Etymology Essay

“Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary defines essay as a short piece of writing that tells a person's thoughts or opinions about a subject.”

One aim of this essay is to learn to stop writing sentences like the one above, and shudder with horror every time you see one like it in the future. Additionally, as we pause to look closely at one word, we will begin to see nuances in many words that will aid you in future close readings of texts.

This project comes in three easy (no, really, look up the first definition of this word as an adjective in the OED!) steps:

1. Pick your word. (Let’s do this today)

2. Research your word from the resources provided and any others you seek out. (We will work on this in class today, Thursday, and Friday.)

3. Write a 1-2 page paper detailing the etymology, history, meanings, uses, and misconceptions of your word. (We will have time to write in class this week and the final draft will be due October 12 to turnitin.com)

Due Date: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Further particulars:

1. Pick a word (duh). First come first served.

2. Research the word:

Look up the word in as many dictionaries you can find. You must start with the OED (Oxford English Dictionaries Database). Read these definitions and understand them. Take notes: trace the historical development(s) of the word. Look at the etymology of the word: understand this (look up any abbreviations you don't know. Ask me for help if you need it). Follow up hyperlinks and internal references. The full etymology of your word might involve the etymology of another word. If the information is to be found in the OED, it is your responsibility to find it. Look at the possible spellings of the word. Now take all this information and explain it, in your own words. Perhaps start with the etymology and then explain the development of the word, paying attention to dates of citations.

Naturally, not all words will be covered in all sources. If you are unsure whether your word will appear in a given resource, CHECK! Begin with the other reputable general dictionaries, and look for discrepancies among the dictionaries. Do the etymologies, definitions, and order of senses concur with that in OED? Are there any editorial comments regarding the usage of this word? Is it considered informal, colloquial, vulgar? Note the exact words each dictionary uses. Is there controversy about the word’s use? If so, how does its historical usage (which you've discovered in the OED) compare with the dictionaries’ recommendation?

Google your word, with an eye towards discovering popular perceptions of its etymology, history, “proper” usage, and meaning. We’re partly looking for popular solutions which are discordant with the academic resources. However, we are also interested in discovering how likely a Google (or comparable) search is of coming up with a correct answer. Therefore keep track of what search engine you use, what search terms you use, and what number result shows up. Also take note of interesting websites which provide good or bad information.

Also check:

urbandictionary snopes and wikipedia

Snopes is a debunking website, which will hopefully counter some of the fantastic word origins you may have found. Urbandictionary is a user-generated dictionary which ranks definitions by popularity. Note the most popular definition, the ratio of “thumbs up” to “thumbs down,” and other noteworthy definitions. For slang words, these resources may give us insight into popular perceptions of a word. For seemingly non-slang words, you may discover a slang usage you do not know of. See if Wikipedia deals with the history of your word, and how accurately it does so.

3. Write a paper

Take all the information you’ve been absorbing (or copy and pasting) and present it in clear, polished academic prose. Your audience (and evaluators) will be your classmates and me. You may find including headers and subheadings a useful way of organizing your paper. You are welcomed to do so.

Helpful hints:

* When discussing a word as a word, put it in italics.

“*Runt* is a ridiculous word, which bears no etymological relation to *run*.”

* When using items from the bibliography, use the short titles I have provided in your internal citation. You need not provide a bibliography/works cited page of any of the sources mentioned in this handout. If you venture outside of these suggestions, please include a works cited page.