

Online Dictionaries

Online dictionaries: Stuck on words

Benjamin Zadik

Still fumbling for the right words? Or hopelessly little lost in translation? Online dictionaries are the way to go for the truly tech-savvy

Those were the good ol' days when writers and translators had whole bookshelves of heavy references for browsing through the perfect word or translation. In the coming years, however, growing technology and the rise of the Internet seemed to pose a great threat to the world of thick hard back books and related libraries. This was nevertheless an assumption that didn't turn true. For many years online dictionary sources were incomplete, inconsistent, and simply unfit to replace the giant copies of the Oxford English Dictionary or the diva Merriam Webster. The Web was – and in large part still is – ridden with broken links and useless translations that give words out of context. Online translators, held in high esteem for translating whole

sentences rather than just words, produced texts that were more humorous than useable.

Today, though, online dictionaries and translators have really come of age – assuming you find the right one for the job. With the proper tools, you will discover that online sources today are faster, more convenient, and often more ample than their traditional counterpart.

The trick is to find authoritative sites and make use of all the features they have to offer.

English spoken here

Let's begin with English-English dictionaries, which are the easiest to find and often most useful. Most computers today have a dictionary installed in them.

Their premium services are only for diehard enthusiasts and editing professionals.

Other practical tools on the Web offer a wider assortment of definitions and answers. One that comes in handy in the oddest of situations is Urban Dictionary, which will remind you what 'to pull a Homer' is, and relieve any anxiety trying to figure out what youngsters mean when they say fershizzle.

Another reference that caught up big time with users is Answers.com, a free online tool that puts on a single screen various definitions (powered by AHED), translations, usage information, and encyclopedia info.

OneLook is yet another definition aggregator, which offers a list of definitions



With a Mac running OS X 10.4 (Tiger) or later, bringing up the Dashboard gives you instant access to the Oxford American dictionary. Some versions of Windows come bundled with dictionary software as well. Overall, these dictionaries are good for simple definitions, but often lack true depth.

For many, Merriam-Webster tops the list for English-English online dictionary reference. Most writers, especially those abiding strictly by the Chicago Manual of Style, prefer Merriam-Webster over others as the definitive source for spelling. The basic dictionary is free, and includes useful features like pronunciation, etymology, and most importantly, usage. The thesaurus and Spanish-English dictionary are great too.

Every field of study has its own language. While seemingly an overkill, this can be a useful way to compare definitions and spellings for modern or multiple-use words. And perhaps easiest of all, did you know that Google has a dictionary too? Simply type: define:word into the search box and you'll get a myriad of definitions from the Web.

Specialty dictionaries

Every field of study has its own language. If you stumble on a medical conference or a meeting of the IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers), you will surely come across many terms you are unfamiliar with, no matter how copious your vocabulary is. Specialty dictionaries

and glossaries are designed to help you come up to speed and decipher what these enthusiasts are talking about.

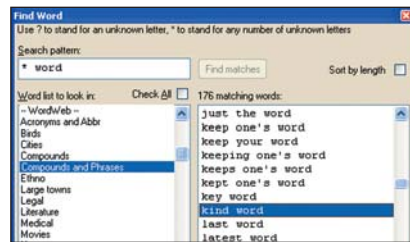
YourDictionary.com is a great reckoner, where links to over one hundred specialty dictionaries are organized by topic. Some of the links are broken or the sites have changed yet this one is apparently the best one-stop source; so, it is definitely worth a look. The Open Directory project's subject dictionary list is another good place to try out. Both sources have glossaries for subjects as diverse as aerospace to zoology.

When in doubt, try typing in <subject> dictionary OR glossary (replacing <subject> with your topic of interest) into a search engine and wait for the results. Chances are someone has compiled even the most esoteric terminology for your particular concentration.

Foreign languages

Whether you are a professional translator, or just trying to decipher a love letter from a captivating pen pal in Krakow, foreign language dictionaries are a valuable resource. Being proficient in English, you have access to online dictionaries for literally every language in the world. Other language combinations are easily available on the Web. The trouble lies in the fact that there are just too many of them – and some of the worst, with too few words to be effective, rank highly on the search engines. There are however a couple of fantastic ones worth book marking.

First on rating is Word Reference, a site highly appreciated by romance language translators. The site specializes in English, Spanish, Portuguese, French, and Italian, offering not only a comprehensive translation dictionary, but also usage instructions and sentence examples. For certain languages it also provides verb conjugation tables. It surely



makes for an invaluable source for those of you who (sometimes) forget that the pluperfect subjunctive of decidere is avessi decido.

Besides these practical features, Word Reference is highly recommended chiefly for online forums. The topics are endless and cover nearly every foreign language expression you will ever encounter, powered by thousands of active, knowledgeable users who are eager to comment, correct, and point you in the appropriate direction for any language query. Best of all, forum topics are linked with the online dictionary. Suppose you are trying to find an

expression in Spanish to mean 'by the way.' Although the dictionary has no entry for the idiom, it will offer links to several forum topics where this phrase was discussed. Click on the appropriate link and you will get the translation por cierto in less than a second.

There isn't always an equivalent for a word or phrase in a foreign language. This explains why language instructors zealously push students to buy foreign language dictionaries in the target language. A Portuguese-Portuguese dictionary is the only source that can truly describe what saudade means – the English equivalents (i.e., longing, nostalgia) are regrettably incomplete.

There are also methods to find dictionaries for less common language combinations on your own. Many foreign universities offer free dictionaries, or links to them. Assuming you have a satisfactory grasp of the language, typing slovník into a search engine may gain you a better Czech dictionary than a search for dictionary. It is also a better way to find accurate definitions and improve language skills.

Unlike the English language, which has no official government body responsible for its development, many languages are supported by bureaucratic institutions that provide free, definitive dictionaries. Spain's Real Academia Española online dictionary is the last word in officialdom (at least if you are from Castilla y León). The Québécois, who are similarly protective of language, have theirs too, which they modestly call Le Grande Dictionnaire. Searching for a government-sponsored or academically-mediated dictionary is always a good idea.

Online translators

To get the gist of a sentence or paragraph in a foreign language, your best bet is an online translator. These sources, which years ago proved several forum topics where this phrase was discussed. Click on the appropriate link and you will get the translation por cierto in less than a second.

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decipher a foreign language web page. No wonder that most online translators will even let you input a URL and view the entire page (more or less) in your own language.

Tips for using online translators

Think before you type. Computers are very literal with sentence translation. While translating a sentence from English to another language, use short, simple sentences, avoid slang, and downplay phrasal verbs (write assaulted, not beat up). The hardest thing for translators (computer and human) to render properly are prepositions (on, in, at, by). Each language uses them with little rhyme or reason; though unavoidable, restrict their use.

Final thoughts

One final tip on solving those nagging writing questions. Have you ever wondered how to use a phrase, either in English or a foreign language, but were unsure exactly how it is said or spelled? The d added to 'serve' does confuse a lot of people. When you run into such a problem, try typing possible wording into Google, careful to add quotes around the whole phrase.

For common mistakes, a discussion of the problem usually comes up as a high-ranking result. But for less common ones, just looking at the number of hits can tell you which is correct. When Google finds 1,300,000 pages with a phrase, chances are the phrase is correctly written (or a very common error).

If Google returns 17 pages, try again. ■

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