

LONG WORDS IN THE OED

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"What's the longest word in the dictionary?"

"You mean--the longest English word."

"Yeah."

"Well, that depends which dictionary you go for. Bigger dictionaries have more words in them, and smaller dictionaries have fewer words in them. There's more chance of bigger dictionaries having longer words. You takes your choice."

"What's the biggest dictionary, then?"

"You can't get much bigger than the complete Oxford English Dictionary."

"Okay. What's the longest word in the Oxford English Dictionary?"

"We need to be precise as to exactly which edition of the Oxford English dictionary we're talking about--or the OED, as we call it."

"Howdya mean?"

"New editions, different supplements, and so on. You need to be clear exactly which edition of a dictionary you're talking about."

"Go on."

"To begin with, there was the original edition of the OED, published in numerous parts between 1884 and 1928. So, the OED wasn't actually a complete work until April 1928. And even before it was complete, the editors started to work on a supplement of new words. Five years later, in 1933, a supplement was published, containing new words and definitions which had come into being during the 45 years that the dictionary was being produced."

"So the OED stops at 1933, then?"

"No, not at all. Between the years 1972 and 1986, a new supplement was published in four volumes. This supplement replaced the original 1933 one, and incorporated many more new words and meanings which had come into use since the 1933 edition. And then finally in 1992, the words in the original OED and the 1972-86 supplement were merged into one new edition of the OED, the second edition. At the same time, the editors included a number of very recent new words, which hadn't appeared in the 1884-1928, 1933 or 1972-86 parts of the dictionary."

"Okay. So let's choose this most recent 1992 edition. What's the longest word in it?"

"Well, that depends on what you mean by 'a word'."

"Uh? Surely, that's simple. A word's a word, or it's not a word. How can it be any more complicated than that?"

"There's a couple of things we need to clarify here."

"Like what?"

"Does a word need to be a main entry in the dictionary--you know, printed in boldface type, appearing in its correct alphabetical position, with a definition--that kind of stuff? Or could it possibly be a word that merely appears in one of the many illustrative quotations in the dictionary, most likely for some other word, and therefore difficult to find and probably having no clearly-given definition?"

"Does it make any difference?"

"Sure does! If you stick with words that are main entries--boldface, correct alphabetical position, a proper definition--then the longest word in the OED is the 45-letter specimen...

pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis

"Wow! That's pretty long!"

"But there's longer if you're interested in words that only appear in illustrative quotations."

"Tell me!"

"If you look in the OED at the entry HAMBURGER, one of the illustrative quotations there contains this 55-letter monster, ten letters longer than PNEUMONO-etcetera...

porkchopbeefsteakhamandegghamburgersteakorliverandbacon

"Is that really a word? I can see it's a string of letters, and I recognize all the elements of it. But is it really a word?"

"You decide--it meant something when it was first written, back in 1889, and it probably conveys some sort of meaning to anyone reading it, then or now."

"I guess. So that's it, is it?"

"Well, you can find even longer words in the OED if you start to relax your definition of what makes up a word."

"Explain!"

"The two long words I've just given you have only used letters of the alphabet. But you could include the humble hyphen, and allow hyphenated words."

"Aahh! I hadn't thought of that. I don't see why we shouldn't consider hyphenated words. What sort of additional long words are there with hyphens?"

"If you're interested in main entries only, then there's..."

hypothalamico-hypophysial

That's 24 letters, or 25 characters if you count the hyphen."

"And what about if you look for hyphenated words in the--what are they?--illustrative quotations?"

"Ahh! This is where the lengths really start to take off! I think the longest hyphenated word in the OED is this one..."

Baconian-pyramidological-cryptographic-spiritualist-theosophical

which has 60 letters, or 64 characters counting the hyphens. You'll find that one appearing under the main entry PYRAMIDOLOGY."

"Although it doesn't look like a real word, I can see that this must be the longest string of characters in the dictionary without any embedded spaces. So that's it?"

"No, not really. There's more."

"Like how?"

"Well, you could progressively include other characters, like the apostrophe and slash, in addition to the twenty-six letters A to Z."

"So where does that take us to?"

"If you look under the main entry for the noun JOURNEY, you'll find this item in one of the illustrative quotations...

feeling-upset-physically-and-mentally-with-anticipatory-excitement-
and/or-anxiety

That's 81 characters--71 letters, 9 hyphens and a slash. And no embedded spaces!"

"I sort of guess there's still more to come?"

"Let's go the whole hog and include all other characters--brackets, numbers, Greek letters, and the like--but no embedded spaces. This is where the world of long chemical names muscles in on the act."

"How much longer than 81 characters can we get, then?"

"The second-longest item in the OED is the following chemical name...

1,2,3,4,5,6-hexahydro-8-hydroxy-6,11-dimethyl-3-(3-methyl-2-butenyl)-
2,6-methano-3-benzazocine

That's got 94 characters--55 letters, 16 digits, 14 hyphens, 7 commas, 1 left bracket and 1 right bracket! You'll find that in an illustrative quotation at the main entry PENTAZOCINE. And just a bit longer than that is the following centipede...

6,8-dideoxy-6-(1-methyl-4-propyl-2-pyrrolidinecarboxamido)-1-thio-
d-erythro-d-galacto-octapyranoside

That's got exactly 100 characters--75 letters, 7 digits, 15 hyphens, 1 comma, 1 left bracket and 1 right bracket. That's buried in an illustrative quotation at LINCOMYCIN."

"So that's the longest word in the Oxford English Dictionary, then?"

"Yep, as far as I can fathom! Of course, whether it's really a word or a string of characters without any embedded spaces is still a moot point. To find anything longer than this, you need to go outside of the OED, especially rooting around reference works involving chemical names, proteins, amino acids and that kind of stuff. Then the numbers just go sky-high. But I think that's a conversation for another day..."