

**OXFORD ADVANCED LEARNER'S CD-ROM DICTIONARY**

**reviewed by Jarek Krajka**

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**Publisher:** Oxford University Press, with TEXTware A/S, Copenhagen, 2000.

**Product type:** electronic dictionary

**Language:** English

**Level:** intermediate to advanced, adult

**Media format:** CD-ROM

**Operating System:** Windows 95, 98, NT, 2000.

**Hardware requirements:** Windows CD-ROM IBM PC or fully compatible, 133 MHz processor or above, 32 MB RAM, 30 MB free space on hard drive, SVGA monitor (800x600 screen resolution capable of displaying thousands of colours), Windows-compatible 24x CD-ROM drive, Microsoft mouse or compatible, optional Sound Blaster sound card or compatible, headphones or speakers, a microphone. Earlier version (ISBN 0194314677) available for lower specification machines.

**Supplementary software:** Acrobat Reader 4.05, HotKey, Windows Media Player, Plugins

**Description**

The CD-ROM is based on the well-known Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. It includes over 80,000 references, with word entries both with British and American English pronunciation, over 4,500 new words and meanings, and examples written especially for the CD-ROM version.

Apart from the definition section, the programme is also equipped with 3-D Search, or an interactive vocabulary builder, which allows the user to see a semantic map of words related to the word in question.

Definitions are illustrated by 680 interactive pictures with 9000 "hot spots," allowing to click on a part of the picture to see and hear the word it stands for. Clickable pictures can be zoomed in to get a closer look at details. It needs to be noted that among pictures we can find high-quality video sequences illustrating verbs relating to facial expressions, and in this way

the difference between "to blink" and "to wink" becomes clear after having seen video with the actions. Also, there are excellent pictures of people performing different actions (e.g., cooking, boarding a plane or leap-frogging), and by clicking on different parts of the picture one may learn the vocabulary connected with a specific action.

Also, the dictionary contains full-colour maps of different parts of the world (the British Isles, Central Europe, Asia, Australia, the Americas, Western Europe), with geographical names such as names of cities, rivers, islands, seas, oceans, and it is possible to hear and practise the pronunciation of even the most strange-looking ones.

Apart from these features, the dictionary also encompasses an "Exercises" section, where learners of English can enjoy truly challenging drag-and-drop vocabulary exercises in nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, idioms and phrasal verbs. The programme identifies the user when starting exercise practice by asking to choose an existing login name or to introduce a new one, and in this way one programme can be used effectively by different students (e.g., in a school computer lab), by keeping a separate score for each user.

Similar to exercises is a "Games" section, where learners can practise their knowledge of words and phrases in three games: crossword, idiom blaster and idiom finder. The last two are competitive games where up to three learners can play at the same time, and they involve guessing a phrase after choosing the smallest number of letters (similar to the idea of a quiz show "The Wheel of Fortune").

"Extras," another section of the dictionary, contains such additions as a guide to the dictionary (phonetic symbols, pronunciation advice, weak and strong forms, stress), topic pages on computing, cooking, health, musical instruments and sport, language study pages (linking words, collocations, nouns and adjectives, verbs, verbs used with clauses, idioms, letter writing, writing a CV or a resumé, new words, numbers, punctuation and the language of literary criticism). Both topic pages and language study pages are in the form of Acrobat Reader .pdf files, and by double clicking on the instruction the appropriate file is instantaneously opened. Next, among the appendices to the dictionary, we can find the spelling, phonetic transcript and pronunciation recording of female and male names, countries with country adjectives and nationality names, towns and cities of the British Isles, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand and irregular verb forms. Finally, there comes the listing of over 3,000 words used in the definitions of the dictionary.

In the crucial part of the programme, the A-Z dictionary, the user may find a definition of a given word, hear its pronunciation (both British English and American English), see examples of use and idioms in which this word appears. If someone does not understand a word from

the definition, he may double-click on it and a dictionary lookup window with its definition appears, which makes it much easier to use this dictionary than a traditional book one. Also, the pronunciation of a given word may be practised, first by listening to its recording, then recording one's own, and finally playing it to compare with the model. Entries can be annotated by the user, which means that one's own comments to specific words may be added to entries. Also, entries can be copied to the word-processing programme, either by clicking on a "Copy to WP" icon, or by highlighting the text, copying and pasting it. Also, the programme allows to print most of its parts, namely entries, exercises, topic study and language study pages. Unfortunately, it is not possible to print out pictures, maps, 3-D Search pictures. The next feature of the programme is that it is well-integrated with other programmes, and it allows instant look-up of words from the Web browser, e-mail message, a word-processing software or any Windows program. The dictionary gives the chance to find a word thanks to advanced search procedure, where the user may specify the type of word needed (headword, idiom, phrasal verb, etc.), and set one of filters, namely part-of-speech filter (where we can choose parts of speech for our wanted word), register filter (old-fashioned, slang, taboo, etc.), geographical filter (British or American English) and assets filter (illustration or video). In this way, the dictionary may serve more sophisticated purposes, such as conducting research on specific parts of speech or getting to know a given register of language.

### **Evaluation**

As for the content, not much is needed here: millions of learners of English have used Hornby's OALD in its various editions, starting with the first one from 1948, and are well-convinced of the friendly and expert advice on words and phrases. No wonder that its electronic version is an extremely authoritative and useful reference tool, as the user can look up a word in a matter of a second, hear its pronunciation, see it in a picture or on video, read the example, get the instant explanation of any unknown word from the explanation itself. When compared with the traditional dictionary, a CD-ROM gives much faster and easier access to entries, and its good integration with other software and the Internet allows the user to use it in all environments and at all times, without wasting time for looking up words.

It needs to be said that this programme is not only a dictionary, but also a map atlas, grammar reference book, picture book, vocabulary practice book, and much more. This is indeed the tendency among electronic dictionaries nowadays (Sobkowiak 2001), as they cease to become reference tools only, but give the learner a substantial amount of practice and assistance in

learning the language. The technology of today, with its enormous storage capacity of a CD-ROM drive, graphic user interface, powerful machines, makes it possible to exploit the power of multimedia, by including pictures, videos, graphics, and sounds to aid comprehension.

The programme is clear and easy to use, with intuitive icons and well-known commands. It is easy to install, and once installed it starts with the Autorun function. OALD has quite an extensive help section, which assists the user in every possible situation.

As for the speed of the programme and reliability of operation, it needs to be mentioned that it does have substantial hardware requirements, and although my PC conformed to them, too little RAM memory made it quite slow to work. Also, it happened to crash and stall quite frequently, especially during loading videos, which was rather annoying considering the fact that a dictionary is usually used alongside with a word-processing document, and a crash caused by the programme may result in the loss of data or document. Thus, it is advised to close any other applications running in the background (anti-virus programmes, system doctor applications), or to use it on machines with at least 64 MB of RAM memory.

As regards platform compatibility, it is intended only for IBM PC-compatible machines, and running only on Windows operating system, which seems to discriminate against Mac and Linux users.

### **Recommendation**

To sum up, it must be said that despite substantial hardware requirements and occasional crashes, *Oxford Advanced Learner's CD-ROM Dictionary* is a product worth recommending for a variety of reasons. It combines the expertise and accuracy of the book version with the fast access and multimedia dimension of a CD-ROM programme, providing an extremely effective reference tool. Also, it is possible to learn with the programme, and not just to look up unknown words, due to its pronunciation practice, 3-D Search, games, pictures, exercises, and topical study pages, which can be used to practise and revise vocabulary, master the English sound system, gain deeper understanding of grammar. Thus, although the dictionary is fairly expensive when compared with other electronic dictionaries present on the market, it needs to be emphasised that it is really value for money. To conclude, I heartily agree with the advertising slogan printed on the CD box, that "no learner of English can afford to be without this resource." I certainly can't.

### **Reference**

Sobkowiak, W. (1999) *Pronunciation in machine-readable dictionaries*.

## ***MICROGRADE***

**reviewed by J. Perry Christensen**

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**Authors:** Chariot Software Group, 123 Camino De La Reina, West Building, San Diego, CA 92108, <http://www.chariot.com/micrograde.html>

**Product type:** grading program

**Language:**

**Media format:**

**Operating system:** Windows 95, 98 & NT; Macintosh System 7.0 or higher

**Hardware requirements:** Windows 95, 98 & NT: Memory: 8MB minimum, 16MB recommended; Disk Space: 4MB minimum, 8MB recommended; Internet Browsers: Netscape: 4.6 and higher or Internet Explorer: 4.0 and higher. Macintosh System 7.0 or higher: Memory: 4MB minimum, 8MB recommended; Disk Space: 4MB minimum, 8MB recommended; Internet Browsers: Netscape: 4.6 and higher or Internet Explorer: 4.0 and higher.

### **Overview**

MicroGrade is a grading program for teachers of students at any level. It is much easier and more flexible to use than a spreadsheet. Grades can be calculated using total points or weighted categories. The software has an excellent menu system which is nearly self-explanatory.

An added bonus is that the software can be configured to generate individual grade reports that can be printed, emailed, or posted on the Internet. Internet reports are protected by an individualized user ID and password. That way, students can view their progress at anytime.

### **Description**

The program contains the follow recording and reporting features:

- Grade Standards
- Categories and Assignments

- Student Records including a place for name, ID, phone, email, and notes
  - Class Roster
  - Student Summary
  - Dropped/Excluded Students
  - Class Standards
  - Overall Class Grades
  - Grades by Assignment
  - Gradebook
  - Statistics
  - Worksheet
  - Free Form reports
  - Attendance by Student
  - Attendance by Day
  - Attendance Grid
  - Seating Chart
  - Web Tutorial
- (Chariot Software Group)

MicroGrade is easy to set up. First student names are input or imported if already in an electronic format. Next the teacher decides what categories to create such as participation, homework, quizzes, and tests. The categories can be weighted (i.e. 10% participation, 20% homework . . .) or a total point method could be used. After that, the teacher stipulates the grading breakdowns (i.e. 93% = A, 90% = A-, 87% = B+, and so forth). Both grade names and percents can be manipulated.

Assignments are easy to add and scores easily recorded. There is a menu to excuse students from assignments, mark work late, and if desired, drop the lowest assignment or two in each category. Class rosters can be sorted by name, grade, or ID number.

The best part of using Micrograde is communication with students. The email, web, or printed reports keep both students and teacher informed. Students are seldom surprised by a final grade since they have been able to track their progress throughout the semester.

### **Other Features**

- Class sizes of up to 480 students
- Tracks up to 128 assignments and 16 categories per class

- Create grade scales using letters, symbols or numbers
- Calculates grades by total points, weighted percent and/or relative weights automatically
- Low grades can be highlighted in different colors
- Mark assignments excused or incomplete
- Changed scores are flagged
- Grading period option for combining terms for final grade calculation
- Maintain student notes and comments
- Password protected class files
- Attendance tracking and reporting
- Built-in seating chart
- Import student rosters or export final grades for use with your school-wide computer system or administrative software packages such as SASI, OSIRIS, and Skyward
- Transfer student information between class files
- Cross platform (Macintosh-Windows) data files
- Extensive help menu with on-screen index and links to an Internet Resource Center (Chariot Software Group)

### **Advantages**

Communication with students, email, reports, Internet posting

Show student strengths, weaknesses, and proficiency

Built-in grade calculations and formulas

Statistical reports and graphs give pictures of overall grades and individual assignments

Site licenses can be purchased for whole elementary schools or individual university departments and allow for teachers to load the software on their home computers at no additional cost

A simple to use help menu gives step-by-step explanations. Additional help and a more detailed manual can be found online.

### **Disadvantages**

There is no connection between attendance and grades. In other words, it would be nice if one could make a participation category and by marking attendance, it would automatically feed into the participation grade.

Assignments marked late are not automatically lowered by a certain percent. For example, it would be better if the teacher could set up the program to automatically lower assignments marked late by 10% or so.

Assignments in one category cannot be cut and pasted into another category, they would have to be deleted and then re-inputted into the new category.

### **Recommendation**

This program has all the essential elements for managing grades. It is easy to learn and use. After using Micrograde, it is a wonder how grades were kept without it. This program is worth buying for teachers who have sufficient access to a computer. A strong recommendation is given for those teachers or schools whose students all have access to a computer and individual email accounts.

### **Demos available:**

Downloaded from <http://www.chariot.com/micrograde.html>