

THE WORLD'S WORST DICTIONARY

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From any standard dictionary, we minimally expect the complete inclusion of basic words, consistency in choice of further entries, and evidence of general care in proofreading. To appreciate these qualities' importance, consider a small dictionary notable for their prodigious absence. I refer to Webster's Dictionary of the English Language: Handy School and Office Edition (HSOE). My copy is a red paperback volume, a revised edition published in 1979 by Book-Craft Guild, Inc., New York. A nearly-identical hardback edition bears a 1976 publishing date.

"Who ever heard of the HSOE?" I hear you ask. I certainly hadn't. During a recent vacation, however, that slim volume was the only reference available to arbitrate a spell of word games.

"'Deep' isn't a dictionary word!" cried out a young competitor triumphantly, after consulting the HSOE. Our surprise at this omission was furthered when another eagle-eyed youngster noticed that page 322 ended with the entry **whirlpool** and page 323 began with the entry **wild-eyed**. She excitedly pointed out the implications: **white** and **wide** and **wild** were all missing! Another noted further oversights: **whiskey**, **whiskers**, **wig** and **wigwam**. Others rejoined: **whisper**, **wife**, **wield**, **widow**, **why** and **wicked**. There are at least twelve more common, distinct words that belong in this list. How many can you suggest?

A cursory perusal revealed other gaps. Indeed, later comparison of the HSOE with a computerized list of common words revealed 80 instances of large lexicographic lacunae at HSOE page boundaries. Quiz 1 below lists 2 examples of consecutive HSOE entries, and challenges you to suggest obvious words that belong between.

QUIZ 1: For each word pair below, find as many distinct words as possible, all falling alphabetically between the pair. A reasonable target number is given in parenthesis. Compare your answers with any dictionary other than the HSOE.

coordinate : copy (7)	scrutinize : sea (8)
due : duly (6)	secrete : seeming (13)
harvestman : haven (13)	significant : Sisyphus (34)
H.Q. : huge (5)	skin-deep : sleeping porch (27)
main yard : Maltese cat (15)	slouch : snare drum (39)
missileman : Möbius strip (20)	soda fountain : -some (24)
mouth : musk (32)	soviet : spear (17)
proto- : prudish (17)	sum : swaddling clothes (52)
renascent : rheum (100)	take ill : tanbark (12)
sahib : salaam (5)	tensile strength : terrapin (11)

The frequency of inter-page omissions led our word-game group to a hypothesis: excess lines on each page were being trimmed in the printing process. Three countervailing arguments demolished this suggestion: (1) gap sizes were not consistent (some pages had none at all), (2) dangling partial definitions were rare at page boundaries, (3) intra-page omissions were as frequent as inter-page gaps.

Decline and **deepen** are just one example of an intra-page gap. They are successive entries on page 69. Between them ought to occur such common entries as **decode**, **decorate**, **decoy**, **decrease**, **decree**, **decrepit**, **dedicate**, **deduce**, **deed** and **deem**, as well as our old friend, **deep**. I found 120 further instances of extended mid-page gaps. Quiz 2 includes 26 of these.

QUIZ 2: Your challenge in each instance is to find as many distinct words as possible, all falling between the pair listed. A reasonable target number is suggested in parenthesis. Compare your answers with any standard dictionary.

diagonal : dictation (15)	royalty : runaround (23)
drop out : dry (11)	saturated : sawfish (10)
father : FBI (8)	snow : society (15)
glutton : goal (7)	sop : southwesterly (14)
here : hex (15)	strive : stymie (29)
lichee : life belt (8)	succotash : sully (24)
manumission : mark (15)	swan : syndicate (37)
moo : moral victory (9)	tarpon : Tb (19)
peace officer : peculiar (12)	tuber : twill (40)
photostate : pièce de résistance (14)	were : whipcord (24)
plaza : plume (20)	wiliness : wood alcohol (42)
pot roast : power brakes (10)	word : writing (29)
rife : road (38)	zenith : zoologist (10)

To investigate the HSOE systematically, I created a computerized word list. Scanning seven computer dictionaries of varying size, I added only words found on all seven. The resulting list included some 14,800 entries. By comparison, the HSOE contains an estimated 13,300 entries. HSOE omissions cannot be accounted for by its smaller size alone, however, for at least seven reasons:

(1) In a random sampling of the HSOE, I counted 85 cases where compounds of a word were defined, but not the stem. For example, **darkroom** but not **dark**, **ice age** but not **ice**, **ionization** but not **ion**, **lend-lease** but not **lend**, **life-belt** but not **life** (or **death!**), **mayn't** but not **may**, **pepper-and-salt** but not **pepper**, **to-do** but not **to**, **well-done** but not **well**. In addition, **rode** is defined "past tense of ride; homonym of road" but neither **ride** nor **road** is an entry! Such inconsistencies are a function of carelessness, not size.

(2) My common word list included 38 two-letter words. Of these, the HSOE omitted such basic words as **ad**, **eh**, **el**, **go**, **he**, **id**, **if**, **in**, **it**, **my**, **of**, **pi**, **so**, **to** and **we**! Additionally, **no** was found only in capitalized form, either as the symbol for nobelium or as an abbreviation for north and number. One can imagine a harried mother scolding a toddler: "Don't you know what 'no' means?"

and the child's response "Yes, I looked it up. It only means nobelium or north!" HSOE's rate of omission among two-letter words: 42%.

(3) Among 1,850 common three- and four-letter words on my list, the HSOE omitted 861 words, a staggering 46% omission rate. Inexplicable three-letter omissions included **ago**, **awe**, **cow**, **die**, **dig**, **era**, **fry**, **get**, **hat**, **hip**, **hot**, **ice**, **ink**, **joy**, **law**, **let**, **lid**, **lie**, **may**, **mix**, **new**, **now**, **odd**, **off**, **old**, **one**, **pat**, **pay**, **pie**, **pig**, **pin**, **rib**, **rip**, **run**, **see**, **set**, **sex**, **tap**, **tie**, **top**, **try**, **two**, **war**, **way**, **wed**, **who**, **why**, **win**, **you** and **zoo**. Amazing four-letter oversights included **bend**, **coat**, **dark**, **dear**, **door**, **fill**, **fire**, **grab**, **hate**, **have**, **idea**, **left**, **life**, **live**, **lose**, **many**, **mind**, **move**, **much**, **name**, **near**, **pull**, **push**, **rest**, **room**, **rule**, **ship**, **some**, **sort**, **they**, **time**, **upon**, **verb**, **very**, **week**, **well**, **what**, **when**, **with**, **wood**, **work** and **zero**. Omission rates varied unpredictably, from 13% among words beginning with J or K, to 89% among words beginning with W.

(4) Without searching systematically, I found only six instances of misplaced word series. The series of words **halibut** to **halo** occur after **hammerhead**; **human** and **human being** after **humorous**; **jiffy** to **jigger** after **jiggle**; **pollen** to **pompadour** after **portiere**; **police** to **policeman** after the misplaced **pompadour**; **prison** to **prize** after **profession**; **sprite** to **spruce** after **sputter**. Misplacement is not a major reason for the wholesale omission of basic words.

(5) The HSOE includes many less-common words. More erudite HSOE entries include **dhow**, **Eustachian tube**, **fellah**, **ghee**, **gyve**, **kea**, **kris**, **lehua**, **pteridophyte**, **quipu**, **shikari**, **sic transit gloria mundi**, **Texas leaguer**, **Venn diagram**, **xylem** and **Y.P.S.C.E**. Etymologies of words are rarely included in HSOE, in no discernible pattern.

(6) Inclusion of variants, irregular plurals and past tenses is inconsistent. To find **took**, one must know to look under **take**; and **disc** is listed as a variant only at the **disk** entry. **Fed**, **fell** and **kept** are separately listed from their roots, and **'gainst** is listed independently of **against**.

(7) Some omissions demand as their explanation that the missing entries actually existed at some point in the editing process. For instance, **raft** has a captioned illustration but no entry! **Hiding**¹ (from **hide**¹) and **hiding**² (from **hide**²) are two entries, but neither **hide**¹ nor **hide**² is an entry. In seventeen instances, snippets of entries were found at the beginning or end of a column; these included dangling endlines from putative definitions for **route** and **warn**. A 1976 hardback edition of HSOE has been located. Its text is nearly identical to its paperback twin cited in the first paragraph. However, the hardback includes two lines of the **scrape** definition omitted in the later paperback edition. The hardback also has two entries for **sealer** whereas the paperback has only **sealer**².

QUIZ 3: The HSOE preface assures readers that every word "has been completely reviewed and edited in order to offer the most modern reference." Speculate which of the errors and omissions cited above are the types normally associated with authors? with

editors? with typesetters? with proofreaders?

Quiz 3 is a chance to reflect on the available facts about HSOE, and to draw your own deductions. Did your deductions take into account the fact that the identical widespread errors are found in two editions published three years apart, and both self-described as revised editions? Since the erstwhile publisher, Book Craft-Guild, is not listed in current publishing directories, definitive explanations are not available.

In my own circle, the principal HSOE dictionary deficits were thought to be best explained by a hypothesis of typesetting errors and omissions. Occasional shifts of margins, as on page 66, and the misplaced word series mentioned above, reinforce the impression of a book compiled by arranging many blocks of typeset lines. The lessons from (1), (2), (3), (6) and (7) strongly suggest that 40% of the intended dictionary disappeared through carelessness in the process of publication!

Doctor Johnson said of dictionaries that they "are like watches; the worst is better than none, and the best cannot be expected to go quite true." Of the HSOE, one can echo that it is a rare curio watch. Studying its inner works provides considerable amusement and fuel for speculation. The book itself is a unique benchmark by which to judge just how far a dictionary can fail "to go quite true."

HOW TO IRK YOUR ENGLISH LIT PROFESSOR

*Had too much of the high seriousness of Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson? In **More Poetry Comics** (a cappella, 1994; \$14.95 in paperback), Dave Morice offers a comic-strip antidote. He pokes fun at a wide variety of literary pretentiousness, casting Whitman as Superman and Dickinson as a True Romances heroine. Even Mother Goose doesn't escape his satiric eye; Little Miss Muffet is a customer at a health bar frequented by the Spiders Bike Club.*

***Word Ways** readers are familiar with Morice's **O'Boy!** cartoons, but they can't appreciate his virtuoso draftsmanship until they see the variety of cartoon styles he employs. The obvious audience for this book is the English-major grad student or lit professor; however, many of the literary allusions are accessible to the casual reader as well. He has filled this literary niche before; several of the examples appeared in his earlier work, **Poetry Comics** (Simon & Schuster, 1982). A delightful work!*