

Tracking the history of words in the OED

Find out what you can about your 'gender' words in the OED online. If a word appears, then look at the **etymology** (word history), **quotations** and **date chart**.

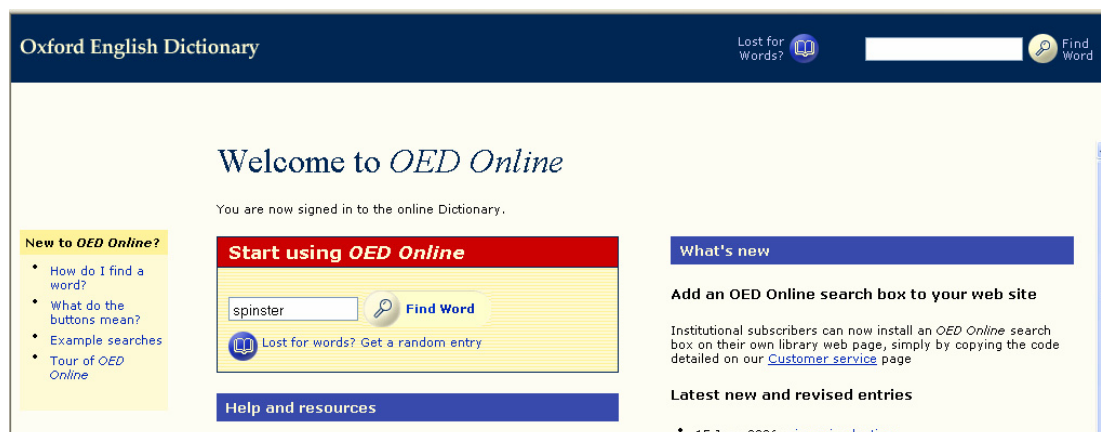
1. What is the earliest record of the word being used in a written text?
2. Where does the word come from?
3. Has the word always carried the meanings it has today?
4. Has the primary meaning of the term changed at all over time, or has there been an 'extension' in meaning of some kind? When did these changes occur?
5. Has the spelling of the word changed at all? Does the word exist in more than one word class (e.g. both *adjective* and *noun*).

Using the OED online



1. Click **Enter OED Online**

On the **OED** welcome page, simply type into the '**find a word**' search facility the word you want to track. Let's use 'spinsters' as an example.



Language change: gender

Oxford English Dictionary

Lost for Words? Find Word

SECOND EDITION 1989

spinster

Pronunciation Spellings Etymology Quotations Date chart

1. a. A woman (or, rarely, a man) who spins, esp. one who practises spinning as a regular occupation.

1362 *LANGL. P. Pl. A. v.* 130 And my wyf at Westmunstre þat wollene cloþ made, Spak to þe spinsters for to spinne hit softe. 14. *Lat.-Eng. Voc. in Wr.*-Wülcker 583 *Filatrix*, a spynnester. 1543 *Star Chamber Cases* (Selden) II. 254 Ther were..ther dwelling..dyuers good spynsters & carders. 1578 *LYTE Dodoens* 617 Spinsters use the stemmes..to winde yarne upon. 1600 *PORY tr. Leo's Africa* II. 103 Their women are excellent spinsters, whereby they are saide to gaine more then the men of the towne. 1647 *R. STAPYLTON Juvenal* 231 Destinies that spin the thred of life; Juvenal calls them spinsters. The distaffe bearer is Clotho, the spinster Lachesis. 1704 *HEARNE Duct. Hist.* (1714) I. 243 This monstrous Sight..that Soldiers that bore Arms should be commanded by a Spinster. 1758 *JOHNSON Idler* No. 2 ¶7, I should be, indeed, unwilling to find that, for the sake of corresponding with the Idler, the smith's iron had cooled on the anvil, or the spinster's distaff stood unemployed. 1836 *C. P. TRAILL Backw. Canada* 47 The spinster does not sit, but walks to and fro. 1910 *Contemp. Rev.* July 31 She would be a famous spinster and needlewoman.

fig. 1609 *DEKKER Gull's Horn-bk.* 16 Let the three huswifely spinsters of Destiny rather curtail the threed of thy life. 1608 *FARQUHAR Love & Bottle* III. i. Are my clothes so coarse. as if they were spun by those lazy spinsters

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Oxford English Dictionary

Lost for Words? Find Word

SECOND EDITION 1989

spinster

2. a. Appended to names of women, originally in order to denote their occupation, but subsequently (from the 17th century) as the proper legal designation of one still unmarried.

1380 in T. Rogers *Oxf. City Docum.* (1891) 10 De Alicia Moris Spynnester, vjd. 1496 *Nottingham Rec.* III. 48 Johanna Hunt,..spynster. 1545 *Knaresb. Wills* (Surtees) I. 49 Elizabeth Lethom, spynstarre. 1564-5 in *10th Rep. Hist. MSS. Comm.* (1885) 27 Joan Lambe, widow of London, spynster. 1580-1 *Ibid.*, Margareta Tirrell spinster, alias dicta Margareta Tirrell uxor Thome Tirrell. 1617 *MINSHEU Ductor*, A Spinster, a terme, or an addition in our Common Law, onely added in Obligations, Euidences, and Writings, vnto maids vnmarried. 1656 *ELOUNT Glossogr.*, Spinster;..this is the onely addition for all unmarried women, from the Viscounts Daughter downward. 1711 *Lond. Gaz.* No. 4865/4 Elizabeth Harris of London, Spinster. 1719 *J. ROBERTS Spinster* 135, I write myself spinster, because the laws of my country call me so. 1773 *GOLDSM. Stoops to Cong.* v. i, Constantia Neville, spinster, of no place at all. 1818 *SCOTT Rob Roy* xxxix, Diana Vernon, Spinster.

b. A woman still unmarried; esp. one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid.

1719 *J. ROBERTS Spinster* 349 As for us poor Spinsters, we must certainly go away to France also. 1832 *W. IRVING Alhambra* II. 140 The vigilant Predegonda was one of the most wary of ancient spinsters. 1859 *THACKERAY Virgin.* xxii, Your sweet mistress, your spotless spinster, your blank maiden just out of the school-room. 1882 *M. E. BRADON Mt. Royal* I. vi. 183 Providence is wonderfully kind to plain little spinsters with a knack of making themselves useful.

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There is quite a lot of useful information here. Its earliest recorded use is from the late 13th century when its original meaning related to the occupation of 'spinning' – a spinster was someone (generally a woman) who would spin yarn. There is evidence too of spelling differences – 'spynnester'; 'spynster' – which may indicate a possible change in pronunciation. But what else can we discover?

If we scroll down to the next meaning we discover that it was added to women's names as a 'job title' – 1545 Elizabeth Lethom, spynstarre – so **narrowing** its use.

Then, from the 17th century, it came to denote a legal term for women who were still unmarried beyond the age that was considered usual – an old maid.

After this we are given various examples of its use in different publications using other suffixes to extend its use – 'spinsterish'.

Explanation:

The term 'spinster' has narrowed from simply being a term to describe an occupation to a pejorative/negative association describing an unmarried woman.

The screenshot shows the Oxford English Dictionary entry for 'spinster'. The word is defined as: 'Hence **'spinsterdom, -ism, -ship, = SPINSTERHOOD; spin'sterial, -ian, 'spinsterish, -ous adjs., having the characteristics of a spinster; old-maidish; 'spinsterishness.**

Key historical citations include:

- 1879 T. H. S. ESCOTT *England* I. vii. 178 Where there is enough of leisure, idleness, and *spinsterdom.
- 1883 *Sat. Rev.* 21 July 82 A single..thunder-shower may..doom maidens by the dozen to the sorrows of spinsterdom.
- 1849 ALB. SMITH *Pottleton Legacy* (1854) 415 His sisters..annoyed him with their *spinsterial propensities.
- 1874 J. HATTON *Clytie* xiii, The landlord's sister, a spinsterial Scotchwoman.
- 1819 *Sporting Mag.* V. 60 With all the finicality of *spinsterian consequence.
- 1881 *Graphic* XXIII. 146/3 The naval, military, clerical, or spinsterian would-be-investor.
- 1892 *Academy* 5 Mar. 237/3 His little *spinsterish ways at times grew rather tiresome.
- 1913 R. WEST *Let.* June in G. N. Ray *H. G. Wells & Rebecca West* (1974) 23 Your *spinsterishness makes you feel that a woman desperately and hopelessly in love with a man is an indecent spectacle.
- 1930 R. MACAULAY *Staying with Relations* iii. 44 The elegant spinsterishness of Claudia and Benet had turned, in Julia,..to something more sensuous.

Activity 1

What about the male equivalent of an unmarried man, **bachelor**? Look this up and do a similar trace.

Activity 2

The example given is a brief run through of some of the *etymological* (word history), *semantic* (meanings) and *orthographic* (spelling) characteristics of just one word according to the OED. Your task is to take a couple of words from the list and track their histories. Focus on the 'female' words initially. You may then wish to compare the 'male' word. Can you draw any conclusions about male/female terms? Is language sexist?

Female	Male
Madam	Sir
Bird	
Chick	
Mistress	Master
Wife	Husband
Whore	
Harlot	
Fiancé	Fiancée
Woman	Man
Bitch	
Queen	King
Nag	
Gossip	
Slag/slut	Stud
Witch	
Nightmare	

A short history of 'gendered' words

You need to write up a brief report on the etymological, semantic and orthographic history of some of the words you've researched. Use the following checklist to help you with the content – you should aim to cover most of these:

- When does the OED citation first record the appearance of the word in printed text?
- What type of text (or context) did it first appear in?
- Where does the word come from? (Latin, French, German, etc.)
- Has the word always been 'gender' specific (a word used specifically for a woman or a man)?
- Has the primary meaning of the word changed at all over time? Or has there been any 'extension' or 'narrowing' in meaning of some kind? Has the meaning become more positive (amelioration) or negative (pejoration)? When did these changes occur?
- Has the spelling of the word changed at all?
- Does the word exist in more than one word class (e.g. both *noun* and *verb*)?
- Does the dictionary definition match your understanding of the word?

Ideally you should present your report as a Word document. You may wish to include **screen captures** pasted from your OED research to back up your points, show the 'process' of your research, save you having to copy lots of data and, possibly, give your report a little visual impact. If you don't already know how, this is easily done:

