

# OK

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THE IMPROBABLE STORY OF  
AMERICA'S GREATEST WORD  
.....

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## **PREFACE**

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**OK. WHY THIS BOOK? STRANGELY ENOUGH, EVEN THOUGH** OK is by far the most successful American creation in language, as well as nearly the strangest, it hasn't had a book of its own. So here it is.

And it is made possible, above all, by Allen Walker Read (1906–2002), professor at Columbia University, scholar without equal of American English. Before he came along, a century of speculation, obfuscation, and deliberate deception had obscured the origin of OK seemingly beyond recovery. In the absence of any clear evidence and the presence of false rumors, learned lexicographers as well as ordinary citizens were free to imagine the beginnings of OK in sources as disparate as the Choctaw Indian language, Otto Kimmel's biscuits, and supposed misspelling by

President Andrew Jackson. All plausible, in their way, but as Read would demonstrate, O.R. (all wrong).

His name was apt, because Read read voluminously in the books, magazines, and newspapers of early America. He did this as a staff member of the four-volume scholarly *Dictionary of American English* (1938–44) but also on his own throughout his life. So it was not surprising that Read was the one who discovered, in fine print on page 2 of the *Boston Morning Post* of March 23, 1839, an instance of OK that turned out to be the earliest on record. Nobody else but Read would have been combing through that newspaper looking for words, and nobody else but Read had read widely enough in the newspapers of that day to be sure that this was the first instance.

When he published his findings in a series of articles in the journal *American Speech* back in 1963–64, he didn't offer just that one citation. To prove his point beyond dispute, he provided literally hundreds of quotations from newspapers of the 1830s and 1840s, showing not only the context of joking abbreviations and misspelling that made OK possible in the first place but also the growth and development of OK as it was adapted in the presidential election of 1840 for "Old Kinderhook," Martin Van Buren, and for many subsequent purposes.

Since the publication of his articles, there have been occasional challenges to Read's evidence of the origin of OK in that Boston newspaper. All have failed to earn support, however, because they rest either entirely on speculation or on isolated instances of something written earlier. As for speculation, it's easy to find native expressions in other languages that sound like OK—that's one reason why the American OK has spread so widely through the languages of the world. But speculation needs evidence to back it, and so far none has been found. As for the earlier isolated instances,

some have turned out to be misreadings, while others—well, there's not a shred of evidence showing that one night's watchword from the American Revolution was somehow connected with a Boston joke half a century later.

My chapters on the first few years of OK necessarily lean heavily on Read's evidence. Those who have seen his articles in *American Speech* or their reprint in his *Milestones in the History of English in America* (edited by Richard W. Bailey, Publication of the American Dialect Society 86, Duke University Press, 2002) will recognize much that is familiar here. The additional matter in my chapters only further confirms his conclusions.

In the half century since Read's articles, much more has been discovered about the later life of OK as it developed from joke to business tool and then to staple of everyday conversation and an attitude toward life. A wealth of new material is available, unimaginable in the paper world of fifty years ago. Internet, take a bow.

I have tried to be as generous as Read in providing examples to illustrate the development of OK. The vast majority of examples come from the Internet, many of them in historical document databases such as Making of America, a digital collection of nineteenth-century newspapers, magazines, and books. Mining the data for examples of OK is still hard work; there is much fool's gold in the false positives dredged up from old publications by automatic OCR. Nevertheless, searching the Internet for OK locates many needles in acres of haystacks, allowing for a full-length portrait that begins to do justice to this incomparable expression.

You won't find footnotes in this book. The Internet changes too fast for that. Instead, I have tried to acknowledge sources in sufficient detail that you can locate them too by Googling, with a

little luck. In those places in my book I have named the numerous people who, wittingly or un-, have contributed to this portrait of OK.

But in addition, let me here note my gratitude for help in ways beyond those noted in the text from researchers Erin McKean, Richard W. Bailey, Barry Popik, Joseph Pickett, and James Davis; at MacMurray College from Colleen Hester, Alice Dodson, Malea Harney, Linda Duncan, Nadine Szczepanski, Dan Currier, Susan Eilering, and DeeAnn Roome; and elsewhere from Fr. Kip Ashmore, Sara Metcalf, Ginger Lane, Elizabeth Schneewind, Jennifer Choi, and Louise DeCosta Wides. At Oxford University Press I had essential assistance from Peter Ohlin, Brian Hurley, Lucy Randall, Woody Gilmartin, Joellyn Ausanka, and Betsy DeJesus. And I must reserve my last word of thanks for my wife, Donna, who is way beyond OK.

OK? Let's begin.

# INTRODUCTION

## THE ABCS OF OK

**IT IS SAID TO BE THE MOST FREQUENTLY SPOKEN (OR TYPED)** word on the planet, bigger even than an infant's first word *ma* or the ubiquitous *Coke*. And it was the first word spoken on the moon.

It's America's answer to Shakespeare.

It's an entire philosophy expressed in two letters.

It's very odd, but it's . . . OK.

Yes, OK. Just two simple letters. And two letters of humble origin; they were born as a lame joke perpetrated by a newspaper editor in 1839. But these two simple letters (or four, if you use its genteel alter ego *okay*) anchor our agreements, confirm our understandings, and choreograph the dance of everyday life.

This is a book about OK. And OK truly deserves a book of its own, not only because it is different from anything else in our language but because it is so important. OK is a meme that has burrowed deeply into the way we think and act. In fact, those two letters encapsulate a whole view of life—the American philosophy, if two letters can be said to embody a philosophy, and if Americans can be said to have one.

Yet we scarcely notice. OK seems too simple, too trivial, and above all too familiar to attract notice to itself. It scarcely makes an appearance in books of famous quotations. Here, in fact, is the complete *Book of Famous OK Quotations*:

I'm OK—You're OK

—*Title of book on transactional analysis (1967) by Thomas A. Harris, M.D.*

That's it? Yes, to capture all the famous quotations involving *love or war* would take many pages. But the collection of famous quotations involving OK contains all of one item.

Wait a minute, you might say. What about Todd Beamer's famous "OK, let's roll!" to begin the attack on the terrorists who hijacked United Flight 93 on September 11, 2001? The full quotation was "Are you guys ready? OK, let's roll!" But even in that statement, the OK was inconspicuous. On the T-shirts and other memorabilia that soon were produced in his honor, only the last two words were reproduced. His wife Lisa's book honoring him likewise omitted OK from its title: *Let's Roll! Ordinary People, Extraordinary Courage*. As *Time* magazine summarized in December 2001, "Many diverse Americans have latched onto his phrase 'Let's roll' to symbolize that strength of character." But not OK.



It's everywhere, but hardly noticed. In the November 23, 2009, issue of the *New Yorker* you will find a cartoon whose caption begins and ends with OK. Two waiters are standing in an entrance-way looking at a woman at a distant table, and one says to the other, "O.K., her mouth is full—run over and ask her if everything is O.K." Amusing, but not because of OK. And there's no indication that the joke was making any kind of play on the two different meanings of OK that it employs.

### No Bananas

Another missed opportunity for a famous OK quotation came when Frank Silver and Irving Cohn wrote one of the best-known songs of the twentieth century. In an alternate universe, maybe, their lyrics would go like this:

There's a fruit store on our street.  
It's run by a Greek.  
And he keeps good things to eat,  
But you should hear him speak.  
When you ask him anything,  
Never answers no.  
He just OKs you to death,  
And as he take your dough, he tells you:  
"OK! We have no bananas. We have no bananas today. . . ."

But in our universe, because of the unassuming nature of OK, Silver and Cohn instead chose a different word for their 1923 hit, and the quotation books have only "Yes! We have no bananas."

Important, yet inconspicuous. That is just one of the oddities of the world's best-known word.

This book will explore the mystery of OK: its odd origin, its unlikely survival, its varied forms and meanings, and its pervasive influence. OK is the most amazing invention in the history of American English.

## The Everyday OK

It would not be much of an exaggeration to say that the modern world runs on OK (or plain lowercase *k*, if you are texting). We write those letters on documents to mark our approval. We speak them to express assent, or just to say we're listening. We accept a computer's actions by clicking on OK. And we also use OK to introduce matters of importance, or recall an audience's wandering attention.

Those are the simple obvious uses for OK, the ones we know well. In those situations, what a good friend OK is! A handy tool. An uncomplaining workhorse. Indeed, in America in the twenty-first century, it's hard to get through a conversation without a plentiful sprinkling of OK. It's the easiest way to signal agreement, whether with a written OK on a document or an OK spoken aloud:

OK, I'll go with you.

OK, you win.

At the start of a sentence, OK can also be a wakeup call, an alert, an attention getter, an announcement that something new is coming:

OK, I'll only say this once.

OK, I get it.

OK, let's start making our pinhole camera!

## Blue Jeans, Shakespeare, and Light

To begin to grasp the full import of the phenomenon that is OK, we need to step back and consider it from fresh perspectives. When we do, we find that OK is like blue jeans, Shakespeare, and light.

### *Blue Jeans*

OK is as American as jeans. In fact, it's very much like them. Nearly everyone uses both OK and jeans for everyday purposes, but not on formal occasions. And they are both American inventions of the nineteenth century that have spread to the far corners of the globe.

### *America's Shakespeare*

Less obviously, OK is also America's answer to Shakespeare. Or more precisely, OK *is* America's Shakespeare, a two-letter expression as potent (though perhaps not as poetic) as anything in the Bard's works. Like Shakespeare, OK is protean, pervasive, influential, and successful in its own day and in ours. But the similarity goes deeper.

Like Shakespeare, OK had humble origins. This has set some critics on edge, prompting them to deny the attested origins in favor of more dignified ones.

For Shakespeare, the anti-Stratfordians reason that the "poacher from Stratford," a commoner, could not have written the noble language of Shakespeare's plays and poems. No, those works of genius must have come from a nobleman like the Earl of Oxford, a scholar like Francis Bacon, a college-educated playwright like Christopher Marlowe (whose death in 1593 must have been faked), or royalty—maybe Queen Elizabeth.

Similarly, for OK, elitists find it beyond embarrassing to think that OK began as a joke misspelling for “all correct.” Surely, they reason, an expression as serious and important as OK must have come from a more serious abbreviation, like “Old Kinderhook” for presidential candidate Martin Van Buren in the 1840 election. Or maybe it came from baker Otto Kimmel’s supposed custom of imprinting his initials in vanilla cookies. Or wait—maybe it was borrowed from another language, like Choctaw, Scottish, Greek, or Mandingo.

All very tempting, but overwhelming evidence shows otherwise.

Another thing OK and Shakespeare have in common is elusiveness. How do you properly spell OK? And is it a noun, verb, adjective, adverb, or interjection? Indeed, is it a word at all, an abbreviation, or something else? There are no simple answers to these questions.

Similarly, the text of Shakespeare’s plays can’t be pinned down. The quarto and folio versions of the plays published during or shortly after Shakespeare’s lifetime have significant differences, and it is hard to imagine the full text of either quarto or folio being spoken quickly enough to fit the “two hours traffic” stated in the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*.

### *Light*

And light! Yes, OK is like light, in our post-Einsteinian understanding of that pervasive phenomenon. Before Einstein, physicists were puzzled: light sometimes appears to be a particle, sometimes a wave. Is light a wave or particle? Einstein’s answer was “Yes, it’s either, or both.” That’s the answer we have to give to the OK phenomenon. Is it a word or an abbreviation? Is it noun, verb, adjective, adverb, interjection, or all of the above? The answer has

to be “Yes, it’s either, or both, or all.” It’s an old-fashioned joke with a postmodern punch line.

So it will take a village of chapters to approach the heart of the mystery of OK.

## The Many Spellings of OK

The elusiveness of OK begins with its first impression, its look on the page. OK has not one but many spellings. That’s odd, when you think about it. Most words have just one acceptable spelling, though they may have varying pronunciation. OK, on the other hand, has just one pronunciation, the names of the letters O and K. Since it just consists of those two letters of the alphabet, why shouldn’t there be just one spelling?

Well, it turns out that there are different ways to spell those two letters, and there is no consensus on which is the best. It can be *OK* in capital letters or *ok* in small. Either of those versions can be served plain or peppered with periods (*O.K.*, *a.k.*), so those two letters make four more possibilities—or six, if we allow a space after the first period (*O. K.*, *a. k.*).

If we’re texting instead of talking, the shorter and simpler *k* rules. In a *New Yorker* review of a book on text messaging, Louis Menand declares, “The most common text message must be ‘k.’ It means ‘I have nothing to say, but God forbid that you should think that I am ignoring your message.’” The medium is new, and so is that abbreviation, but not the message; a century and a half earlier, OK served a similar function in telegraphy, confirming that a message had been properly received.

Of course, the variation in spelling doesn’t stop there. If we think of OK as a word, why shouldn’t it be spelled like an ordinary word? In ordinary writing, when we aren’t texting, we don’t use

MLE for *Emily*, DK for *decay*, or TDS for *tedious*. So it is more conventional and less conspicuous to render OK as *okay* (or occasionally *okeh* or *okee*).

But suppose we opt for *okay*. Even that, it turns out, is not the expected spelling for a word pronounced OK. The problem is the *k* English spelling does have some rules, chaotic as it often seems. One of the rules is to spell the *k* sound, when possible, with a *c*.

Before a vowel, we do spell the *k* sound with *k* if the vowel that follows is *e*, *i*, or *y*. That's to avoid mispronouncing a word with a soft *c* (an *s* or *ch*) sound, as in *circus* or *cello*. The spelling *c* is ambiguous before those vowels, so we allow *k*.

But when the vowel following the *k* sound is *a*, *o*, or *u*, there is no such ambiguity. In those cases, English spelling prefers *c*, not *k*. So the dictionary spells the names of certain plants as *oca* and *ocotilla* not *oka* and *okotillo*. We write *oculist*, not *okulist*.

True, *okay* is generally (though not always) spoken with emphasis on the second syllable, not the first as in those examples. In that case, the typical spelling for the *k* sound is a double *c*, as in *occult*, *occur*, and *occasion*. That last word happens to begin with the exact same sounds as OK. For some reason, however, we don't spell OK as *ocay*.

Why don't we notice that the spelling *okay* is odd? Two reasons. First, we're so used to *okay* that we don't question it. It has had that spelling for nearly a century and a half. And second, it does follow a certain logic, however exceptional. There's a *k* in the two-letter versions of OK, so a spelling that starts out *ok-* is more closely connected to its sibling than one that begins *oc-*. Further, the name of the letter *k* takes the exceptional spelling *kay*, making the connection to the two-letter spelling even closer. That's different from the expected spelling *cay*, referring to a little island of sand or coral.

So *okay* is an odd yet logical spelling, following a different drummer than most words with the *k* sound before the vowel *a*.

## Konspikuous Ks

In the English alphabet, no letter is more conspicuous than *k*. Or to put it another way, no letter has a better ready-made opportunity to be conspicuous than *k*. That's because, thanks to the versatility of *c*, *k* really isn't needed in English. It was a late addition to the English alphabet, used regularly in English writing only after the Norman conquest, a mere thousand years ago.

So *k* makes OK stand out. Indeed, with regard to recent borrowings into English of foreign words beginning with "non-English initial combinations" like *ka-*, the *Oxford English Dictionary* says that these spellings suggest "the uncouth or barbarous character of the words."

In all its spelling variations, OK makes use of the conspicuous letter *k*, instead of the correct and less conspicuous *c*. Other words take advantage of the power of *k* too: *K* for *strikeout* in baseball, even though it's not the initial letter, *KO* for a *knockout* in boxing (a twentieth-century innovation possibly suggested by being a simple reversal of OK), even though it's a silent letter, and two Ks in *Kodak*, deliberately chosen to make that name distinctive.

## Many Parts of Speech

### *Adjective First*

When we turn from spelling to grammar, the hydra-headedness of OK continues. It won't be confined to a single part of speech. In fact, OK fits every one of the four major grammatical categories:

noun, verb, adjective, and adverb, as well as the wild-card category of interjection.

At heart, OK is an adjective, modifying a noun. It was that way in its very first appearance, in a Boston newspaper in 1839, and it has thrived that way ever since. To take a few examples plucked from the Web:

**Finding flaws on our website is OK.**

**Gwyneth's Marriage Is OK, Says Mom (headline)**

**We Are Not Perfect, but We Are OK (title of a human anatomy exhibit)**

This is OK as a predicate adjective, coming after the noun it modifies as well as the verb of the sentence (most often *is*). It's one of two common positions in a sentence for an adjective. The other is right before the noun, what's known as an attributive adjective, and OK readily assumes that position too.

**Burris will be at least an OK U.S. senator, probably a decent one and maybe even a good one. (*Chicago Tribune*)**

### *Noun, Verb, Adverb*

But OK was too versatile to be limited to its original part of speech as an adjective. Sometimes it became a thing, taking on the form and function of a noun. The form includes the possibility of a plural, and the function includes object and subject of a sentence, as well as object of a preposition, all illustrated in the first of these examples:

**He includes another boxed and starred "OK," but he does not silently write it, as before. This "OK" is not primarily iconic**



but orally expressive, like the “OKs” of his homework story. (*Handbook of Early Literacy Research*)

Sounds to me her English level was not so high, so her OK was simply a way of acknowledging his statement.

When this OK becomes our everyday attitude, when we accept reality, we can at last live in the middle of reality.

What else? Well, you can verb OK easily enough, adding the inflections *-s*, *-ed*, and *-ing* as appropriate. It occurs especially in newspaper headlines, where OK is attractive to editors because it takes up less space than *approve* or another alternative:

Phillips Says She OK'd Use of Photo

Woman Admits She OK'd Fraudulent Loan

L.A. Council OKs 3-Month Moratorium on Billboards

Council OKs Smoking Pot in WAMM Tent

Less common, but still plentiful, is OK as an adverb, modifying a verb or an entire sentence. Here is an example, embedded in a 1954 letter by Chicago newspaperman Mike Royko to his future wife:

This caused the officer in charge of my section to feel that I had put a black mark on his record so he gave me a long winded lecture. I took the lecture OK but when he asked me if I planned on reenlisting I blew my stack.

### *Interjection!*

Finally, there is OK the interjection, the wild card located in a third dimension outside the structure of the rest of the sentence. It's perhaps the most common use for OK nowadays:

OK, show me the money.

OK, I give up. What's the answer?

OK, what is this Venus retrograde all about?

And being unrelated grammatically to anything else in the sentence, the interjection OK can also occur all by itself. Or merely be repeated, as in the song from a 2007 album by the Swedish group the Bombhappies with the title *Ok ok ok ok ok ok ok*, or Juliana Hatfield's song "OK, OK," from her 1995 album "Only Everything," with the chorus

OK OK, whatever you say.

OK OK, I did it but I didn't.

OK OK, don't make me get crazy.

OK OK OK OK, OK, OK.

To give the interjection an emphatic positive spin, you can add an exclamation point to make it OK! (which happens to be the title of a celebrity magazine, first published in Britain and recently also available in an American edition).

## The Wordhood of OK

The multiplicity of spellings and grammatical uses leads to a more fundamental question: What is OK, anyway? Is it a word? If so, why do we spell it OK, like an abbreviation or acronym? Or is it an abbreviation or acronym? If so, why do we spell it *okay*? And if an abbreviation, what does it stand for?

There's a simple answer, but it's not fully satisfying. Simply stated, OK is an abbreviation, an acronym, technically an initialism—the name of each initial letter sounded—for *all correct*. And yes, the perpetrator knew that the initials were not correct at all.

That's how OK began. But it wasn't long before the ridiculous abbreviation was forgotten and fanciful false explanations of its origin began to emerge in its place. Though the true origin of OK was uncovered and exhaustively demonstrated by Columbia University professor Allen Walker Read nearly fifty years ago, it's safe to say that hardly any one of the many millions who use it nowadays knows what OK originally stood for.

If we consider OK an initialism, it would be in the same class as IOU, FBI, USA, or more recent abbreviations like FAQ, IMHO, ROFL, WTF. If we consider OK a word, it's like *scuba* (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus) or *laser* (light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation).

But either way it's the dunce in the class, the pseudo-ignorant fool with a sign pinned to its back proclaiming its failure to master even the rudiments of proper spelling. It might seem good to let its origin remain obscure so that the grown-up OK can go about its serious business nowadays without evoking laughter. But it's all the more impressive when we recognize its triumphant ascent from humble beginnings.

## The Meaning of OK: The Neutral Affirmer

Amidst its many spellings and grammatical uses, OK manages to retain the essence of the definition it was given at its birth: "all correct." It affirms. An action succeeds, a device works, and a person survives if they are OK. If a document is OK, it is approved. If food is OK, you can eat it. If your car is OK, you can drive it without worry. If a patient in a hospital is OK, you can expect that the person will recover. If you click an OK box on your computer, you approve of what it's doing. If a friend answers "OK" when you propose a change in plans, you know the change is approved.

As long as it is in an either-or situation, OK is as positive as can be. OK is as good as it gets when you accept an offer, confirm an arrival, or proofread a page. Typically in this situation OK is used as an interjection, either by itself or leading off a sentence. Or it's an interjection at the end of a sentence, asking for confirmation. Maybe you're confirming plans with someone:

**OK, we'll meet at 10 a.m. this Saturday at Anne's house on 123 Main Street. Can you be in charge of bringing extra pens?**

**I'm coming home now, OK? OK, see you in a bit.**

Or more simply, an exchange sometimes repeated several times at the end of a discussion,

**OK? OK.**

But even in those situations, OK affirms without evaluating. That plans have been made and accepted is certain. Whether that is welcome or grudging, OK doesn't say. You have to add a qualifying word or phrase to make that clear:

**OK, great! We'll meet at 10 a.m. this Saturday. . . .**

**OK, that will really ruin the weekend, but if we have to, we'll meet at 10 a.m. this Saturday. . . .**

If it's OK, it's all correct. But it's not necessarily wonderful. Or terrible either. About the value of the affirmation, OK just doesn't say. No wonder it is so useful.

In its earliest days, especially during the presidential campaign of 1840, when OK was just a year old, OK could express enthusiasm. Tammany OK Clubs boisterously supported the reelection of incumbent Martin Van Buren. (He still lost.) But the vigor injected into OK by the election of 1840 did not spread to every instance

of its use. Even back then OK had the distinctive quality of today's basic meaning: affirming without evaluating. As far back as 1872, Maximilian Schele de Vere wrote in his book *Americanisms*, "To the question how a convalescent is, the answer comes back: "Oh, he is quite O. K. again!" OK wasn't enough of an affirmation; he needed *quite* as well.

Here are more examples of an OK that isn't so wonderful:

Just these few lines to tell you I got here all O.K. but I left my coat in the ladies dressing room in Los Angeles. (Letter from Josephine Earp to her husband, Wyatt, in 1929)

Well Bud how are you and the folks? O.K. I hope. I am well and getting along fairly well still working in the shirt shop. (Letter from bank robber John Dillinger, in jail, to his brother in 1930)

You can apply the *very* test to see how noncommittal OK is. Most adjectives can express greater intensity with the modifying adverb *very*, as in *very good* or *very satisfying*. But you can't say *very OK*; something is either simply OK or not. The prohibition extends to all modifying adverbs, so we never (or hardly ever) say *extremely OK*, *thoroughly OK*, *moderately OK*, *partly OK*, or the like.

Furthermore, unlike most other adjectives, OK refuses to allow comparatives or superlatives: you can say *better*, *best*, or *more satisfying*, *most satisfying*, but not *OKer*, *OKest*, or *more OK*, *most OK*.

So by itself, OK is value neutral. Whenever there are different degrees of acceptability, OK doesn't point to any particular one. By default, that permits mediocrity as well as excellence. OK is not a sufficiently positive response to questions like "How do I look?" or "What did you think of my dinner?" Used that

way, OK can deflate a balloon—or anything else. Some examples from the Web:

Yes, it was an OK balloon, but I wanted a bigger one.

This vacuum did an OK job. Don't expect superior cleaning with this one.

Went to Peasant last nite and had great food. The decor is OK, the service OK but the food is wonderful!

In terms of the chicken the most we can say is that it was OK. OK meaning not lousy and not spectacular either. It was OK as in good OK but not exceptional that we'd rave about it.

Regarding the relatively disappointing reception for Michael Jackson's 2001 album *Invincible*, a commentator on VH1 said,

In the end, it was an OK record. And nobody was interested in OK for Michael Jackson.

In Oklahoma, the OK Chorale (named for the state) is a serious award-winning barbershop group. But outside Oklahoma, a chorus that puts OK in front of its name makes a point of its mediocrity. The OK Chorale of Seattle, Washington, declares:

The OK Chorale is an ASUW [Associated Students of the University of Washington] Experimental College non-audition choir of folks who love to sing. We sing in 4-part harmony and have experienced singers and uncertain beginners, music readers and non-readers. The rehearsals are fun and no one gets hurt. Just because your grade school music teacher told you to mouth the words is no reason not to sing out now.

Likewise, in Boston there is the OK Chorale, a filk/folk chorus. And what is filk? According to Jordin Kare in *Sing Out!* magazine:

Filkers are, by tradition, extremely bad singers, and many filksongs parody filking itself. The traditional filkish key is Off, and a classic filk chorus starts, “So belt out whatever note suits you / The rest will join in, each one in his own key. . . .”

How negative OK can become is illustrated by one of the Nine Most Widely Used Words by Women on David Tan’s website:

(6) That’s Okay: This is one of the most dangerous statements a woman can make to a man. *That’s okay* means she wants to think long and hard before deciding how and when you will pay for your mistake.

### Another Meaning: The Lecturer’s OK

Carmody clears her throat. She says, “Stay right where you are, please. Stop.” Her voice is loud enough for them to hear, but it is not demanding.

The young woman reaches out on each side of her, grabbing a hand of each of the men. Her lips move.

Carmody thinks the girl said, “Okay.” She imagines the word in her head and decides that the girl didn’t mean “okay” as in “good.” She meant “okay” as in “now.”

The trio begins to move forward. . . . (Stephen White, *The Siege* [2009], 124)

This example from a novel reflects what many of us do in conversation: use OK as a “structural marker,” not so much to affirm as to introduce, punctuate, or conclude what we have to say. In

some people's speech OK even serves as a filler word, equivalent to *you know like, uh, or um*. Speakers use fillers to avoid silence while they are thinking of what to say next, because silence would invite interruption.

One frequent modern use of OK is what Harry Levin and Deborah Gray called "the lecturer's OK," as in, "OK. The final study I'm going to talk about had to do with. . . ." It's a natural spin-off from the simple affirmative interjection at the start of a sentence, the OK of "OK, I'll meet you there in ten minutes." We are so used to beginning a sentence with that interjection that it easily is picked up to introduce a new topic or just call for our attention. Indeed, sometimes it calls to attention the speaker more than the listener; some people will say OK to themselves as they review points they want to make. (Or they may say *all right*, the closest synonym of OK, as Erik Schlee recently pointed out.)

### The Old Philosophy of OK: Making It Work

Alexis de Tocqueville, writing around the time of the birth of OK, could make the argument that Americans have no philosophy. They are too pragmatic; they just go about their business.

Perhaps so. But if there is an American philosophy, it could be argued that it is simply OK.

That OK should embody a philosophy seems, at first glance, absurd. Two letters born of a joke and used for practical purposes hardly make a view of life or a guiding principle. In fact, to this day formal philosophical discourse, like all formal discourse, generally avoids using OK at all.

But it could be argued that OK is the American philosophy, expressing in two letters our pragmatism, our efficiency, our concern to get things accomplished by hook or crook. We don't insist



that everything be perfect; OK is good enough, and much better than not OK.

It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government, except for everything else. Similarly, OK is the worst way of getting along, except for everything else. As Tim Gunn says, make it work! With OK, it does. In the words of the moral of a short story by humorist George Ade, one of the popularizers of OK early in the twentieth century:

**Any System is O.K. if it finally Works Out.**

### The New Philosophy of OK: I'm OK—You're OK

Beginning in the 1960s, and thanks to that one famous OK quotation, another philosophy of OK began to spread. It was one of tolerance and acceptance, as in these recent postings on the Web:

**It's OK to wear what you want.**

**It's OK to choose melodies where only a line or two are immediately singable by the congregation.**

**It's OK to choose not to vaccinate your kids.**

**It's OK not to have a child. It's OK to adopt or foster. It's OK to make choices your mother won't understand.**

**If you don't know what you want to major in, you are not alone. Many freshmen and sophomores haven't picked a major yet. And guess what? That's OK.**

It would be a mistake to claim that OK caused the American philosophies of pragmatism in the nineteenth century and tolerance

in the twentieth. But OK has become an expression of both—a concise, poignant, and constant reminder.

OK as a touchstone for tolerance goes back to that best-selling book published in 1967: *I'm OK, You're OK* by Thomas Harris. The book was about the kind of psychology known as transactional analysis, first popularized by Eric Berne's 1964 book *Games People Play*. The particulars of transactional analysis have faded from public awareness, but the simplified message conveyed by Harris's title thrives as a basis for present-day tolerance of diversity and hence acceptance of self. Thanks to that title, the two letters OK have acquired the power to make us feel good about ourselves, deserving or not.

That's relatively new territory for OK. It was around for more than a century before Harris's book gave it a new spin. And *I'm OK, You're OK* couldn't have happened to an ordinary word. But OK is anything but ordinary in its form and in its history.

## The OK Taboo

*O.K.* (or *OK* or *okay*) is widely used on every level of speech and on all levels of writing except the stodgiest. Unless you are taking freshman English, you can use it freely.

—*Merriam-Webster's Concise Dictionary of English Usage*

OK has so many oddities that it is hard to tell which is the oddest. But a leading candidate for oddest, surely, is the taboo against using OK, or even its more conventional respelling *okay*, in formal discourse.

When OK first appeared, it must have seemed not quite suitable for polite company. It wasn't sacrilegious or obscene, like certain other four-letter words that even nowadays are banned

from broadcast. But it did have low associations, with people (purely hypothetical) whose knowledge of spelling was so poor that they would actually spell “all correct” *oll korreect*, and also with the rowdy Tammany ruffians of the OK Clubs in the 1840 election.

It had the stigma of slang, not for what it meant or how it was pronounced but because it was a deliberately blatant, stupid misspelling. As such, it was attributed, in jest or otherwise, to ignorant people, to be avoided by those who wanted to be considered cultured.

Whatever the reason, OK never made it to the pages of most of the better nineteenth-century authors. It's not surprising that you won't find OK in the works of, say, Henry James. But it's not even used by Mark Twain and Bret Harte, who wrote about low characters and used their slang. And when OK slipped once into the works of Henry David Thoreau and Louisa May Alcott, it was removed in subsequent editions.

That's no longer the case. The dialogue used by many authors of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries freely includes OK. And though it has a lengthy entry in the recent *Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, few people nowadays think of it as slang. Nevertheless, despite its ubiquity, it remains strictly excluded from whole genres and many books.

You will look in vain through the inaugural addresses of the presidents of the United States, even as informal a president as George W. Bush, for a single instance of OK. Similarly, you can page through volume after volume of scholarly publications without turning up an OK, except in reports of conversations.

To take a more extreme example, consider the Bible. In more than three-quarters of a million words, OK doesn't show up even once in most English versions.

You wouldn't find OK in the original Hebrew and Greek, of course. Nor could OK have appeared in the King James Version, published in 1611, more than two hundred years before the invention of OK. But there are now many contemporary English translations, including ones in colloquial language, and they too avoid OK.

There's one exception, the colloquial translation called *The Message*. But even it has only one OK from the entire Hebrew Bible and only one, repeated once, from the New Testament, both in dialogue:

“I don't care; let me run.” “Okay,” said Joab, “run.” So Ahimaaz ran. . . . (2 Samuel 18:23)

The voice came a second time: “If God says it's okay, it's okay.” (Acts 10:15)

“Then I heard a voice: ‘Go to it, Peter—kill and eat.’ I said, ‘Oh, no, Master. I've never so much as tasted food that wasn't kosher.’ The voice spoke again: ‘If God says it's okay, it's okay. . . .’” (Acts 11:7)

A more conventional translation of the latter, from the New International Version, is “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

There's no mystery why OK isn't often employed in the Bible. Aside from being insufficiently dignified, it's too neutral. Imagine the story of the Creation in the Hebrew Bible with OK instead of “very good”:

And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was OK. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day. (Genesis 1:31)

## The Presidential OK

Because we hesitate to use OK in formal situations, it's rare to find it in a presidential speech on a serious issue, but it's not impossible. Here are a few examples from Barack Obama's public speaking. He used OK in speaking to schoolchildren on September 8, 2009:

**But the truth is, being successful is hard. You won't love every subject you study. You won't click with every teacher. Not every homework assignment will seem completely relevant to your life right this minute. And you won't necessarily succeed at everything the first time you try.**

**That's OK. Some of the most successful people in the world are the ones who've had the most failures.**

Generally, however, official presidential OKs are few and far between. It is only when speaking informally that OK occurs in the transcripts of President Obama's remarks. Interrupted at a rally on health insurance reform at the University of Maryland on September 17, 2009, he said, according to the official transcript,

**(audience interruption) What's going on, guys? We're doing OK. Relax. Everybody is all right. We're doing fine.  
(Applause)**

And later in that speech:

**You just heard Rachel's story. She's OK right now, she's thriving.**

At a joint press conference with Canadian prime minister Stephen Harper on September 16, 2009, President Obama opened the questioning with this:

**OK. All right, Ben Feller.**

Later that month, finishing a press conference at the G20 summit meeting in Pittsburgh, he used OK to make sure there were no more questions:

**OK? Thank you very much, everybody. I hope you enjoy Pittsburgh.**

### The Word That Shouldn't Have Been Born

OK. Now, think for a moment of a world without OK. By all odds, that should be the world we inhabit. Maybe the oddest thing about OK is its mere existence.

OK wasn't needed. It wasn't animal, vegetable, or mineral, no newly discovered ocelot, okra, or obsidian requiring a name. It wasn't a new product or invention, neither reaping machine nor revolver. It was nothing concrete in need of a label, neither lapdog or laptop. Nor was it an abstract political or philosophical concept like democracy or deconstruction. *All right* was already at hand to express the essential meaning of OK. In short, our language needed OK as much as a fish needs a bicycle, to use a famous comparison.

Before its invention, it would not have appeared on anyone's list of needed words, the list that nowadays includes a term for "brothers and sisters" that isn't as formal as *siblings*, and a gender-neutral personal pronoun to replace *he* or *she*. And yet, when created almost by happenstance, it caught on, better than most creations.

### The Word That Shouldn't Have Lived

As anyone who has tried it knows, inventing a word is no guarantee that anyone else will use it, let alone that it will be enshrined in

dictionaries. And as anyone who has tried it knows, the more conspicuous an invented word, the less likely it is to be taken up into the vocabulary. And OK is, and was, conspicuous.

It's not just that it began as a joke. True, our language has other initialisms like IOU and PDQ, not to mention more modern abbreviations like NIMBY and ROFL. But those are different; their spelling is OK. In contrast, for most of its first seventy years or so, OK was well known to be a blatant misspelling of "all correct."

It's hard enough for a normal-looking word to gain acceptance into our vocabulary, but for such an oddity as OK, the odds would seem to be almost impossible. It doesn't fit the mold of words we admit to the English language. In fact, it breaks the mold.

Words generally come into being by evolution, not special creation. Most new words come from old ones naturally developing new meanings or combining in new ways, rather than from conscious invention. Even experts at inventing new words usually fall flat. As examples of conscious and conspicuous coinage, who could forget humorist Gelett Burgess's *cowcat*, meaning an insignificant person? Or futurist Faith Popcorn's *blanquilized*, meaning a person "so loaded up with tranquilizers that they go through the day in a medicinal fog"? As it turns out, just about everyone has forgotten these artificial coinages, or never used them in the first place.

As a rule, oddities die out. Words conspicuous for their odd shape or for their cleverness rarely last longer than a round of chuckles. We may enjoy them, but we don't adopt them into our vocabulary, just as we wouldn't invite a circus menagerie into our home. And indeed, the numerous equally odd misspelled cousins of newborn OK, expressions like *o.w.* for *all right*, *k.y.* for *no use*, and *n.s.m.g.* for *enough said among gentlemen*, vanished as soon as the short-lived fad for abbreviations faded.

But OK had luck on its side. It managed not just to survive but to flourish in its infancy. And with that strong beginning, in less than a century it developed into America's greatest invention.

## Fertile Soil

OK certainly falls in the category of conspicuous coinage. Where conspicuousness usually dooms a neologism, this most conspicuous word made a virtue of its bizarreness and thrived because of its oddity rather than despite it.

So how did it survive?

Once it was launched, conditions had to be just right for the propagation of OK . . . but they were. OK was able to establish itself because of four unique circumstances in its early years:

1. The fad for joking abbreviations in Boston newspapers of the late 1830s
2. The campaign for reelection of a United States president who happened to come from Kinderhook, New York
3. Former President Andrew Jackson's humble origins
4. The invention of the telegraph

The unlikely coincidence of these four circumstances created the perfect storm that allowed OK to flourish during the nineteenth century, both in practical use and as a marginalized slang term. It remained for the early twentieth century to rescue OK from the margin so that it could be used as widely as it is today. Perhaps the key impetus for that modern development was the almost universal amnesia about the true origins of OK that took place early in the twentieth century. With the source of OK forgotten, each ethnic group and tribe could claim the



honor of having ushered it into being from an expression in their native language. With pride in OK thus replacing embarrassment about using it, OK settled into its current respectable maturity.

That's how it is today. The next chapter tells how it began.