

## AN IDIOM, A CATCH PHRASE, AN APHORISM: A REFERENCE QUESTION

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*Teachable Moments for Students ... is designed to provide information that can be used for quick and accessible answers to the basic questions that are frequently asked of librarians and those involved in teaching legal research and writing. These questions present a "teachable moment," a brief window of opportunity when—because he or she has a specific need to know right now—the student or lawyer asking the question may actually remember the answer you provide. The material presented in this column is not meant to be an in-depth review of the topic, but rather a summary of the main points that everyone should know. It is a companion to the Teachable Moments for Teachers column that gives teachers an opportunity to describe a special moment of epiphany that changed their approach to presenting a particular topic to their students. Readers are invited to submit their own "teachable moments for students" to the editor of the column: Barbara Bintliff, University of Colorado Law Library, Campus Box 402, Boulder, CO 80309, phone: (303) 492-1233, fax: (303) 492-2707.*

Researchers are often puzzled about the original use of a word or phrase found in legal materials and other documents. It's not unusual for them to have relied on the word or phrase for many years, and yet suddenly be intrigued by its derivation, history, and usage. When this happens, suddenly it is imperative to find out everything possible about the word or phrase.

Finding the derivation of a word through its roots, and discovering the meaning of the roots, is fairly straightforward—any good dictionary should provide the information. But how do you trace the development and changes in meaning and usage of most English words? Happily, the answer to that question also is straightforward. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (the OED) is the

reference source for the origin and meaning of English and American words. It defines and illustrates the historical usage and meanings of both current and obsolete words. Following each definition of a word is a series of quotations that shows the changes in the word's usage, beginning with its earliest known appearance and concluding with its present form. The OED is such a standard reference work that even the smallest public library will have one or more editions. The OED is also available as an online subscription service at <http://dictionary.oed.com>.

Definitions, derivations, changes, and usage of individual words in the English language can be readily identified, but what if you need to find the origin or history of a phrase or an idiom? While "all roads lead to Rome," or at least to the OED, for words, is there a comparable source for phrases?

The answer is, unfortunately, no. Finding information on phrases and idioms takes some detective work. For example, there are many specialty dictionaries like the *Dictionary of American Slang*, Chapman (Harper & Row 1986), the *Dictionary of American Proverbs*, Mieder (Oxford University Press 1992), and the *Random House Dictionary of America's Popular Proverbs and Sayings*, Titelman (Random House 1996) and popular monographs such as *An Exaltation of Larks*, Lipton (Grossman 1968) and *Hog on Ice*, Funk (Harper & Row 1948) that are useful in your research. General reference works that collect quotations are frequently helpful in finding basic background information on a phrase or quotation, as are movie trivia dictionaries and related resources. However, many of these sources only cover selective expressions, proverbs, jargon, or slang. None is definitive. Some are indexed only under one keyword, or by theme, while others only give meanings and not origins. In any event, most law libraries will not have an extensive collection of such reference books. What, then, is an efficient strategy to employ when looking for phrase origins?

“Finding information on phrases and idioms takes some detective work.”

One approach that has proven successful is to take advantage of several online research tools in combination to answer these questions. The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* is a popular destination for phrases just as it is for words. To find the history of “all roads lead to Rome,” begin your travels with the OED’s online Advanced Search option, select *quotations* and enter the words *roads*, *Rome*, and *lead*. Three quotations are displayed from the OED’s second edition, with the note that there are no additional entries in the newest edition. All three are from the entry for the word *Rome*, and are highlighted in red under that entry (this not an insignificant feature when the length of the OED entries is considered). The first use given for the familiar “All roads lead to Rome” is from 1872, but earlier variations are included, culminating in a quote from Chaucer as the earliest known use of the phrase:

“(d) C1380 CHAUCER *Troylus* (1894) II.  
36 For every wight which that to Rome  
went, Halt nat o path, or alwey o manere.”

It is important to note that the same outcome can be reached using the print OED. Each of the significant words in the phrase would need to be looked up in each available edition of the dictionary. Given the publication’s size, its several editions, and the necessity of searching for multiple words, this is a prodigious job. In this instance, researchers would need to look under *roads*, *Rome*, and *lead* in several editions of the print OED. Researchers are reminded to take provisions for this trip!

Searching the online OED was tried with numerous phrases (“hit the road,” “cook with gas,” “cut of his jib,” “cat’s pyjamas”), with good result. But some phrases proved resistant (“an apple a day keeps the doctor away,” “you can’t see the forest for the trees,” “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” “knock on wood”). In these instances it helped to turn to another commercial online source, The Phrase Finder, at <[www.phrases.org.uk](http://www.phrases.org.uk)>. This free meanings and origins database originated at Sheffield Hallam

University, United Kingdom, as a computational linguistics project. The free database has meanings and origins of more than 2,000 English phrases and sayings. An additional 30,000 searchable postings, gleaned from the site-sponsored discussion forum, allows queries and answers as to phrase origin and meaning to be contributed by participating individuals. Often the postings cite from a variety of well-vetted hard copy references, and a search of this database can be fruitful. (A sister site offers a phrase thesaurus search engine as a subscription service at <[www.phrasefinder.co.uk](http://www.phrasefinder.co.uk)>.)

“An apple a day keeps the doctor away” was a phrase that was not discoverable in the OED online. However, searching for *apple doctor* in The Phrase Finder pulled up more than 20 postings from the discussion forum. The first posting quotes directly from the *Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings*:

“An apple a day keeps the doctor away.  
Eating fruit regularly keeps one healthy.  
First found as a Welsh folk proverb  
(1866) ‘Eat an apple on going to bed,  
And you’ll keep the doctor from earning  
his bread.’ First attested in the United  
States in 1913. ...”

Information on “can’t see the forest for the trees,” another phrase difficult to trace via the OED online, was readily available through The Phrase Finder. The fourth of 35 postings referenced *Heavens to Betsy*, Funk (Harper & Row 1955), an older work that gives selective histories of popular phrases:

Too beset by petty things to appreciate the greatness or grandeur; too wrapped up in details to gain a view of the whole. In America we are likely to use the plural, ‘woods,’ or possibly to substitute ‘forest,’ but ‘wood’ is the old form and is preferable. Yes, the saying is at least five hundred years old, and probably a century or two could be added to that, for it must have been long

been in use to have been recorded in 1546 in John Heywood's 'A dialogue Conteynnyng the Nomber in Effect of all the Prouerbes in the Englishe Tongue.' He wrote 'Plentie is no deinte, ye see not your owne ease. I see, ye can not see the wood for trees.'

This entry points up a major difficulty in searching for the origin of a phrase: they change over time and across oceans. Heading back to the OED with the knowledge that the above expression at one time was "can't see the *wood* for the trees," we find the same reference to Heywood's 1546 reference under the entry for "wood." No matter what database or hard copy resource is used, it is wise to keep in mind that the form of a word (knocking—instead of knock—on wood) or actual word (touch—instead of knock—on wood) may be different than cited. It seems that patience, creativity, and plain old luck all factor into keeping the researcher on the right road to a phrase's origin.<sup>1</sup>

(As an aside, for those who might be intrigued by the whole concept of the OED, you are not alone. Its development is chronicled in the 1999 book, *The Professor and the Madman: A Tale of Murder, Insanity, and the Making of the Oxford English Dictionary*, by Simon Winchester.)

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<sup>1</sup> An example of good, plain luck is the discovery of the following source in a Google search. This scholarly paper includes brief background information on numerous well-known quotes from movies. *Popular Movie Quotes: Reflections of a People and a Culture*, by Stuart Fischhoff, Ph.D., Esmerelda Cardenas, Angela Hernandez, Corey Wyatt, Jarod Young, and Rachel Gordon, Executive Editor, *Journal of Media Psychology*. Based on a paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., August 7, 2000 <[www.calstatela.edu/faculty/sfisco/moviequotes.htm](http://www.calstatela.edu/faculty/sfisco/moviequotes.htm)>.

**"In the history of legal education, the study of legal bibliography and the use of law books is more ancient than formal teaching of the subject. Since the days when precedent was first firmly seated on the throne of English law, lawyers have bowed down to it, and wise men have admonished the tyro to seek knowledge in the books wherein are set down a multitude of isolated instances of authoritative rules of the courts. Less homage has been paid to those commands of governments which appear in the form of statutes; although their superiority over all but a few of the classical treatises is invariably pointed out."**

—Frederick C. Hicks, *Materials and Methods of Legal Research: With Bibliographical Manual* 13 (1923).