There Is No Such Thing As The Dictionary

[The following is excerpted from a presentation at the 1994 Southwestern Michigan Association Annual Meeting of Phi Beta Kappa by Professor David Isaacson, Assistant Head of Reference and Humanities Librarian, Waldo Library.]

When a student (and sometimes a faculty member) asks me for "the dictionary" I occasionally have to bite my tongue to prevent myself from saying, reprovingly, "we have so many dictionaries, there simply is no such thing as the dictionary." More often than not, the person asking the question will accept any dictionary—she [or he] simply wants to "look up a word," doesn't want to spend a lot of time doing it, and may not want to find out that more than one dictionary might answer the question.

But, when a student seems interested or slightly curious, I like to point out that some dictionaries are better suited than others to answer certain questions. If time and inclination permit, I can often persuade students that a few moments devoted to browsing the dictionary shelves—or a few more minutes spent comparing entries on the same word in different dictionaries—can be fun as well as enlightening. If, as is usually the case, I can spend only a few minutes, my response might include some of the following suggestions.

If you want to get more information than the abridged dictionary you probably had in mind when you asked the question, let me show you the standard unabridged dictionaries. "Unabridged" may be a rather intimidating word, as is the size of these fat, sometimes obese dictionaries. On the other hand, size can impress rather than daunt. Probably, for instance, most dictionary users have some vague appreciation of the name Webster's. You may not know, however, that there is no copyright on this brand name, and that only those dictionaries published by Merriam-Webster inherit the venerability of Noah Webster—the most famous of American lexicographers.

The last major edition—the third edition—of the unabridged Webster's was published in 1961. It defines about 472,000 words used in English since 1755, the year the first comprehensive English dictionary, by Dr. Samuel Johnson, was published. Words coined since 1961 or new uses of old words are listed separately at the front (not the back) in the Addenda. I recommend Webster's Third for anyone who wants accurate, detailed definitions. You should keep in mind, however, that, unlike most dictionaries, when a word has more than one meaning, Webster's lists the oldest meaning of a word first. So, for instance, the first meaning for the word "disinterest" is "something contrary to interest," or a disadvantage—a meaning that is not typically intended by today's users. The second meaning—a "lack of self-interest"—as in a disinterested judge, also seems to be fading out of the language, but the third meaning, "lack of interest," or aptly, is the definition that is most commonly used or understood.

If you're really fussy, however, you may not be content with Webster's Third. The famous second edition, published in 1934, has about 650,000 words, goes back to Chaucer's time, and therefore includes many words not found in the third edition. Although many entries are the same in both editions, each has words not found in the other, and some definitions of the same word have changed over the thirty year period between dates of publication. This edition notes, interestingly, that "disinterested" in the sense of "indifferent" is a rare use of the word (remember, this edition was published in 1934). The second edition also takes a rather prescriptive attitude toward the language, while the third edition has, generally, a more liberal, descriptive attitude. So, for instance, "ain't" in the second edition is labeled as a dialect word as well as a mark of illiteracy, while the third edition has a usage note: "though disapproved of by many and more common in less educated speech, used orally in most parts of the United States by many cultivated speakers, as in the phrase, "ain't I." (Surely, if you're caught in a verbal corner, "ain't" works better than 'amn't.']

Another highly respected unabridged dictionary is the Random House Dictionary of the English Language, whose second edition was published in 1987. This source defines about 315,000 words, so it's no match for either edition of Webster's. On the other hand, Random House's definitions are usually easier to understand since they're often shorter. Random House also lists the most recent meaning first, which is, after all, what most users are probably looking for. You can immediately see the difference between these rivals by the following example. Webster's Third defines "credenza" as "a sideboard, buffet, or bookcase patterned after the credence of the Renaissance period, especially one without legs whose base rests on the floor." But Random House simply defines the word as a sideboard or buffet. If you already know what a buffet looks like, Random House gives you a ballpark idea of a credenza, but clearly Webster's Third, in this instance, is more precise—and has a drawing as well.

By far the most important unabridged English dictionary is the Oxford English Dictionary. This monument of scholarship had its last major revision in 1989. It is published in 20 volumes, costs $2,500, has 291,600 entries, 616,500 definitions, 2.5 million quotations, 250,000 etymologies, and 137,000 pronunciations. The reason it takes 20 volumes to cover the alphabet is that every word is traced historically. Each definition as well as each major nuance of meaning are supported by chronologically arranged quotations. If Webster's Third takes three small print columns to define 40 meanings of the word "set," the OED takes 24 three-column pages of small print to define 147 major and hundreds of minor meanings of this word.

Most general readers may not want the exhaustive detail of the OED, and they may feel that an abridged Random House or Webster's is quite sufficient for everyday use. But you don't have to be a word maven to appreciate that even the unabridged sources may fail to answer some word questions. Waldo Library's reference collection, for instance, is well stocked with hundreds of other general dictionaries as well as specialized ones in English and many other languages. Some of these are at least as scholarly as the OED, such as the Australian National...
The Dictionary...
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Dictionaries. Some are restricted to a particular aspect of language, such as word origins, slang, dialect, pronunciation, rhymes, clichés, and euphemisms. Some are restricted to the technical language of a profession, such as librarianship or law. Many of these dictionaries are clustered together by the Library of Congress classification system in the general dictionaries section, but many others are classed by subject, so that dictionaries of words in economics are found near other economics books.

With those final comments, my additional words of suggestion or guidance to the student (or other user) who asked for the dictionary would end. But, of course, I invite all members of this audience [and our Library Friends] to visit our dictionaries. After browsing among them for a time, I’m sure you’ll agree with me that each is unique, and, therefore, it’s not true that one is as good as another nor, indeed, is there the dictionary.

For those who would like the full references to the titles cited in the article:

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kilometers—and the temperature which often reached 27 degrees centigrade—for us a florid 80 degrees Fahrenheit. His last entry is March 6, 1878.
The Africana Collection in Waldo Library’s Rare Book Room includes many first and early editions of other explorers of Africa. Often the records of their travels and exploits reflect the late nineteenth century attitude that Africa contained an inexhaustible supply of flora and fauna to remove, hunt, or conquer. The legacy from this perspective has become a sad inheritance for the twentieth century, but the volumes in the collection return us to a time and to exotic places that haunt our dreams, pique our curiosity, and shape our fantasies.

Friends Meet...
The Annual Meeting and Reception of the Friends of [Western Michigan] University Libraries was held on Sunday, April 17, 1994. A number of donors, contributors, associates, students, and life members met in the Rare Book Room in Waldo Library to conduct the annual business meeting and hear Dean Lance Query describe the University Libraries’ unusual collections and aspirations for the future.
The nominating committee put forth the following slate: President, Leta Schoenhals; Vice President, Robert Hegel; Secretary, Kristin Johnston; and Treasurer, Bettina Meyer. The membership unanimously elected the slate and added Kristen Badra to the Board of Directors; she joins Judy Canaan and Hazel DeMeyer Rupp. Retiring president Peter Krawutschke welcomed the members and conducted the annual business meeting.

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