

dash *NOUN* **dashes**

- 1** a short quick run; a rush ♦ *We made a dash for the door.*
- 2** a small amount of liquid added to a mixture ♦ *Add a dash of cream.*
- 3** (*Language*) the punctuation mark (—) used to mark a pause or to show that letters or words are missing
- 4** to do something with dash is to do it with confidence and style

dashes

Dashes are used to mark a break in the flow of a sentence.

They can be used on their own, to add a final comment, question, or summary:

*I have only two words to say to you—'Never again!'
Would you like your bagel split, toasted, buttered—or
none of the above?*

They can be used in pairs before and after an interruption in a narrative or conversation, and are more emphatic than parentheses. For example, they can show a change of subject, or a break or hesitation in thought:

*Maybe I'll just say 'oh, I don't know that—I'm allergic
to opera'.*

or they can be used to elaborate or explain a point:

*The creature was vast—over ten feet tall and was
staring at my sandwich.
It was called Casa Bruja—that is, Witch House
—although I never asked why.*

date ¹ **NOUN** **dates**

- 1 the day of the month or year expressed by a number or series of numbers
 - 2 a day or year when something happened or will happen ♦ *She still doesn't know the date of her operation.*
 - 3 (*informal*) an appointment to meet someone socially, especially at the start of a romantic relationship
 - 4 (*informal*) a person you have a date with
- to date** until now ♦ *These are the best results to date.*

date **VERB** **dates, dating, dated**

- 1 to give a date to something from the past
♦ *Archaeologists hope to date the pots from coins that were found with them.*
- 2 to have existed from a particular time ♦ *It seems most likely that the painting dates from the 1630s.*
- 3 to show signs of becoming out of date ♦ *Some fashions date quickly.*
- 4 (*informal*) to go out with someone in a romantic relationship

▷ **datable** **ADJECTIVE**

WORD HISTORY from Latin *data* 'given or delivered (at a certain time)'

dates

The normal way to write a **date** is to put the day first, followed by the month, then the year, e.g. *12 June 2006*. This is how you would write the date at the top of a letter. You can also use numbers for the months and the last two digits for the year, e.g. *12/06/06* or *12.06.06*.

But beware: the American practice is to put the month first and then the date (as in *9/11* to refer to 11 September), so that *12 June 2006* would be *6/12/06*, which in Britain would be understood as *6 December 2006*. If there is any danger of confusion, it is better to write out the month in full.

Most of the month names have shorter forms: *Jan., Feb., Mar., Apr., Jun., Jul., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.*, which you can use in more informal writing. (*May* is too short to have a short form, and *June* and *July* are best written in full.) Years are written as *AD 2006* and *431 BC* (or *BCE*): see the dictionary entries for **AD**, **BC**, and **BCE**.

definite article NOUN **definite articles** the word 'the'

definite and indefinite articles

The word *the* is called the **definite article**. It comes before a noun or noun phrase when referring to people or things which are specific and definite:

That is the cave where the dragon sleeps.

Jupiter is the largest gas planet.

The words *a* and *an* are **indefinite articles** and are used before a singular noun or noun phrase when referring to people or things in a general or indefinite way:

I saw a cave and a dragon in my dream.

Jupiter is a gas planet.

A is used before words which begin with a consonant (*a beetle, a text*), and *an* before those which begin with a vowel (*an ant, an email*). Abbreviations take either *a* or *an* depending on whether they begin with the sound of a consonant or a vowel: *a CD*, but *an MP3 player*; *an IQ test*, but *a UFO*.

See also the panel on **determiners**.

determiner *NOUN* **determiners**

(*Grammar*) a word that gives information about a noun, for example *a*, *the*, *this*, *every*, *some*

determiners

Nouns often have a **determiner** in front of them. The most common determiners are the words *the*, *a*, or *an*, which are known as the **definite article** (*the*) and the **indefinite article** (*a* or *an*). The following words are also determiners when they come before a noun:

- *this*, *that*, *these*, and *those* (known as **demonstratives**), e.g. *this* weekend, *those* boots;
- *my*, *your*, *his*, *her*, *its*, *our*, and *their* (known as **possessives**), e.g. *That's my* idea; *It's your* problem;
- *what*, *which*, and *whose* (known as **interrogatives**), e.g. *What* flavours do you have? *Which* team won?

Other determiners, such as *all*, *another*, *any*, *both*, *each*, *every*, *few*, *many*, *some*, and *several*, are used to express quantity, e.g. *Both* socks are missing; *Few* people have seen a yeti. Note that *any* and *some* can refer to either a number of separate things (*any* coins, *some* biscuits), or to an amount of something (*any* money, *some* cake).

Numbers can also be determiners when they come before a noun, e.g. *one* slice, *thirty* euros, as can the words *next* and *last*, e.g. *next* season, *last* summer.

See also the panels on **definite and indefinite articles** and **possessives**.

direct speech NOUN

(Grammar) someone's words written down exactly in the way they were said, with speech marks as in *'I'm leaving,' she said.*

direct and indirect speech

Direct speech shows exactly what a person or character says. The spoken words—and any punctuation that goes with them, such as full stops, exclamation marks, or question marks—are enclosed in quotation marks:

'Wait! Can you at least tell me your name?' I shouted at the retreating figure.

Any description of who is speaking (e.g. *she said, I exclaimed*) is separated from the spoken words by a comma or commas:

'We are planning', said a NASA spokesperson, 'to send a manned expedition to Mars.'

Indirect speech is also called **reported speech**. It describes or reports what a person or character says without using their exact words. You do not use quotation marks in indirect speech and the tense of the verb (*were* in this example) follows that of the reporting verb (*said* in the example):

A NASA spokesperson said that they were planning to send a manned expedition to Mars.

You can also leave out the word *that* at the beginning of the reported speech:

A NASA spokesperson said they were planning to send a manned expedition to Mars.

See also the panels on **question marks** and **quotation marks**.

double negative *NOUN* **double negatives**
(Grammar) a negative statement containing two negative words

double negatives

A **negative** is a word such as *no*, *not*, *never*, *nobody*, and *nowhere*. You normally only need one negative word to make a negative statement or ask a negative question: *We never wanted any trouble*; *Won't they give you some money?* A **double negative** is when you have two negative words to make a sentence, e.g. *We never wanted no trouble*; *Won't they give you no money?* This use of two negatives is not acceptable in standard English and you should avoid it, especially in writing.

Note also that the words *barely*, *hardly*, and *scarcely* are effectively negative and should not be used with another negative:

The burial chamber was so dark, we could barely see the tomb (not we couldn't barely see the tomb).

Another type of double negative is more acceptable because each cancels out the other and together they produce a positive meaning. For example, to visit a place *not infrequently* is to visit it often, and a *not unpleasant* sound is one that is rather pleasant.

eponym (say ep- o- nim) **NOUN** **eponyms**
a word or name that is derived from the name of a person

eponyms

An **eponym** is a word which is derived from a person's name, usually because that person invented the object or was associated with it. For example, *Braille*, *Biro*, *guillotine*, and *saxophone* are all named after their inventors.

The flowers *begonia*, *dahlia*, and *wisteria* are named after the botanists who discovered them, and other scientists gave their names to *fahrenheit*, *hertz*, and *watt*. Some items of food or clothing are named after famous people who enjoyed eating or wearing them: for example, *cardigan*, *wellingtons*, and *sandwich*.

Some eponyms come from mythological or fictional characters. For example, an *atlas* is named after the ancient Greek giant, *Atlas*, who was believed to hold up the sky on his shoulders and was pictured at the front of early books of maps; and the word *gargantuan* (meaning 'gigantic') comes from another giant character (*Gargantua*) created by the French writer Rabelais.

exclamation mark *NOUN* **exclamation marks**

(*Language*) the punctuation mark (!) placed after an exclamation

exclamation marks

You use an **exclamation mark** to indicate shouting, surprise, or excitement in direct speech:

'Stop! Don't drink! The goblet is poisoned!'

'Wow! That's a real mammoth's tooth!'

It can also be used to express surprise, alarm, or excitement in a narrative, or in a character's thoughts:

The sun was coming up. She must hurry! Soon the spell would wear off!

Swimming with sharks! That would be something to remember!

figurative ADJECTIVE

(Language) figurative language uses figures of speech, and is meant to be understood in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense

▷ **figuratively** ADVERB**figurative language**

Figurative language uses words for the effects they create, rather than their literal meanings. It often produces vivid images and sounds in the mind of the reader or listener. In these two examples, the first description of the sea is literal and the second is figurative:

Ahead of us the sea formed a spiralling whirlpool.

Ahead of us the sea was being churned by an unseen hand, and we were being scooped like so many currants into a giant's mixing bowl.

Types of figurative language are also called *figures of speech*. The most common types are:

- **simile** and **metaphor**, which describe something by comparing or likening it to something else: *an expression as cold as ice; his eyes were pools of ice*
- **personification**, which describes something inanimate as if it were human: *the waves rocked us to sleep*
- **onomatopoeia**, in which words have sounds that seem to imitate what they describe: *the engine chugged and chuffed up the hill.*

See also the panels on **simile and metaphor** and **onomatopoeia**.

formal ADJECTIVE

1 strictly following the accepted rules or customs; ceremonious ♦ *a formal occasion*
♦ *formal dress*

2 behaving in a serious and stiff manner

▷ **formally** ADVERB

USAGE NOTE In this dictionary, words are marked *formal* when they are chiefly used in more serious writing or speaking.

formal and informal language

The choice between **formal** and **informal language** depends on the type of thing you are writing or saying, on how well you know the reader or listener, and on what effect you want to make. An email to a friend might begin with an informal *Hi Hermione* and end with *Cheers*; whereas a letter to someone you have never met would use more formal language (e.g. *Dear Miss Granger* and *Yours sincerely*). A word or phrase can have a synonym which is more formal (*precipitous* is more formal than *steep*), or more informal (*loo* is more informal than *toilet*).

Informal writing gives a feeling of closeness between the writer and the reader, whereas formal writing creates distance; for this reason, the passive voice is often used in formal language. Formal language also tends to use longer and more complex sentences. Compare these two examples, where the second is more formal:

You've got the job. Well done!

Your application has been successful. We would like to congratulate you upon your success on this occasion.

See also the panel on **active and passive**.

French *ADJECTIVE*

to do with France or its people

French *NOUN*

the language of France, also used as a first language in some other countries

French words in English

French words have been borrowed into English since the time of the Norman Conquest in the 11th century. The Normans who settled in England (and later Scotland) spoke a dialect of Norman French, and French was spoken by people in the ruling classes throughout the Middle Ages, leading to an influx of French vocabulary into English. Some terms which were borrowed from French at an early date are *commerce*, *damage*, *honour*, *justice*, *labour*, *marriage*, *money*, *receive*, and *regard*. The word *tennis* is thought to come from French *tenez!*, a call meaning 'receive (the ball)'; and the tennis term *deuce* comes from French *deus* 'two'. More recent borrowings from French have kept their original spelling, such as *gateau* (which still retains its French plural form, *gateaux*) and *derailleur*. Several French phrases are also used in English in their original form, e.g. *au fait*, *déjà vu*, *en masse*, and *joie de vivre*.

full stop *NOUN* **full stops**

the dot used as a punctuation mark at the end of a sentence or an abbreviation

full stops

A **full stop** (also called a **period**) shows where a sentence ends, when the sentence is neither a question nor an exclamation:

Our story begins in 1914, on the eve of the First World War.

It can also be used to indicate a complete break between single words or phrases that are not complete sentences:

There was nothing left of the cake. Not a crumb. Not a particle. Nothing.

Full stops go within quotation marks in direct speech:

He said, 'I'll meet you outside the cinema.'

and within parentheses when these surround a complete sentence:

The waiter arrived with a plate of toast. (I had ordered waffles.)

A full stop is also used to mark an abbreviation (e.g. *Mon.* = Monday). This is no longer necessary for common abbreviations, like *Mr*, *Mrs*, and *Dr*.

German ADJECTIVE

to do with Germany or its people

German NOUN

- 1 the language of Germany, also used as a first language in some other countries
- 2 a person from Germany

German words in English

Many very old words in English are similar to **German words**, because English and German are closely related. The earliest form of English (called Old English or Anglo-Saxon) was a Germanic language which was brought to the British Isles by peoples from Northern Germany in the 5th century. The words, *father*, *finger*, *hand*, and *king*, which all derive from Old English, are similar to their modern German equivalents.

But words have also been borrowed into English directly from German. For example, *haversack* comes from *Habersack*, an 'oat bag' used to carry food for horses; a *dachshund* is literally a 'badger dog'; *delicatessen* means 'delicacies to eat'; a *kindergarten* is literally a 'children garden'; and *waltz* comes from a German verb meaning 'to revolve'.

A less obvious borrowing from German is *dollar*, which comes from a German word for a silver coin; and the informal American term *dude* is thought to come from a German dialect word meaning 'a fool'.

Greek ADJECTIVE

to do with ancient or modern Greece or its people

Greek NOUN

- 1 the language of Greece, which has ancient and modern forms
- 2 a person from Greece

Greek words in English

The spelling of an English word often shows that it comes from ancient **Greek**. Many words which begin with *ph-* and *ps-* are Greek in origin (e.g. *phobia*, *psychic*), as are words beginning with *ch-* which have a *k* sound (e.g. *chiroprody*, *chord*, *choreography*, and *chorus*). The Greek origin of other words, like *dragon* and *planet* (from Greek words meaning respectively 'serpent' and 'wanderer') is less obvious.

English uses many prefixes and suffixes of Greek origin. The prefixes *bio-*, *eco-*, *mega-*, and *micro-* are derived from the Greek words *bios* 'life', *oikos* 'house', *megas* 'great', and *mikros* 'small', and are still being used to form new words, like *biodiversity*, *ecosystem*, *megabyte*, and *microwave*. And the Greek words *graphein* 'to write', *logia* 'study', and *patheia* 'feeling' have produced the suffixes *-graphy*, *-logy*, and *-pathy*, which feature in many English words, such as *biography*, *calligraphy*, *astrology*, *mythology*, *sympathy*, and *telepathy*.

homograph NOUN **homographs**

(*Language*) a word that is spelled like another but has a different meaning or origin, e.g. *hide* (to keep secret) and *hide* (an animal's skin)

homographs and homophones

Homographs are words which are spelled the same but have different meanings, and often different origins. Some examples are *cricket* (a sport or an insect), *mould* (fungus or a shape), and *swallow* (to gulp or a bird). Sometimes homographs are pronounced differently, like *bow* (to bend down) and *bow* (for archery), or *wind* (a gust) and *wind* (to twist).

Homophones are words which sound the same but have different spellings and meanings, such as *aisle* (in a church) and *isle* (an island), *currant* (dried fruit) and *current* (river flow), *metal* (gold, silver, etc.) and *mettle* (strength), *yolk* (of an egg) and *yoke* (a harness). And these three words are all homophones: *vain* (proud), *vane* (weathercock), and *vein* (blood vessel).

So, *dessert* (pudding) and *desert* (to abandon) are homophones, because they sound the same (but are written differently); whereas *desert* (Sahara desert) and *desert* (to abandon) are homographs because they are written the same way (but do not sound the same).

See also the panel on **confusable words**.

hyphen NOUN hyphens

(Language) a short dash used to join words or parts of words together

hyphens

Hyphens connect two or more words which make up a compound noun or adjective. Sometimes, the hyphen is part of a fixed compound, like *close-up*, *free-range*, or *orang-utan*; but hyphens can join any pair or group of words to form a new compound: an *ultra-squidgy sandwich*; *that morning-after-the-night-before feeling*.

Hyphens are often useful to avoid ambiguity. Note, for example, the difference between *a cross-section of the audience* (= a typical sample) and *a cross section of the audience* (= an annoyed group). You do not need a hyphen for compound adjectives which follow a noun (*an out-of-date hairstyle* but *a hairstyle which looks out of date*), or for compounds which begin with an -ly adverb (*a well-written autobiography* but *a badly scripted film*).

Hyphens are also used in compound numbers and fractions, such as *thirty-two* and *four-fifths*, and in some place names, such as *Henley-on-Thames* and *Aix-en-Provence*.

See also the panel on [compounds](#).