

From the printed dictionary to the CD-ROM

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Reference books such as dictionaries have in common two characteristics that stand in sharp contrast to other printed books like novels or essays:

- There is a huge quantity of material (an average dictionary may contain the same volume of text as 50 or more medium-sized novels).
- The book is meant to be read by the same user repeatedly, but only for a very limited part of its content each time (while the traditional novel is generally read only once and from cover to cover).

As dictionaries are used in connection with the writing of texts and as texts are more and more written with the help of word processors, dictionary entries are therefore data which should be accessed electronically.

Until recently, the limitations of storage in microcomputers did not provide enough space to accommodate the entire text of such reference books. A floppy disk of 360 kilobytes was totally inadequate to cope with a 40-megabyte dictionary, and this even well exceeded the capacity of an average hard disk.

So the first so-called «electronic dictionaries» were in fact a mere list of headwords or word forms to be used as crude spelling checkers or as rudimentary dictionaries of synonyms.

With the development of CD-ROM technology offering storage capacity of nearly 600 megabytes, on-line access to an entire dictionary or even a whole range of dictionaries has now become a reality, and several monolingual and bilingual dictionaries are now sold on CD-ROM.

The search procedures of the electronic medium enable the computer user to get rid of the sequential order imposed by the alphabetical presentation on the printed page and to focus immediately on the desired entry. The order in which these entries appear on the screen is directed by the logical progress of the user's thought processes and this makes the CD-ROM a very powerful and convenient tool.

But however useful they may be, such products may well fall short of users' expectations.

Dictionary users think that each dictionary entry is a kind of short story in itself: the life and adventures of the headword told by the editor. In fact, the printed page contains elements of information about the headword which just happen to be placed side by side for the convenience of consultation but which bear no direct relation to each other. A user is hardly ever interested in all the components of the entry but will only look for one item of information at a time:

* Information about the spelling: How does one write the word? Are there alternative spellings? Is there a hyphen? Is there a feminine or a plural form?

* Information about grammar: What is the gender of this noun? Is it a transitive verb? What preposition is to be used?

- * Information about pronunciation.
- * Information about register: Is it archaic and/or colloquial?
- * Information about synonyms, antonyms, derivatives.
- * Information about meaning: Is it a polysemous word?
- * Beyond the isolated word, information about phrases and idioms which are grouped under the headword for convenience but which may have no direct semantic relation with it.

All information which is not relevant to the specific need of the user is parasitic and causes a linguistic «noise». Yet all has to appear sequentially on the printed page so as to give an exhaustive coverage of all aspects of the headword.

Let us take a practical example —at random—: the word **CONFÉRENCE**, taken from the French monolingual dictionary: *le GRAND ROBERT de la langue française*.

CONFÉRENCE [kɔfərɑ̃s] n. f. — 1464; lat. *conferentia* «confrontation, réunion», de *conferre*. → Conférer.

★ I. Vx. Action de rapprocher des objets pour les comparer. ⇒ **Collation**. *La conférence de plusieurs textes*.

★ II. Mod. ♦ 1. Conversation, discussion à caractère officiel ou solennel. ⇒ **Entretien**; et (am) **palabre**, **parlotte**. *Avoir une conférence avec qqn. Tenir conférence*. ⇒ **Conférer**; négocier. **Conférence rompue, renouée**. **Conférence secrète**. ⇒ **Conciliabule**.

Enfin, après plusieurs discours, voici où s'est réduit le résultat de notre conférence.
MOLIÈRE, *les Fourberies de Scapin*, II, 5.

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Ils avaient avec le cuisinier d'un petit restaurant réputé d'interminables conférences sur la composition du menu et la confection des plats.

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PROLST, *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs*, Pl., t. I, p. 682.

♦ 2. Réunion de travail (dans une entreprise). *Être en conférence*. ⇒ **Réunion (en)**.

Quand je leur téléphone, ils sont en Conférence ou ils reçoivent quelqu'un, et quand ils me reçoivent ils ne cessent de téléphoner.

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Pierre DANINOS, *Un certain Monsieur Blot*, p. 21

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(...) il me serait difficile de dire avec exactitude le nombre de conférences auxquelles j'ai été convoqué depuis mon entrée dans la maison. Six mille, approximativement. Ces six mille conférences, d'une durée moyenne d'une heure, n'ayant le plus souvent pour résultat que d'inciter les participants à repasser la question, sous une autre forme, lors d'une nouvelle conférence à l'échelon supérieur, on peut évaluer le temps légal perdu à près de trois ans.

Pierre DANINOS, *Un certain Monsieur Blot*, p. 30

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♦ 3. Assemblée de hautes personnalités discutant d'un sujet important. ⇒ **Réunion, congrès, conseil**. **Conférence politique, diplomatique, internationale**. ⇒ **Pourparler**. **Conférence pour la paix** (→ **Apposer**, cit. 2). **Conférence à quatre**. — **Conférence au sommet**, = **Sommet**. **Participants à une conférence internationale**. ⇒ **Conférent**.

(...) on rêve d'une Conférence où les cinq grandes puissances maritimes et pacifiques (...) ne se préoccuperaient que de définir les forces navales nécessaires pour sauvegarder l'ordre, la tranquillité et la justice dans le monde. Malheureusement ce n'est pas ce que nous suppose la Conférence de Londres

J. BAIVILLE, *la France*, 21 janv. 1930, t. II, p. 249.

Réunion de personnes discutant un sujet en commun. **Conférence religieuse, théologique**. — **Conférence de médecins**. ⇒ **Consultation**. **Conférence d'étudiants**, sous la direction d'un maître de conférences. **Conférence de droit**. **Conférences du stage des avocats**. — **Conférence d'une société savante, conférence scientifique**. ⇒ **Colloque, congrès, table (ronde)**.

Conférences de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, société pieuse de bienfaisance.

♦ 4. (1680, théol.). Discours, causerie (où l'on traite en public une question littéraire, artistique, scientifique, politique). ⇒ *Causeurie, exposé; communication. L'une série de conférences sur les pays étrangers. Conférence gratuite. Conférence contradictoire Faire une conférence. Personne qui donne une conférence.* ⇒ *Conférencier. Conférence accompagnée de projections, d'un film. Salle de conférences.*

Monsieur Régis, étant parti de Paris avec une espèce de mission de son maître, alla établir la nouvelle philosophie à Toulouse par des conférences publiques.

FONTENELLE. Régis, in LITTRÉ.

Spécial. Discours sur un sujet religieux. *Les conférences de Notre-Dame. Les conférences de Massillon.*

♦ 5. (1752). Leçon (dans certaines écoles, dans les facultés). ⇒ *Cours. Conférences publiques. Conférence magistrale.* — Loc. *Salle de conférences. Maître* de conférences.*

♦ 6. CONFÉRENCE DE PRESSE : réunion où une ou plusieurs personnalités s'adressent aux journalistes et répondent à leurs questions. *La conférence de presse donnée hier soir par le chef de l'État.*

Hier soir, conférence de presse télévisée du général de Gaulle.

F. MALLIAC, le Nouveau Bloc-notes 1958-1960, p. 118

DÉR. *Conférencier.*

The entry contains:

- * the headword;
- * the phonetics;
- * the part of speech (n.f. = nom féminin);
- * the etymology (the word appeared in 1464);
- * the definitions of the various senses;
- * phrases;
- * synonyms;
- * citations from French authors;
- * a derivative at the end.

The whole entry contains some 72 lines, i.e. three times what a normal 24-line screen can accommodate. This would inevitably result in a clumsy unsightly piece of text being scrolled up and down, lacking the elegance of the layout on the printed page. Most of the typographical distinctions which help structuring the printed entry would be poorly rendered. The cluttered screen would soon get unmanageable.

How can all this information be sorted out and made usable?

This paper purports to illustrate all these points by showing practical examples taken from the actual creation of an electronic dictionary on CD-ROM. The experiment was carried out by a team of lexicographers, phoneticians and computer scientists using the typesetting tape of *le GRAND ROBERT*.

The basic assumption behind the work has been that merely putting the printed text on the screen was a very poor way of exploiting the power of the computer. The lexicographic material has been used as raw material. It had both to be kept unaltered for content but heavily processed in its form. The exhaustive coverage of the French language described in the nine volumes of the dictionary was so far reserved for language experts, writers and educated readers. The aim has been to enable the most unsophisticated user (i.e. the majority of the public) to find the answer to his or her questions quickly and efficiently.

The following screen printouts will illustrate the treatment of our example: **CONFÉRENCE** through the various phases of the search procedures.

At the start of the search, users are placed in front of a screen which contains the beginning of the headword list:

The screenshot shows a software interface for a French dictionary. On the left, there is a large empty rectangular input field. To its right is a vertical list of words, each preceded by a small letter indicating its part of speech (n. for noun, m. for masculine, adj. for adjective, etc.). The list includes: A n. m., À- (1.), À- (2.), à (I.) prép., à (II.) prép., à (III.) prép., à (IV.) prép., à (V.) prép., AA (1.), AA (2.), AA (3.) n. m., AB-, ABACA n. m., ABACULE n. m., ABAISSABLE adj., ABAISSANT adj., ABAISSANTE adj., ABAISSE n. f.

F1 Aide F2 Joker F3 Orth. F4 Conj. F5 Copie Esc Sortie

Thanks to the arrow keys, they can move up or down the list. They can also start keying in the beginning of the word. As the letters are keyed in, the word list moves in the right-hand window and the cursor is placed on the spelling which is closest:

The screenshot shows the same software interface after the user has typed "CONFÉR" into the input field. The list of words has shifted to show entries starting with "CONFÉR". The visible words are: CONFÉDÉRATIVE adj., CONFÉDÉRAUX adj., CONFÉDÉRER v. tr., CONFÉRER v., CONFÉRENCE n. f., CONFÉRENCIER n., CONFÉRENCIÈRE n., CONFÉRÉNT n. m., CONFÉRER v., CONFERVER n. f., CONFESSE n. f., CONFESSER v. tr., CONFESSEUR n. m., CONFÉSSION n. f., CONFÉSSIONNAL n. m., CONFÉSSIONNAUX n. m., CONFÉSSIONNEL adj., CONFÉSSIONNELLE adj., CONFETTI n. m., CONFIAНCE n. f., CONFIAНT adj., CONFIAНTE adj.

F1 Aide F2 Joker F3 Orth. F4 Conj. F5 Copie Esc Sortie

By hitting the ENTER key, users are placed before an abridged version of the entry, which shows the main semantic divisions together with their principal definition. It is usually contained within a single screen, which permits a quick overview of the essential constituents:

CONFÉRENCE [kōfeRās] n. f.

I. Vx. Action de rapprocher des objets pour les comparer.

II. Mod

- ♦ 1. Conversation, discussion à caractère officiel ou solennel.
- ♦ 2. Réunion de travail (dans une entreprise).
- ♦ 3. Assemblée de hautes personnalités discutant d'un sujet important.
- ♦ 4. (1680. Théol.). Discours, causerie (où l'on traite en public une question littéraire, artistique, scientifique, politique).
- ♦ 5. (1752). Leçon (dans certaines écoles, dans les facultés).
- ♦ 6. CONFÉRENCE DE PRESSE : réunion où une ou plusieurs personnalités s'adressent aux journalistes et répondent à leurs questions.

MOT Abrégé Détaillé Étymologie Citations Syn./Ana. Hom./Dér.

The bottom line shows a menu. By pressing the corresponding keys, further information can be accessed in windows which open and can be closed by the ESCAPE key. The etymology can thus be looked up:

CONFÉRENCE [kōfeRās] n. f.

I. Vx. Action de rapprocher des objets pour les comparer.

II. Mod

- ♦ 1. Conversation, discussion à caractère officiel ou solennel.

1464; lat. conferentia «confrontation, réunion», de conferre. → Conférer.

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s'adressent aux journalistes et répondent à leurs questions.

MOT Abrégé Détaillé Étymologie Citations Syn./Ana. Hom./Dér.

The synonyms, which are scattered throughout the entry on the printed page have here been grouped in one window. These synonyms and related words make up an analogical database containing over one million words:

CONFÉRENCE [kōfeRās] n. f.

- I => Réunion, congrès, conseil
 => Pourparler
 => Sommet
 => Conférent.
 => Consultation
 => Colloque, congrès, table (ronde).
 => Causerie, exposé; communication

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s'adressent aux journalistes et répondent à leurs questions.

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The citations are grouped in another window. The rest of the text can be scrolled up with the arrow key.

CONFÉRENCE [kōfeRās] n. f.

- I. Vx. Action de rapprocher des objets pour les comparer.
 II. Mod

1 Enfin, après plusieurs discours, voici où s'est réduit la résultat de notre conférence.
 MOLIÈRE, les Fourberies de Scapin, II, 5.

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1.1 Ils avaient avec le cuisinier d'un petit restaurant réputé d'interminables conférences sur la composition du menu et la confection des plats.
 PROUST, à l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs, Pl., t. I, p. 682.

1.2 Quand je leur téléphone, ils sont en conférence ou ils reçoivent quelqu'un, et quand ils me reçoivent ils ne cessent de téléphoner.
 Pierre DANINOS, Un certain Monsieur Blot, p. 21.

MOT	Abrégé	Détaillé	Étymologie	Citations	Syn./Ana.	Hom./Dér.
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The search can be made on the whole entry or on each semantic division in order to get the corresponding subset of information. It is also possible to access the full (detailed) version of each semantic division. Here is the detailed version of meaning number 3:

CONFÉRENCE [köfeRäs] n. f.

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♦ 3. Assemblée de hautes personnalités discutant d'un sujet important. => Réunion, congrès, conseil. Conférence politique, diplomatique, internationale. => Pourparler. Conférence pour la paix (~ Apposer, cit. 2). Conférence à quatre. - Conférence au sommet. => Sommet. Participants à une conférence internationale. => Conférent.

[2]

Réunion de personnes discutant un sujet en commun. Conférence religieuse, théologique. - Conférence de médecins. => Consultation. Conférence d'étudiants, sous la direction d'un maître de conférences. Conférence de droit. Conférences du stage des avocats. - Conférence d'une société savante, conférence scientifique. => Colloque, congrès, table (ronde). Conférences de Saint-Vincent-de-Paul, société pieuse de bienfaisance.

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SENS Abrégé Détaillé Étymologie Citations Syn./Ana. Hom./Dér.

In this instance, the citation which was present in the printed version has only been indicated by its reference number [2] so as not to make the screen look too complex. By hitting a key, the full text of it can of course be called up immediately. By hitting another key, the detailed version of the whole entry can appear and be scrolled up. At every step of the search, the program lets the users choose the degree of complexity they want. This creates a dynamic interactive look-up. Users have only to blame themselves if what they are getting is too much for what they can cope with!

As the text is being read, further investigations can be carried out by placing the cursor on any letter of a word in a definition, a citation or a set of synonyms and by pressing the ENTER key. The abridged version of the chosen word immediately appears on the screen. The operation can be repeated indefinitely. Users are therefore free to wander through the tens of thousands of entries of the dictionary without reverting to the headword list search.

Other modules have been implemented. They provide new means of accessing the information, which were unthinkable in the printed version.

The classical problem of finding words whose spelling is not known has been dealt with thanks to the development of a phonetic tool. It automatically converts the string of letters which is entered at the keyboard into its phonetic transcriptions. This phonetic transcription is then matched against the phonetic transcriptions of all the dictionary entries which have been stored in a file. When one match is found (or several matches in cases of homophony), the correct spelling is displayed:

KHONFAIRANSS

KHMER adj. et n.
KHMÈRE adj. et n.
KHODJA n. m.
KHÔL n. m.
KHOTBA n. f.
KIBBOUTZ n. m.
KIBBOUTZIQUE adj.
KIBBOUTZNIK n. invar.
KIBITKA n. f.
CONFÉRENCE n. f.
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KICHENOTTE n. f.
KICK n. m.
KICK-STARTER n. m.
KID n. m.
KIDNAPPAGE n. m.
KIDNAPPER v. tr.
KIDNAPPEUR n.
KIDNAPPEUSE n.
KIDNAPPING n. m.
KIEF (1.) n. m.

F1 Aide F2 Joker F3 Orth. F4 Conj. F5 Copie Esc Sortie

Other searches can be made on the headword list using the usual wild cards (where ? stands for one unknown letter and * stands for any string of unknown letters). The following screen displays in a split second the thirteen French entries ending in «*FÉRENCE», thus performing the function of a dictionary of rhymes and of a dictionary of suffixes:

*FÉRENCE

PERBLANTERIE n. f.
FERBLANTIER n. m.
FER-CHAUD n. m.
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APPÉRENCE n. f.
CIRCONFÉRENCE n. f.
CONFÉRENCE n. f.
CORÉFÉRENCE n. f.
DÉFÉRENCE n. f.
DIFFÉRENCE n. f.
EFFÉRENCE n. f.
ÉQUIDIFFÉRENCE n. f.
INDIFFÉRENCE n. f.
INFÉRENCE n. f.
INTERFÉRENCE n. f.
PRÉFÉRENCE n. f.
RÉFÉRENCE n. f.
FERLAMPIILLE n. f.
FERLER v. tr.
FERLOUCHE n. f.
FERMAGE n. m.

F1 Aide F2 Joker F3 Orth. F4 Conj. F5 Copie Esc Sortie

The following screen performs the function of a crossword search on the set of ten-letter words following the pattern «CONF?????E»:

CONF?????E

CONFABULANT adj.
CONFABULANTE adj.
CONFABULATION n. f.
CONFABULER v. intr.
CONFECITION n. f.
CONFECITIONNER v. tr.

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CONFÉRENCE n. f.
CONFIDENCE n. f.
CONFIDENTE n.
CONFISERIE n. f.
CONFISEUSE n.
CONFLEUENCE n. f.
CONFLUENTE (z.) adj.

CONFÉDÉRER v. tr.
CONFER
CONFÉRENCE n. f.
CONFÉRENCIER n.
CONFÉRENCIÈRE n.
CONFÉRENT n. m.
CONFÉREUR v.

F1 Aide F2 Joker F3 Orth. F4 Conj. F5 Copie Esc Sortie

Each French verb takes roughly fifty forms when it is conjugated. This makes a list of some 450,000 forms which can never be mentioned in a printed dictionary. Thanks to an automatic conjugation tool, the entire conjugation of every verb can be displayed in successive windows:

CONFÉRER

CONFÉRENCE n. f.
CONFÉRENCIER n.
CONFÉRENCIÈRE n.
CONFÉRENT n. m.
CONFÉRER v.
CONFERVER n. f.
CONFESSE n. f.
CONFESSER v. tr.
CONFESSEUR n. m.

INDICATIF PRÉSENT	SUBJONCTIF PRÉSENT	IMPÉRATIF PRÉSENT
je confère	q.je confère	confère
tu confères	q.tu confères	
il confère	q.il confère	conférons
ns conférons	q.ns conférons	
vs conférez	q.vs conférez	conférez
ils confèrent	q.ils confèrent	

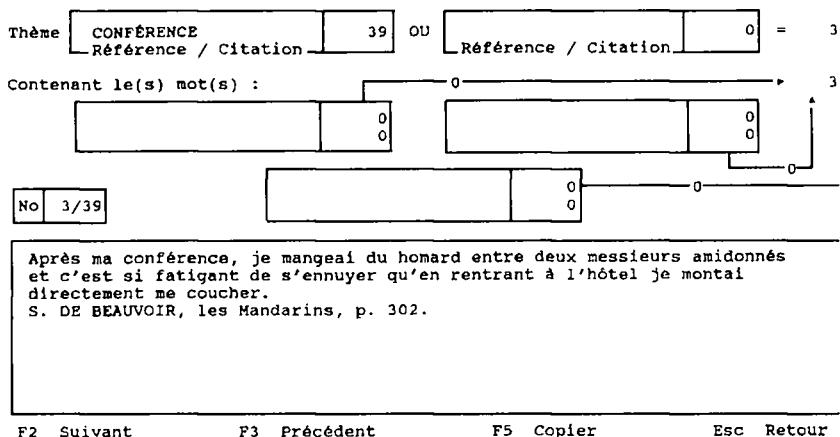
CONFIDENMMENT adv.
CONFIDENCE n. f.
CONFIDENT n.
CONFIDENTE n.

F1 Aide F2 Joker F3 Orth. F4 Conj. F5 Copie Esc Sortie

All this information is accessed directly from within any word processor by hitting the relevant keys. Pieces of a definition or citation can be stored, correct spellings checked and synonyms or conjugated forms chosen to be immediately pasted into the document which is in the process of being written.

Another module has been created to offer users the possibility of searching through the 160,000 citations which are scattered in the text. They have been grouped in a separate file, with the indication of the author and of the title of the work. Thanks to logical operators: **ET - OU - SANS** (AND - OR - WITHOUT) several levels of selection can be made on authors and titles, and restrictions imposed on combinations

of words. Here is one of the 39 instances of the word **CONFÉRENCE** found in the citations. The truth of it is left to everyone's appreciation:



As a concluding remark, may I suggest one of the 1,307 citations by *Jean-Paul SARTRE*, taken from 35 excerpts from *LA NAUSÉE*, which I hope won't be considered as the logical outcome of this presentation:

