SOFTWARE & TECH

Largest English Dictionary In The World

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Introduction: The Quest for the Ultimate Word Hoard

For logophiles, writers, editors, and linguists, the English language is an immense, ever-shifting mosaic. With over a million words and countless technical terms, slang, and archaic expressions, pinning down the single largest collection of them is a fascinating pursuit. When someone asks, “What is the **largest English dictionary in the world**?” the answer is almost universally the **Oxford English Dictionary (OED)**. But the story behind this mammoth reference work is far more than a simple number of entries. It represents a monumental effort of scholarship, a chronicle of cultural history, and a living document that continues to grow. This article explores not only the OED’s status as the most comprehensive English dictionary ever compiled but also how it measures up against other giants, how it has evolved in the digital age, and what truly makes a dictionary the “largest.”

Defining “Largest”: Scope, Entries, and Depth

Before diving into the specific titleholder, it is important to understand what “largest” means in the context of lexicography. There are several metrics:

- Number of headwords – the primary entries listed alphabetically.
- Number of definitions – including different senses of a word.
- Number of quotations and citations – evidence of usage across time.
- Physical size – number of volumes, pages, or sheer weight.
- Word count – the total text of the dictionary itself.

By nearly every measure, the **Oxford English Dictionary** is the unchallenged champion. Its second edition (1989) contains over 291,500 entries, with approximately 616,500 word-forms. The third edition, currently in progress online, is even larger. However, other contenders, such as the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged* and *Collins English Dictionary*, also boast impressive figures, though they fall short of the OED’s comprehensiveness. The OED’s unique strength lies not just in counting words but in tracing the historical development of each entry through 2.5 million quotations spanning over a thousand years of English.

The Oxford English Dictionary: A Monument of Scholarship

Origins and the Vision of a Perfect Dictionary

The story begins in 1857 when the Philological Society of London proposed a new dictionary that would supersede all existing works. The aim was audacious: to record every word in the English language from the time of the earliest known writings (roughly 1150 CE) to the present day. The project was initially led by Herbert Coleridge, then by Frederick Furnivall, but it was James Murray who became the legendary editor from 1879 onward. Murray’s team of volunteer readers sent in millions of slips of paper with quotations, creating a massive citation file. This crowd-sourced approach—long before the internet—was revolutionary. The first fascicle (part)

was published in 1884, and the complete first edition finally appeared in 1928, filling 10 volumes.

The Second Edition and Beyond

In 1989, the second edition (OED2) was published, integrating the original *Oxford English Dictionary* with the four supplementary volumes that had been issued between 1972 and 1986. This edition is often cited as the definitive print version of the **largest English dictionary in the world**. It includes:

- Over 290,000 main entries
- More than 157,000 combinations and derivatives in bold
- Over 169,000 phrases and combinations
- Approximately 616,500 word-forms (including inflected forms)
- 2.4 million illustrative quotations

Physically, the second edition comprises 20 volumes, with 21,730 pages of entries. To give a sense of scale, the index alone is two volumes. This edition was later digitized, and in 2000, the OED Online was launched, making it possible to update the dictionary far more quickly.

The Third Edition: A Living Dictionary

Work on the third edition (OED3) began in the 1990s. Unlike the previous editions, which were static print products, OED3 is being published online in quarterly updates. Each entry is thoroughly revised: archaic words are reconsidered, new words like “selfie,” “Brexit,” and “meme” are added, and quotations from earlier sources are constantly integrated. As of March 2025, the OED Online contains well over 600,000 entries and is expanding every three months. Because it is digital, its size is essentially unbounded by paper. It remains the **largest English dictionary in the world** by any meaningful metric, and it is also the most authoritative.

How Does the OED Compare to Other Major Dictionaries?

Merriam-Webster Unabridged

Merriam-Webster’s flagship product, the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged*, is a popular American dictionary. It claims about 490,000 entries (including archaic and specialist terms), but many entries are less detailed than the OED. It does not trace a word’s history back to Old English with the same depth of quotation. Nevertheless, it is the largest single-volume English dictionary in print, with a heavy 2,800-page tome.

Collins English Dictionary

The *Collins English Dictionary*boasts around 725,000 words, definitions, and phrases. However, that number includes inflected forms and derived words. When counting headwords, Collins is smaller than the OED. Collins also has a strong focus on contemporary usage and technical terms.

Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary

The *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*(1997) contains about 315,000 entries. It is a respected American reference but again does not match the OED’s historical depth.

In summary, while many dictionaries have large word counts, no other work dedicates so much space per entry to etymology, pronunciation, variant forms, and—most crucially—quotations showing the word’s evolution across centuries. This comprehensive approach is what cements the OED’s reputation as the **largest English dictionary in the world**.

What Makes the OED Unique Beyond Size?

The Historical Principle

The OED is built on the “historical principle.” Each entry aims to show the meaning of a word as it has

developed over time, with the earliest known use first and later senses following. For example, the entry for “nice” originally meant “foolish” in the 13th century, which gradually shifted to “precise” and then to “pleasant.” This approach turns the dictionary into a narrative of human thought and culture.

The Unmatched Quotation Database

With over 3 million quotations now in the digital edition, the OED is a treasure trove for historians and linguists. Each quote is meticulously sourced from a published work, providing the title, author, date, and page number. The longest entry? The word “set” has over 430 senses and runs to roughly 60,000 words of text in the print edition—longer than many novels.

Inclusion of Global Englishes

Modern English is not just British or American. The OED actively includes words from Canada, Australia, India, South Africa, the Caribbean, and other regions. For instance, “sasa” (a M ÷i term for a woven flax skirt) and “blin” (a type of pancake from Russian cuisine) are listed. The dictionary aims to reflect the global nature of the language, making it even more comprehensive.

The Digital Evolution: How the Largest Dictionary Stays Current

Print limitations once meant that a dictionary could only be updated with new editions every few decades. The OED’s move to an online platform changed everything. Subscribers can access the full OED3 content, which is revised quarterly. The digital version also allows for advanced search functions, such as finding all words that entered English from a particular language (e.g., French loanwords) or words first used in a specific decade. There are also pronunciation audio files and links to the Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary. Because it is digital, the dictionary can be genuinely “largest” without the physical constraints of paper. It continues to absorb new words from science, technology, pop culture, and social media.

Challenges of Maintaining the Largest English Dictionary

Editing the OED is a painstaking process. Each revision of a single entry can take weeks. Lexicographers must read widely, verify dates, and ensure that definitions are precise and unbiased. The project has been described as a “labor of love” that requires deep expertise in etymology, phonetics, and historical linguistics. Funding is also a challenge. The OED costs millions of pounds annually to maintain, and its primary funding comes from Oxford University Press through subscriptions and book sales. Nevertheless, it remains a flagship project for the university and a symbol of English linguistic heritage.

Other Notable Large Dictionaries Worth Mentioning

While the OED holds the crown, several other dictionaries deserve recognition for their size and specialized coverage:

- The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language – known for its usage panel and fine illustrations.
- Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1961) – a massive American dictionary with 476,000 entries.
- Black’s Law Dictionary – the most comprehensive legal dictionary.
- Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE) – a fascinating record of regionalisms across the United States.

Yet none of these combine the historical coverage, the sheer number of quotations, and the global scope of the **Oxford English Dictionary**.

Conclusion: A Living Monument to the English Language

The largest English **largest English dictionary in the world** is indisputably held by the Oxford English Dictionary. It is far more than a list of words and definitions; it is an encyclopedia of the human experience, capturing the way we have communicated, thought, and named the world around us for over a millennium. From its humble beginnings in a small scriptorium to its current status as a $100+ million digital enterprise, the OED continues to grow with each passing quarter. Whether you are a curious reader, a student of linguistics, or a professional writer, the OED offers an unparalleled journey through the English language. And as the language evolves, so too will this magnificent resource, ensuring that it remains not just the largest, but the most authoritative and enduring dictionary of English ever created.

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