

# COMMON ACRONYM WORDS

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As computerized word lists become readily available to the logologist, many of the previously difficult problems that have filled the pages of *Word Ways* become trivial. It is therefore interesting to begin researching problems that cannot be solved with word lists. A dictionary provides four pieces of information about a word: spelling, pronunciation, etymology and meaning. This suggests three types of problems for systematic logological research, in ascending order of difficulty: pronunciation (homophones, refractory rhymes, syllables, etc.), etymology (this article) and meaning (homographs, autonyms, contronyms, etc.). Although these topics have appeared in *Word Ways*, they have not received the kind of systematic treatment accorded spelling.

As a step in the right direction, I now attempt to answer the following question: "What acronyms have become common English words?" I define a common English word to be a word that appears uncapitalized in Merriam-Webster's Ninth Collegiate Dictionary. The Ninth defines an acronym as "a word formed from the initial letter or letters of each of the successive parts or major parts of a compound term." Note that a blend is "a word produced by combining other words or parts of words." Therefore, every acronym is a blend but no vice versa. However, blends usually are constructed from phonemes, while quality acronyms are constructed from initials.

Since I do not yet have access to a computerized dictionary complete with etymologies, and I am too lazy to scan all 160,000 entries in the Ninth, I needed a method. After much experimentation, I noticed that the word "acronym" was coined in 1943. In fact, in the Second Edition of the New International, such words are called "acrostics." This implies that most acronyms were formed since the turn of the century, and can be located by scanning the addenda to the various Merriam-Webster dictionaries. My other method was to ask members of the National Puzzlers League; I received help notably from Eric Albert, Philip Cohen and Murray Pearce.

Entries in the following table include the year in which they first entered the language (according to the Ninth), and the Merriam-Webster dictionary that first contains them. The following symbols are used:

- NI1     New International (1909)
- NI1+    New Words section of the New International (1931)
- NI2     New International, Second Edition (1934)
- NI2+    Addendum section of the Second (1959, same as 1954)

NI3 Third New International (1961)  
 12W 12,000 Words (separately published addendum to the Third, 1986)  
 9C Ninth New Collegiate (1986)

### Quality Acronyms

asdic Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee (1940, NI2+)  
 dew Distant Early Warning (1953, 9C)  
 dopa DihydrOxyPhenylAlanine (1917, NI3)  
 fido Freaks + Irregulars + Defects + Oddities (1966, 12W)  
 laser Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation (1957, NI3)  
 lidar LIght Detection And Ranging (1963, 12W)  
 maser Microwave Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation (1955, NI3)  
 nitinol NiCkel + TIn + Naval Ordnance Laboratory (1968, 12W)  
 radar RAdio Detection And Ranging (ca.1941, NI2+)  
 rem Roentgen Equivalent Man (1947, NI3)  
 scuba Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus (1952, NI3)  
 snafu Situation Normal -- All Fucked (Fouled) Up (ca.1940, NI2+)  
 sofar SOund Fixing And Ranging (1946, NI2+)  
 sonar SOund NAVigation Ranging (1945, NI2+)  
 tepa Tri-Ethylene Phosphor-Amide (1953, 12W)  
 zip Zone Improvement Plan (1963, 12W)

### Blends That Technically Are Also Acronyms

alnico ALuminum + NiCkel + CObalt (1935, NI2+)  
 boff BOx OFFice (1946, NI3)  
 ceramal CERAMic ALloy (ca.1948, NI2+)  
 cermet CERAmic METAl (1948, NI2+)  
 comsymp COMMunist SYMPathizer (ca.1961, 12W)  
 cyborg CYBernetic ORGAnism (ca.1962, 12W)  
 elhi ELementary school + HIgh school (1948, 12W)  
 gox Gaseous OXYgen (1959, 9C)  
 hela HElen LANE (1953, 12W)  
 linac LINear ACcelerator (1950, 12W)  
 loran LONG-RANGE Navigation (ca.1932, NI2+)  
 lox LIquid OXYgen (1923, 9C)  
 mascon MASs CONcentration (1968, 12W)  
 maximin MAXimum + MINimum (1951, 12W)  
 minimax MINimum + MAXimum (1918, 12W)  
 modem MOdulator + DEModulator (ca.1952, 12W)  
 motocross MOTOR + CROSS-country (1951, 12W)  
 napalm NAphtenic and PALMitic acids (1942, NI2+)  
 parsec PARallax SECond (ca.1913, NI1+)  
 selsyn SELf-SYNchronizing (1936, NI2+)  
 shoran SHORt-RANGE Navigation (ca. 1932, NI2+)  
 silvex SILVa + EXterminator (1961, 12W)  
 sitcom SITuation COMedy (1965, 12W)  
 teleran TELEvision-RADar Navigation (1946, NI2+)  
 telex TELEprinter EXchange (ca.1943, 12W)

**Acronyms From Other Languages**

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| agitprop | AGITatsiya + PROPaganda (Russian, ca.1926, NI2+)                       |
| flak     | FLiegerAbwehrKanonen (German, 1938, NI2+)                              |
| gestapo  | GEheime STAatsPOLizei (German, 1934, NI2+)                             |
| gulag    | Glavnoe Upravlenie ispravitel'notrudovykh LAGerei (Russian, 1974, 12W) |
| moped    | MOtor + PEDal (Swedish, ca.1955, 12W)                                  |
| sambo    | SAMozashchita Bez Oruzhiya (Russian, 1972, 12W)                        |

**Near Misses**

|           |  |
|-----------|--|
| athodyd   | Aero-THERmODYnamic Duct (1945, NI2+) - blend                             |
| awol      | Absent WithOut Leave (1919, NI2+) - usually capitalized                  |
| benday    | BENjamin DAY (1903, NI1+) - blend  |
| deet      | Di-Ethyl Tolumide (1962, 12W) - pronunciation of D.E.T.                  |
| hi-fi     | HIgh FIDelity (1948, NI2+) - hyphenated                                  |
| ibuprofen | Iso-BUtyl PROpionic PHENyl (12W) - PH pronounced f                       |
| jeep      | General Purpose (1940, NI2+) - pronunciation of G.P.                     |
| op-ed     | OPposite EDitorial (1970, 12W) - hyphenated                              |
| nazi      | NATIonalsoZIAList (German, 1930) - shorten & alter                       |
| sci-fi    | SCIence FIction (1955, 12W) - hyphenated                                 |
| siloxane  | SILicon + OXYgen + methANE (1922, NI3) - blend                           |
| tokamak   | TORoidskaia KAMERA MAGneticheskaja (Russian, 1965, 12W) - G pronounced k |
| veep      | Vice President (1940, NI2+) - pronunciation of V.P.                      |

**Acronyms That Should Be In Webster's Ninth**

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| biopic | BIOgraphical PICTure (12W)                         |
| fifo   | First In, First Out (NI2+)                         |
| lifo   | Last In, First Out (NI2+)                          |
| quango | QUASI-Non Governmental Organization (12W)          |
| shazam | Solomon Hercules Atlas Zeus Achilles Mercury (12W) |
| tacan  | TACTical Air Navigation (12W)                      |

**Supposed Acronyms**

|      |   |
|------|---|
| posh | Port Out Starboard Home                                 |
| tip  | To Insure (should be Ensure) Politeness (or Promptness) |