Online Dictionaries

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

Hose 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—infiltrated 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 usable.

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 useful than their traditional counterparts.

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

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 is the online dictionary, which will remind you what “to pull a Homer” is, and relieves 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. One looks is yet another definition aggregator, which offers a list of definitions from nearly every freely available online dictionary. 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 Electronic Engineers), you will surely come across many terms you are unfamiliar with, no matter how expansive your vocabulary. Specialty dictionaries...
and glossaries are designed to help you come up to speed and decipher what these confusions are talking about.

YourDictionary.com is a great resource, 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 resource, 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 aerodynamics and entomology. The subject dictionary list is another good stop source; so, it is definitely worth a try. Suppose you are trying to find an expression in Spanish to mean 'by the way'. Although the dictionary has an 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 put in on less than a second. This is much faster than an equivalent search for a phrase in a foreign language dictionary. With the help of YourDictionary, searching for a word or phrase in a foreign language dictionary is much faster and easier.

Besides these practical features, YourDictionary is highly recommended for students of Romance languages. The site is a comprehensive one-stop shop for learners of any language who want to focus on specific vocabulary. YourDictionary's glossary section contains thousands of words, phrases, and expressions that are commonly used in daily conversation. The glossaries are designed to help you come up to speed and decipher what these confusions are talking about.

Online translators

To get the gist of a sentence or paragraph in a foreign language, your best bet is an online translator. These sites, which years ago produced only laughing stock, are today getting smarter and more accurate. There are several to choose from, but the best to consider are Babelfish and Google Translate.

It should go without saying that automatic, or computer translation, is not necessarily accurate. You should never use an online translator as if you were using a dictionary. Online translators are a valuable resource. Being proficient in English, you have access to online translators for every language in the world. Other language combinations are easier to translate, but the best to consider are Babelfish and Google Translate. YourDictionary is highly recommended for students of Romance languages. The site is a comprehensive one-stop shop for learners of any language who want to focus on specific vocabulary. YourDictionary’s glossary section contains thousands of words, phrases, and expressions that are commonly used in daily conversation. The glossaries are designed to help you come up to speed and decipher what these confusions are talking about.

Tips for using online translators

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

Final thoughts

One final tip on selecting those nagging writing questions. When you ever wondered how to use a phrase, either in English or a foreign language, but were unsure how it is said or spelled? For instance, is it "Auch come, first serve" or "first come, first served"? The added to "serve" does confuse a lot of people. When you run into such a problem, try typing possible wording into Google, careful to wording into Google, careful to...