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Opening extract from  
**Oxford School Dictionary of Word  
Origins**

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## Aa

**aardvark** The word for this badger-like African animal comes from Afrikaans, from two words, *aarde* meaning 'earth' and *vark* meaning 'pig'.

**abacus** The abacus is a forerunner of the computer. It's an ancient counting machine, consisting of several rows of beads that can be moved from side to side. In the West we're used to counting with written numbers, which we got from Arabic. But this took the place of counting with small stones or similar objects which could be grouped together for the purpose of making calculations (the word **calculation** comes from a Latin word for 'pebble'; **SEE calculate**). One early method of doing this involved a board covered with sand or dust, so that you could mark the groupings with your fingers and then rub them out again. The Hebrew word for 'dust' was *abaq*, and the Greeks used it when they coined a word for the counting board: *abax*. That, via Latin, is where we get **abacus** from.

**abandon** comes from Old French *abandoner*, which was based on a *bandon* meaning 'under control'. This was used in the phrase *mettre a bandon* 'to put someone under someone else's control', and so to abandon them.

**abate** When a storm abates, it dies down. The word comes from Old French *abatre* meaning 'to fell', from Latin *battuere* meaning 'to beat'. **SEE ALSO bat**.

**abbot** comes from Old English *abbod*, from Latin *abbas*. This came from Greek *abbas* meaning 'father', from Aramaic (a language once spoken in the Middle East).

**abbreviate** If you abbreviate something, you shorten it. The word comes from Late Latin *abbreviat-* meaning 'shortened', from the verb *abbreviare* (from Latin *brevis* meaning 'short', which is also where the word **brief** comes from).

**abdicate** To abdicate means to give up an important responsibility, especially to give up being a king or queen. **Abdicate** comes from Latin *abdica-* meaning 'renounced', from the verb *abdicare* (based on *dicare* meaning 'to proclaim', also the source of the words **dedicate** and **indicate**).

**abhor** To abhor something is to hate it very much. The word comes from Latin *abhorrere* meaning 'to shrink away in horror', which is made up of the prefix *ab-* meaning 'away, from' and *horrere* meaning 'to shudder'. The words **horror** and **horrid** also come from this Latin word.

**able** comes from Old French *hable*. This came from Latin *habilis* meaning 'handy', from the verb *habere* meaning 'to hold'.

**abnormal** dates from the 19th century and is an alteration of an earlier word *anormal*. This came from French, ultimately from Greek *anomalos*.

**abolish** To abolish something, such as a law, is to put an end to it. The word **abolish** comes via Old French from Latin *abolere* meaning 'to destroy'.

**abominate** If you abominate something you hate it very much. The word comes from Latin *abominat-*, from the verb *abominari* meaning 'to regard as a bad omen'. From the 14th to the 17th century many people believed that the related word **abominable** came from the Latin *ab hominem* meaning 'away from man' or 'inhuman, unnatural', and the word was often wrongly spelled *abhominable* during this period.

**aborigine** An aborigine is one of the earliest inhabitants of a country. The