

The origins of the word 'OK'

There are many thoughts as to the origin of the word *OK*. It is likely to have had African origins. The first written use of the word *OK* was in Tennessee, America, in 1790. An Andrew Jackson wrote: "*Proved a bill of sale from Hugh McGary to Gasper Mansker, for a Negro man, which was O.K.*" However, in the American Choctaw Indian language, there is a word *okeh*, which means "*it is so*". It is likely this word was used in some American communities in the early 19th century. In 1815, a William Richardson who had travelled from New Orleans wrote in his diary: '*We travelled to NY we arrived OK.*' The *Boston Morning Post* is credited with introducing the word '*OK*' (all correct) on 23rd March 1839 in the midst of a long paragraph. In 1840, one presidential candidate Martin van Buren was nicknamed '*Old Kinderhook*' (*OK*), as he was a native from Kinderhook, NY. During the 1830s & 1840s comical abbreviations flourished in the American press, thus helping spread the word. In the 1860s, British people were taught not to use this '*American word*', as one wouldn't be speaking '*correct*' English.

Some people may argue the word started on the docks. French people say the word is a mishearing of the French word '*Au quai*' (literally '*on the way*') so "*vos baggages sont au quai* ('*your luggage is ready for loading*'). A cargo of trouble free sugar would be *au quai* in any French Caribbean port. Within a decade people started to use the word on documents that everything was *OK* and on the telegraph that '*all was well*'. It was distinctive enough for everyone to understand. During this period the word was used mainly in business or in fictional dialogue by characters deemed illiterate or rustic. It wasn't until the 20th century that *OK* moved from the margins to mainstream use. Gradually, it came into use in everyone's conversation. Even President Woodrow Wilson used the expression on the documents he approved. The word spread round the world and became part of many languages. All this does beg the question what did we use before 1839 when the word first appeared? The answer is we used words like "*yes*", "*satisfactory*", "*fine*", "*excellent*", "*all right*", and "*good*". What *OK* offers that the others do not is neutrality, a way to affirm or to express agreement without having to offer an opinion. Early dictionary definitions spell *OK* as *okey*, *Oke*, or *hoke*! *OK*! There is of course the *OK* hand gesture!

Category: USA / Origin of Words / OK
Level: Intermediate / Upper Intermediate

EXERCISES

1. **The word 'OK':** Give three sentences using the word OK in them. Go round the room swapping details.

2. **Dictation:** The teacher will read four to six lines of the article slowly and clearly. Students will write down what they hear. The teacher will repeat the passage slowly again. Self-correct your work from page one - filling in spaces and correcting mistakes. Be honest with yourself on the number of errors. Advise the teacher of your total number of errors. Less than five is very good. Ten is acceptable. Any more is room for improvement! More than twenty - you need to do some work!

3. **Reading:** The students should now read the article aloud, swapping readers every paragraph.

4. **Vocabulary:** Students should now look through the article and underline any vocabulary they do not know. Look in dictionaries. Discuss and help each other out. The teacher will go through and explain any unknown words or phrases.

5. **The article:** Students should look through the article with the teacher.

- a) What is the article about?
- b) What do you think about the article?

6. **Let's think! Synonyms of the word OK:** In pairs, think of four synonyms for each of the following definitions of the word OK. Write them below. Discuss together. What are your conclusions?

	1	2	3	4
Acceptance/ satisfactory	_____	_____	_____	_____
Reasonably good	_____	_____	_____	_____
Agree to	_____	_____	_____	_____
Agreement	_____	_____	_____	_____
Permit	_____	_____	_____	_____
Authorisation	_____	_____	_____	_____
Yes	_____	_____	_____	_____

Teachers: See link on page 8

The teacher will choose some pairs to discuss their findings in front of the class.

7. **Let's think!** In pairs. On the board write as many words as you can to do with the word **OK**. *One-two minutes*. Compare with other teams. Using your words compile a short dialogue together.

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8. **Let's talk! Radio Dictionary:** *In pairs.* You are in the Radio Dictionary studio. One of you is the presenter; the other student is the guest. Today's interview is about: **The word OK.** *5 minutes.*

9. **Let's chat!** *In pairs.* You are in a traditional English pub. Over a drink you are discussing the word *OK.*

10. **Let's think!** Write three sentences using the word OK.

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

The teacher will choose some students to read their sentences to the class.

11. **OK:** In pairs/groups. Choose to be one of the following people. You are in an English lesson! Create a **fun** short story about your last 24 hours using the word OK and synonyms of the word OK. Tell it to your partner/group. Students try to interlink **or** interact student storylines!

1	Yourself	3	A teacher
2	Your boss	4	A journalist

The teacher will choose some pairs to tell their stories in front of the class.

12. **Let's do 'The Article Quiz':** Have the students quiz each other in pairs. They score a point for each correct answer and half a point each time they have to look at the article for help. See who can get the highest score!

Student A

- 1) What year was the word first written?
- 2) What happened in 1840?
- 3) What happened in the 1860s?
- 4) What happened in the 1830s and 40s?
- 5) What is the OK hand gesture? (Show your partner!)

Student B

- 1) What happened in the 20th century?
- 2) Name the president.
- 3) What does 'vos baggage sont au quai' mean in English?
- 4) Name the newspaper.
- 5) Name the famous southern US city.

13. **Let's write an e-mail:** Write and send a 200 word e-mail to your teacher about: **Using the word 'OK' in my language.** Your e-mail can be read out in class.

14. **Sentence starters:** Finish these sentence starters. Correct your mistakes. Compare what other people have written.

- a) Everything is OK _____
- b) I am OK _____
- c) It is OK _____

DISCUSSION

Student A questions

- 1) Did the headline make you want to read the article?
- 2) Do you use the word 'OK' in your language?
- 3) How do you say the word OK in your language?
- 4) How often do you use the word OK?
- 5) What other words do you use rather than using the word OK?
- 6) Is OK widely used in your language? Explain!
- 7) Do you use the OK hand gesture? Why?
- 8) Do you think it's OK to use the word OK internationally? Explain!
- 9) When is it not OK to use the word OK?
- 10) Think of three other places where the word OK may have originated from.

Student B questions

- 1) What do you think about what you've read?
- 2) Are you OK?
- 3) Is everything OK today?
- 4) When is everything not OK?
- 5) How do you pronounce the word OK?
- 6) Do you speak English correctly or just OK? Explain!
- 7) Did you know of the meaning of OK like you do now before this English lesson?
- 8) What other words in today's English are OK to use in abbreviated form?
- 9) Think of three other 'international' words like OK to tell your partner.
- 10) Did you like this discussion?

SPEAKING

Let's discuss! OK

Allow 10-15 minutes – As a class / small groups / pairs / 1 to 1

Consider the following alternative words: How often do you use them? Give examples.

Okey dokey, hunky dory, alright, sure, awesome, right, agree, fine, sweet, cool, whatever, yea, thanks, for sure, average, affirmative, no problem, excellent, oh, agreed, boring, wow, sounds good, happy

Add a selection of your own alternatives to the word OK

Now think of some words linked to the word OK that will alter its meaning...

E.g. Ok Joe! (Directed at someone for doing something stupid or retarded)

The teacher can moderate the session.

GAP FILL: READING:

Put the words into the gaps in the text.

There are many thoughts as to the (1)_____ of the word *OK*. It is likely to have had African origins. The first (2)_____ use of the word (3)_____ was in Tennessee, America, in 1790. An Andrew Jackson wrote: "*Proved a bill of sale from Hugh McGary to Gasper Mansker, for a Negro man, which was O.K.*" However, in the American Choctaw Indian language, there is a word *okeh*, which means "*it is so*". It is likely this word was used in some American (4)_____ in the early 19th (5)_____. In 1815, a William Richardson who had travelled from New Orleans wrote in his diary: '*We travelled to NY we arrived OK.*' The *Boston Morning Post* is credited with introducing the word '*OK*' (all correct) on 23rd March 1839 in the (6)_____ of a long paragraph. In 1840, one presidential (7)_____ Martin van Buren was nicknamed '*Old Kinderhook*' (*OK*), as he was a native from Kinderhook, NY. During the 1830s & 1840s comical abbreviations flourished in the American press, thus helping spread the word. In the 1860s, British people were taught not to use this '*American word*', as one wouldn't be speaking '(8)_____' English.

written

OK

century

candidate

correct

communities

midst

origin

Some people may (1)_____ the word started on the (2)_____. French people say the word is a mishearing of the French word '*Au quai*' (literally '*on the way*') so "*vos baggages sont au quai*" ('*your luggage is ready for loading*'). A cargo of trouble free sugar would be *au quai* in any French Caribbean (3)_____. Within a decade people started to use the word on (4)_____ that everything was *OK* and on the telegraph that '*all was well*'. It was (5)_____ enough for everyone to understand. During this period the word was used mainly in business or in fictional dialogue by characters deemed (6)_____ or (7)_____. It wasn't until the 20th century that *OK* moved from the margins to (8)_____ use. Gradually, it came into use in everyone's conversation. Even President Woodrow Wilson used the expression on the documents he approved. The word spread round the world and became part of many languages.

distinctive

port

argue

mainstream

docks

Rustic

documents

illiterate

GAP FILL: LISTENING

Listen and fill in the spaces.

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Some people _____ started on the docks. French people say the word is a mishearing of the French word 'Au quai' (literally 'on the way') so "vos baggages sont au quai ('your luggage is ready for loading'). A _____ sugar would be au quai in any French Caribbean port. Within a decade people started _____ documents that everything was *OK* and on the telegraph that 'all was well'. It was distinctive enough for everyone to understand. During this period the word was used mainly in business or in fictional dialogue by characters deemed illiterate or rustic. It wasn't until the 20th century that *OK* moved from the _____. Gradually, it came into use in everyone's conversation. Even _____ used the expression on the documents he approved. The word spread round the world and became part _____.

GRAMMAR

Put the words into the gaps in the text.

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many

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some

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he

so

a

of

and

for

may

it

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SPELLING TEST

The teacher will ask the class individually to spell the following words that are in the article. Afterwards, check your answers with your teacher, using the following ratings:

Pass = 12, Good = 15, Very good = 18, Excellent = 20

1	communities	11	excellent
2	course	12	neutrality
3	gesture	13	affirm
4	characters	14	agreement
5	distinctive	15	opinion
6	satisfactory	16	dictionary
7	languages	17	paragraph
8	mainstream	18	abbreviations
9	definitions	19	illiterate
10	expression	20	mishearing

LINKS

<http://www.miketodd.net/encyc/okay.htm>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Okay>

<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/OK>

<http://thesaurus.com/browse/ok> Teachers link for answers!

<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/page/190>

<http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Meaning-of-the-OK-Hand-Gesture-Around-the-World---Learn-the-Meaning-of-Hand-Gestures&id=1640238>

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