

***Introducing English Studies***  
**Chapter 1: Screencast Transcript**

**Slide 1 [Title slide]**

Hello. I am Tamara O’Callaghan, co-author of the textbook *Introducing English Studies*. In this screencast, “How to Conduct Research in HEL,” I will explain how to explore the origins and development of English words as a productive strategy in HEL research.

**Slide 2 [Text]**

Topics in this presentation include:

1. Understanding Etymology
2. *Oxford English Dictionary* Online
3. *Online Etymology Dictionary*
4. *Chipmunk*: First Use in Writing
5. *Chipmunk*: Etymology in *OED*
6. *Chipmunk*: Etymology in *Online Etymology Dictionary*
7. *Big*: Origins and First Use

**Slide 3 [Text]**

What is an etymology of a word? Let me begin by stating that an etymology is *not* a definition. Rather, it is an explanation of a word’s origins, including its original meaning, spelling, and pronunciation, as well as how that meaning, spelling, and pronunciation have changed over time. Fundamentally, etymological research asks a question that you have probably asked yourself at some point: namely, where did this word come from? By knowing the roots of a word, you will better understand how we arrived at the sound and meaning of that word in English today.

When you look up a word in a dictionary, you can actually find much more information than just its current spelling and meaning. You may discover that the word originated in an earlier form of English or that it traveled through more than one language on its journey into modern English. The dates listed indicate the earliest year for which there is a surviving written record of that word in English. It is important to understand that we mean the first example in *writing*, since the word may have been used in speech long before it was ever written down in a physical artifact (such as a book, letter, or other text) that has managed to survive the centuries.

A dictionary also includes examples and sources for a word to illustrate how it has been used in context over time, usually through a phrase or sentence from a written document in English. These examples provide concrete historical evidence for the word’s origins and its change in meaning.

**Slide 4 [Screenshot of Search Interface of *OED*]**

One of the best online resources available for etymological research is the *Oxford English Dictionary* or *OED* as it is typically called. You likely have access to this database tool through

your university library and, if you are in a large city, possibly through the main branch of your public library.

As the “Welcome” page of the online *OED* shows, you can easily search for a word using the Quick Search field. However, you should note that, below this field on the page, are links to Categories, Timelines, Sources, and Historical Timeline. These features can be very useful for learning more about a word’s origins and history, so be sure to check them out.

The *OED* website provides excellent online tutorials of how to use this powerful tool. And remember: you can always ask a librarian at your university library for help using the *OED* and other reference tools.

### **Slide 5 [Screenshot of Search Interface of *Online Etymology Dictionary*]**

In addition to the *OED*, there are many other etymological resources available in print or online. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* is another useful, free online tool for etymological research. It has a very simple interface and compiles results from a number of dictionaries that are largely out of print, including ones specializing in etymologies. All you have to do is type a word into the search field and click on the “search” button to see the results.

### **Slide 6 [Screenshot of Written Citations of Word “Chipmunk” in *OED*]**

So let’s take a look at the word *chipmunk*, the name for a small, striped rodent found throughout North America. If you look up *chipmunk* in the online *Oxford English Dictionary*, you will see that, under its general, recognizable definitions, a list of citations that include the first written use of the word. You may be surprised to discover that *chipmunk* does not appear in written English until 1830. Why so late? Did chipmunks not exist prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century?

### **Slide 7 [Screenshot of Etymology of Word “Chipmunk” in *OED*]**

To answer these questions, you need to consider historical context. When the English language arrived in what would become North America, hundreds of rich and diverse languages of the indigenous inhabitants had existed in the land for thousands of years. In addition to this linguistic diversity, English speakers also encountered many unfamiliar animals not found in Britain or Europe. As a result, the new settlers often turned to Native American languages to help create English names for these unfamiliar creatures.

Once such animal was the chipmunk. Early colonists in New England reported that “chitmunk” (with a “t”) was the name for the animal in a local Algonquian language, a family of Native American languages spoken by peoples from Labrador to Carolina and the Great Plains. This word was never recorded in a dictionary, and the Algonquian languages of that region are no longer natively spoken, so the original form and meaning of the word has been lost. It is a good guess that the word probably actually meant “squirrel,” since “chitmunk” sounds similar to words for “squirrel” in living Algonquian languages, such as the Ojibwa word *jidmoonh*, pronounced “chit-moon” and meaning “red squirrel.”

**Slide 9 [Screenshot of “Chipmunk” in the *Online Etymology Dictionary*]**

This history of the word *chipmunk* is confirmed by the *Online Etymology Dictionary*. You will also not be surprised to learn that other animals, such as the skunk, possum, coyote, raccoon, moose, woodchuck, and caribou, also owe their names to Native American languages.

**Slide 9 [Screenshot of Etymology of Word “Big” in *OED*]**

But what if a word does not have a clear origin? Some English words are not clearly rooted in English or borrowed from other languages.

One example is the word *big* – an adjective that we use a lot today. However, it was not the word of choice in Old English when *mickle* (*much*) was used. In fact, *big* only shows up in the 14th century and onwards. Was it borrowed from a Scandinavian word for a rich, powerful man? There is the word *bugge* from a Norwegian dialect meaning "large man." Nevertheless, the origin of *big* remains unknown.

Exploring etymology can be a very rewarding research process in HEL, for it allows you to develop a highly informative and sometimes surprising lexical “biography” of a word.