

# Dr Johnson's Dictionary

*The cornerstone of standard English*

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*And Johnson, well arm'd like a hero of yore,  
Has beat forty French, and will beat forty more.*

Thus wrote the actor David Garrick, friend and pupil of Doctor Samuel Johnson, expressing the pride and respect of a nation for this exceptional man of letters. It had taken forty learned French academicians forty years to produce the first French National dictionary; Samuel Johnson had completed his almost alone in a mere nine years.

Johnson's Dictionary was published on 15th April, 1755, and it achieved immediate international recognition. A leading Italian lexicographer wrote that

*This very noble work will be a perpetual monument of fame to the Author,  
an Honour to his own Country in particular, and a general Benefit to the  
Republic of Letters throughout Europe.*

Johnson's was not by any means the first English Dictionary. Robert Cawdray's *Alphabetical Table* was published in 1604 but this, and others which followed it in the Seventeenth Century, were little more than aids for academics; they listed only 'scholarly' words and thus helped to give the student the impression of 'learning'.

But it was Johnson's luck to be writing his dictionary right at the beginning of the heyday of the middle class, at a time when every member of that class was concerned with social and commercial advancement, and with copying the manners and speech of his betters. If he was exposed to words he didn't understand he was socially isolated and thus felt the need to better himself. Thus, with increasing literacy and a flourishing middle class, the time was right for a work like Johnson's.

In a sense Johnson sat down to write his dictionary as a one-man alternative to an English Academy. We know all about this from records; we know that he signed a contract for his Dictionary with a bookseller called Robert Dodsley, and that the agreement was for him to receive £1,575 in installments. We even know that this meeting took place at an Inn called the Golden Anchor, on June 18<sup>th</sup>, 1746, over breakfast.

Using an advance of his money Johnson proceeded to rent rooms at number 17 Gough Square, where he set up a 'dictionary workshop'. He was helped by a mere six assistants, two of whom died during the preparation - curiously, of these only one was an Englishman, the other five being Scots.

Johnson's biographer, James Boswell, tells us something about how he worked. The room was a garret, with a long high desk running down the middle where copy clerks worked standing up. You must remember there was no technology for copying, not even carbon paper. Boswell describes this room as "fitted up like a counting house" and Johnson himself as sitting on a rickety chair at an "old crazy deal table", surrounded by a "chaos of borrowed books".

He did not even have immediate access to a library, having to borrow books from elsewhere, and I doubt whether anyone today (except perhaps another James Joyce) would sit down to such a mammoth task. Using large notebooks, he wrote down definitions for some forty-one thousand words, and he illustrated these words with some 114,000 quotations from every field, citing authors as far back as Queen Elizabeth I's reign.

He did not claim to be original and could not have been so with a deadline to meet, but little of the earlier dictionaries he drew on can be discerned in his completed work. He also established a very important 'rule'

- his definitions were generally (not always) based on precedent rather than opinion.

Apart from being a lexicographer Johnson was of course one of Britain's wittiest and most elegant writers, and his wit and erudition shine through his lexicography. Some of his definitions show his humour, and have passed into folklore:

<i>Oats</i>	A grain, which in England is generally given to horses, but in Scotland supports the people.
<i>Lexicographer</i>	A writer of dictionaries, a harmless drudge.
<i>Patron</i>	One who countenances, supports, or protects. Commonly a wretch who supports with insolence and is paid with flattery.
<i>Pension</i>	An allowance made to anyone without an equivalent. In England it is generally understood to mean pay given to a state hireling for treason to his country.

Johnson probably bit his tongue over this last entry later in his life; he was to accept a pension from George III.

Although our interest today is perhaps focussed more on Johnson's distinctive humour, we should not forget that his dictionary also gives extremely clear definitions, and it was this clarity that was to make it the undisputed authority for the following hundred years. Look at this definition of the word 'heart'.

<i>Heart</i>	<i>The muscle which by its contraction and dilation propels the blood through the course of circulation and is therefore considered as the source of vital motion. It is supposed in popular language to be the seat sometimes of courage, sometimes of affection.</i> (Citations follow from Sir Philip Sidney and William Shakespeare).
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Some words are of course easier to define than others. The word 'thought' must be considered a difficult word in any terms. Before reading any further, readers might like to try to write some kind of dictionary entry for this word. You may then care to look it up in a modern dictionary, and then compare that entry (and yours) with Johnson's as given below:

<i>Thought</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li><i>1. The operation of the mind; the act of thinking.</i></li><li><i>2. Idea; image formed in the mind.</i></li><li><i>3. Sentiment; fancy; imagery.</i></li><li><i>4. Reflection; particular consideration.</i></li><li><i>5. Conception; preconceived notion.</i></li><li><i>6. Opinion; judgement.</i></li><li><i>7. Meditation; serious consideration.</i></li><li><i>8. Design; purpose.</i></li><li><i>9. Silent contemplation.</i></li><li><i>10. Solitude; care; concern.</i></li><li><i>11. Expectation.</i></li><li><i>12. A small degree; a small quantity.</i></li></ol>
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This is surely the mind of a great man. The book has its faults - it is the work of an eccentric, it is necessarily an individual view, it is not always accurate and its etymologies are occasionally absurd inventions. Nevertheless, it succeeds in setting the orthography, displaying the analogy, regulating the structures, and ascertaining the significations of English words. The words are Johnson's own. Johnson's Dictionary is a work of art and a milestone in lexicography; coming as it did at the advent of mass literacy and the national dissemination of the printed word it can rightly be called the cornerstone of standard English.

