

# SHORTENINGS, BLENDS AND ACRONYMS

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The English lexicon has attained its present size, at least in part, by the creation of new words based on existing ones. In large measure this has involved the addition of prefixes and suffixes to existing words to create new ones having new meanings or nuances, but subtractive ways of using existing words to create new ones have also been used. Three closely-related types of such words - shortenings, blends and acronyms - are discussed below; in all three, a new word is created by taking letters in order from the original word or words. One can distinguish between shortenings and blends by noting that the former utilizes a group of consecutive letters contained in the original word, such as **van** for caravan or **bra** for brassiere, whereas the latter utilizes parts of two words, such as **blotch** = bl(ot + bl)otch. Blends are ordinarily formed by taking the first few letters from one word and combining these with the last few letters from the other, but there are two limiting cases. In one, the first word is fully employed at the start of the blend; in the other, the last word is fully employed at the end. Finally, one can distinguish between blends and acronyms by noting that the former consist of words that can be taken in either order (for a notable example, consider **liger** = li(on + ti)ger, and **tigon** = tig(er + li)on), whereas acronyms are formed out of letters taken from conventional phrases that cannot be reversed. Usually, acronyms are built up from the first letter or letters in each word of the phrase, unlike blends which use terminal letters as well. Acronyms are distinguished from initialisms by the fact that the resulting concatenation of letters is pronounced as a word, such as **veep** for vice-president, not merely spelled out letter by letter, such as **TV** or **DDT**. Finally, acronyms are distinguished from abbreviations by the fact that the latter use letters from other parts of the word or words, such as **Dr.** for doctor. Acronyms, blends and shortenings all reflect the tendency of speakers and writers to encode commonly-used words and phrases in shorter forms to save time and paper in communicating.

## Shortenings

As already noted, a shortening can be defined as a word produced by the dropping of part of a longer word or phrase. Almost always, the latter part of the word is dropped:

ad(vertisement)	blitz(krieg)	champ(ion)	cox(swain)
bach(elor)	bra(ssiere)	chap(arajo)s	deb(utante)
bally(hoo)	brig(antine)	condo(minium)	decal(comania)

deli(catessen)	knicker(bocker)s	polio(myelitis)	roto(gravure)
disco(theque)	logo(type)	postgrad(uate)	sax(ophone)
exam(ination)	lunch(eon)	prefab(ricate)	schizo(phrenic)
frank(furter)	math(ematics)	prelim(inary)	sis(ter)
frat(ernity)	memo(randum)	prep(aratory)	strep(tococcal)
gar(fish)	metro(politan)	pro(fessional)	sulfa(nilamide)
gas(oline)	mitt(en)	prole(tariat)	sync(hronize)
gent(leman)	mutton(head)	prom(enade)	tach(ometer)
glad(iolus)	nitro(glycerine)	psych(ology)	tarp(aulin)
grad(uate)	nympho(maniac)	pug(ilist)	trig(onometry)
grid(iron)	orang(utan)	pup(py)	uke(lele)
gym(nasium)	pep(per)	rec(reation)	vamp(ire)
hack(ney)	phenom(enon)	recon(naissance)	vet(erinarian)
hippo(potamus)	photo(graph)	ref(eree)	wag(halter)
homo(sexual)	piano(forte)	repro(duction)	wiz(ard)
hood(lum)	piezo(electric)	rev(olution)	Yank(ee)
jock(strap)	pip(pin)	rhino(ceros)	

A few shortenings deal with phrases: (sodium) bicarb(onate), coed(ucational student), gat(ling gun), narc(otics agent), noncom(missioned officer), pub(lic house), Tam (o'Shanter), typo(graphical error), and zoo(logical garden).

In a small group of words, the first part is dropped:

(alli)gator	(chrysanthemums	(hur)rah	(tele)phone
(auto)giro	(em)ploy	(ice)berg	(turn)pike
(cara)van	(heli)copter	(o)possum	(violin)cello)

Less frequent, but nonetheless possible, is the creation of a new word from the middle portion of an existing one. The two commonest examples are (in)flu(enza) and (di)still(ery).

Any of these types of shortening can be combined with an orthographic or phonetic alteration:

ammo (ammunition)	kook (cuckoo)	prexy (president)
bike (bicycle)	middy (midshipman)	rickshaw (jinrikisha)
biz (show business)	mike (microphone)	rotor (rotator)
bosun (boatswain)	morfrey (hermaphrodite)	sarge (sergeant)
broolly (umbrella)	pants (pantaloons)	strobe (stroboscope)
carom (carambole)	phiz (physiognomy)	undies (underpants)
fridge (refrigerator)	pix (pictures)	vibes (vibrations)
frosh (freshman)	pram (perambulator)	whiz (wizard)

Hooch or hootch, a slang term for alcoholic liquor, derives, believe it or not, from Hoochinoo, or Hutsnuwu, the name of an Alaskan Indian tribe which made liquor.

More frequently than not, shortenings are used in informal speech and writing, while the parent words continue to be used for formal speech and writing. There are, of course, many exceptions. But whatever their origins, modes of usage, and process of formation, all shortenings share one thing in common, namely, they have achieved sufficient currency that lexicographers have felt compelled to include them as separate entries in English dictionaries. They

have, in short, achieved a life of their own.

Indeed, some shortenings are guilty of what one might humorously call lexical patricide. For example, every speaker of English knows the word *bus*, but relatively few are aware that it is merely a shortened form of *omnibus*. English dictionaries still carry an entry for *omnibus*, as a noun, defined as "an automotive public vehicle," but the word has disappeared from use except in its adjectival meaning, as in "the Senate passed an omnibus appropriations bill." In other cases, dictionaries no longer even list the antecedents of some shortenings. *Brandywine* and *rumbullion*, the antecedents of *brandy* and *rum*, are two good examples. And how many English speakers are aware that *gammon*, *maitre d'hotel*, *quacksalver* and *rakehell* are the original versions of, respectively, *gam*, *maitre d'*, *quack* and *rake*? Another good example is *taxi* and *cab*, both shortenings of *taxicab*. But the latter itself, unbeknownst to most English speakers, is merely a shortening of *taximeter cab*, with *cab*, moreover, being a shortening of *cabriolet*. In other contexts, of course, *cab* is a shortening of *cabin*, as in *truck cab*.

As the above example demonstrates, some shortenings reflect two or more longer words or, to phrase it differently, two or more words may spawn the same shortening. Thus, *gyro* is synonymous with both *gyrocompass* and *gyroscope*; *helio* with both *heliogram* and *heliograph*; *kilo* with both *kilogram* and *kilometer*; *quad* with both *quadrangle* and *quadruplet*; *perk* with both *perquisite* and *percolate*; *recap* with *recapitulate*, *recapitulation* and *recapped tire*; *rep* with both *reputation* and *representative*; *stereo* with *stereoscopy*, *stereophonic reproduction* and *stereophonic sound system*; *sub* with *submarine*, *substitute* and *substratum*; and *van* with *vanguard* and *caravan*. There are also others that could be cited. *Coop*, for example, stands for *cooperative store*, *cooperative society* or *cooperative apartment*, depending on context, while *lube* is the shortened form of both *lubricant* and *lubrification*. *Porno*, as a noun, stems from *pornography*, but, as an adjective, from *pornographic*. The theatrical term *prop* can reflect either *property* or *property man*, while *steno* is short for both *stenography* and *stenographer*. On the other hand, a single English word may spawn two different shortenings. Beside the previously-mentioned *taxicab*, the two that leap to mind are *oleomargarine*, which has produced both *oleo* and *margarine*, and *muskelunge*, giving us *muskie* and *lunge*.

## Blends

Blends, or what Lewis Carroll dubbed portmanteau words, are words formed of parts of two (sometimes, three or more) other words. Carroll, for example, suggested *slithy*, meaning both *slimy* and *lithe*, but it never took hold and is not to be found in any English dictionary or, at least, in any that I consulted. Over the centuries, however, many blends have taken hold, especially verbs, including some that are in the vocabulary of most English speakers:

bl(ot + b)otch  
 br(eakfast + l)unch  
 chu(nk + lu)mp  
 cl(ap + cr)ash  
 fl(ame + gl)are  
 fl(ash + g)ush  
 gl(eam + sh)immer  
 gl(obe + bl)ob  
 g(oo + m)uck  
 j(oll + b)ounce  
 j(oll + t)umble  
 mo(tor + ho)tel  
 na(g + cha)tter  
 pri(m + si)ssy

simul(taneous + broad)cast  
 sma(ck + ma)sh  
 sm(oke + f)og  
 spl(ash + s)urge  
 sp(ot + bl)otch  
 squa(ll + ha)wk  
 squi(rm + wri)ggle  
 squi(rm + pi)nch  
 stag(nation + in)flation  
 tele(vision + broad)cast  
 tele(vision + mara)thon  
 to(tter + wa)ddle  
 tr(ead + dr)udge  
 tw(ist + wh)irl

A perusal of an unabridged dictionary will reveal more esoteric examples:

bl(end + pl)unge  
 br(awl + wr)angle  
 Fran(cais + Ang)lais  
 gal(lop + tri)umph  
 gr(im + gl)um

kl(an + e)agle  
 knu(r + gna)rl  
 plo(d + tru)dge  
 prin(kle + tin)gle  
 sm(oke + h)aze

Many are coined by scientists and engineers:

bin(ary + dig)it  
 bi(nary + dig)it  
 electr(icity + magn)et  
 neur(on + trans)istor

posit(ive + elect)ron  
 prob(ability + un)it  
 puls(e + quas)ar  
 vitam(in + isom)er

Similarly, the military and aviation have contributed a number of solidly established blends to English:

avi(ation + electr)onics  
 ci(pher + tele)phony  
 elev(ator + ailer)on  
 heli(copter + air)port  
 li(ght + ra)dar

nav(igational + rad)ar  
 ra(dar + bea)con  
 ra(nge + a)zon bomb  
 rock(et + ball)oon  
 rudde(r + eleva)tor

New plant or animal species are often identified by blends:

cari(bou + rein)deer  
 catt(le + buff)alo  
 garl(ic + on)ion  
 li(on + ti)ger

po(tato + to)mato  
 tang(erine + l)emon  
 tang(erine + pom)elo  
 tig(er + li)on

Another relevant blend, although it seems not yet to have appeared in any dictionary - at least it does not appear in those that I consulted - is beefalo, from bee(f + buf)falo. But although lexicographers may not yet have recognized it, the word is undeniably well established in English. There exist, for example, an American Beefalo Association, founded in 1975, with headquarters in Louisville, Kentucky, with 950 members who owned 25,000 head as of January 1982; an International Beefalo Breeders Registry, headquartered in Stockton, California; and a World Beefalo Association,

also headquartered in Stockton (see New York Times, 6 January 1982).

In some blends the first word appears in full:

aero + (argo)naut	pi + (mes)on
astro + (aero)naut	polo + (la)crosse
book + (auto)mobile	Reagan + (ec)onomics
camp + (jamb)oree	slum + (land)lord
ex + (sub)urb	snow + (auto)mobile
ice + (gym)khana	work + a(lco)holic

In others, the last word appears in full:

ani(se) + seed	mini(ature) + skirt
con(densation) + trail	op(tical) art
docu(mentary) + drama	perma(nent) + frost
gyro(scope) + pilot	pil(led) + garlic
medic(al) + aid	pop(ped) + corn
medi(cal) + care	ra(dar) + dome
mini(ature) + bus	zirc(onium) + alloy

Although it does not fall neatly into any of the above classifications, the word **chortle** is also a blend: ch(uck)le + (sn)ort. Note that the letters in the blend are not taken from the component words in order.

## Acronyms

Dictionaries define an acronym as a pronounceable word formed from the initial letter or letters of successive words in a phrase. In the western world, they are perhaps most frequently utilized as a way of referring to government entities, organizations of all kinds, and businesses, but the acronymic process is also used to form new common nouns.

The military and scientific communities have spawned many acronymic nouns in English. Perhaps the best-known of these is **radar**, from **R**adio **D**etecting **A**nd **R**anging. Only slightly less well-known is **laser**, from **L**ight **A**mplification by **S**timulated **E**mission of **R**adiation. (**Maser**, a close but much less well-known relative, comes from **M**icrowave **A**mplification by **S**timulated **E**mission of **R**adiation.)

Examples of acronyms using the initial letters only include **Jet-Assisted Take-Off**, **Roentgen Equivalent Man**, **Roentgen Equivalent Physical**, **Reduction In Force**, **Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee**, and **Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus**. No one who served in the U.S. armed forces during World War II will ever forget the acronym **snafu** (euphemized as **S**ituation **N**ormal, **A**ll **F**ouled **U**p). Closely related, but now virtually forgotten, are **fubar** (**F**ouled **U**p **B**eyond **A**ll **R**ecognition) and **janfu** (**J**oint **A**rmies-**N**avy **F**oul-**U**p).

Acronymic words need not be restricted to the initial letters of the phrase; to improve pronounceability, often the first two or three letters are used. Examples: **GE**heime **STA**ats **POL**izei, **SIT**uation **COM**edy, **H**igh **F**idelity, **SC**ience **F**iction, **AV**iation **GAS**oline,

Naphthene PALMitate, PSYchological WARfare, ALGOrithmic Language, FORMula TRANslation, PARallax SECond, NAVIgation CERTificate, REDuction-OXidation, MASS CONcentration, SOund NAVigation Rang-ing, Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation coumARIN, Sheppard + Turpin + ENgland (gun), and WILL Comply.

Flak, from the German FLiegerAbwehrKanone, is an example of an acronym which uses the initials of the syllables in a single word instead of the first letters of successive words.

Finally, one encounters phonetic acronyms. If words beginning with vowels are not contained in the phrase, the acronymic word often consists of the spelled-out version of the alphabetic letters: **deejay** from Disc Jockey, **veep** from Vice President, **emcee** from Master of Ceremonies, **jayvee** from Junior Varsity, **jaycee** from Junior Chamber (of Commerce), **kayo** from Knock-Out. Note how fine the line between acronyms and initialisms becomes; if these are written with the letters (VP instead of veep, KO instead of kayo), they are called initialisms.

### *HISPANIC FIRST NAMES*

*This is the title of a 1984 book compiled by Richard D. Woods and published for \$35 by Greenwood Press (publisher of Word Ways, 1968-69). Though several books on first names have been published in the past, this is the first book I have seen devoted wholly to Hispanic given names. Drawing from telephone books, censuses, and Catholic baptismal data from Texas, California and New Mexico, the book consists of approximately 2000 main entries giving the pronunciation of the name, its English equivalent, its gender, its etymology, and diminutive and variant spellings (though some of these may be merely clerical errors). Some of the etymologies are fascinating. For example, Limona was a maiden (in Greek mythology) imprisoned for adultery and devoured by a wild horse, Sabino was Nero's wife who tried to save her beauty by bathing in asses' milk, Diogenes believed in the simple life and lived in a tub, and Donaldo was a Scottish king who had nine daughters but still lived a religious life. The Appendix gives rough frequency counts for the most common names; not surprisingly, 119 names serve 73 per cent of all females and 131 names serve 81 per cent of all males.*