows you to save the results).

**Etymological Dictionaries.** Because of its appendix of Indo-European roots, the *American Heritage Dictionary* is particularly useful for etymologies. Fuller treatments (though of fewer words) are available in the 1988 *Barnhart Dictionary of Etymology* (ed. R. K. Barnhart), which also includes references to the Indo-European roots, including some not mentioned in the *American Heritage*.

Eric Partridge's *Origins: A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* is perhaps my favorite: it clusters words with the same element; Partridge is willing to make some inspired guesses about words of uncertain origin; and he provides useful information on Latin and Greek morphology for those of us with not much by way of a Classical education. Ernest Weekley in his *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (Dover, 1967), though more concise, is also willing to offer guesses in uncertain

cases.

Far and away, the best source of information on the changing spelling and senses of words once they came into English is the *Oxford English Dictionary* now available on CD-ROM and on-line.

Though not exactly an etymological dictionary, Roland W. Brown's *Composition of Scientific Words* is very useful for scientific and technical terminology.

**Historical Studies.** My favorites here are two volumes of Otto Jespersen's somewhat hard to find *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles: Part 1. Sounds and Spellings* and *Part 6. Morphology* (Unwin, 1961). Most college-level textbooks for classes in the history of the language contain some material on spelling. The following are just a few of the available and more accessible historical studies: Albert C. Baugh and Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language* (Prentice-Hall, 1978); Thomas Pyles and John Algeo, *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (Harcourt, 1993).

### **Studies of English Spelling.**

Richard Venezky has two very important studies: *The Structure of English Orthography* (Mouton, 1990), a technical discussion, and the less technical and more recent *The American Way of Spelling: The Structure and Origins of American English Orthography* (Guilford, 1999), both of which deal with encoding, or spelling for readers.

Edward Carney's large and technical *A Survey of English Spelling* (Routledge, 1994), which deals with both encoding and decoding—that is, spelling for both readers and writers.

K. H. Albrow's short but useful, if somewhat hard to come by, *The English Writing System: Notes Towards a Description*.

G. H. Vallins *Spelling* (Language Library, 1965), revised by D. G. Scragg, with a chapter on American spelling by John W. Clark.

W. A. Craigie's *English Spelling: Its Rules and Reasons* (1927, repr. Folcroft, 1974), a venerable short description by one of the editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

D. G. Scragg's *A History of English Spelling* (Manchester UP, 1974), a short but very informative study.

And my book *American English Spelling: An Informal Description* (Johns Hopkins, 1988), which contains a fairly full, though by now somewhat dated, bibliography of further sources.