

CURRENT USE AND CLASSIFICATION OF ACRONYMS

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In the English language the widespread use of acronyms and initialisms is a relatively new linguistic phenomenon, becoming increasingly evident since the mid-20th century. As literacy rates rose, and as advances in science and technology brought with them more complicated terms and concepts, the practice of abbreviating terms became increasingly convenient. The Oxford English Dictionary records the first printed use of the word initialism as occurring in 1899, but it did not come into general use until forties.

Around 1943, the term acronym was coined to recognize abbreviations and contractions of phrases pronounced as words. For example, the army offense of being Absent Without Official Leave was abbreviated to "A.W.O.L." in reports, but when pronounced "awol" became an acronym. While initial letters are commonly used to form an acronym, the original definition was a word made from the initial letters or syllables of other words, for example UNIVAC from Universal Automatic Computer. «The word acronym itself comes from Greek: ἀκροξ, akros, "topmost, extreme" + ὄνομα, ovoma, "name".

Acronyms and initialisms are used most often to abbreviate names of organizations and long or frequently referenced terms. The rapid advance of science and technology in recent centuries seems to be an underlying force driving the usage, as new inventions and concepts with multiword names create a demand for shorter, more manageable names. For example, from the U.S. Navy, is COMCRUDESPEC, which stands for Commander Cruisers Destroyers Pacific.

Classification of acronyms:

- Pronounced as a word, containing only initial letters;

Laser: light amplification by the stimulated emission of radiation; NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization; Scuba: self-contained underwater breathing apparatus; EPCOT: Experimental Prototype Community of Tomorrow; AIDS: acquired immune deficiency syndrome

- Pronounced as a word, containing non-initial letters: Amphetamine: Alpha-methyl-phenethylamine; Gestapo: Geheime Staatspolizei ("secret state police"); Interpol: International Criminal Police Organization; Radar: radio detection and ranging

• Pronounced as a word or names of letters, depending on speaker or context:

FAQ: ([fæk] or [ef ei kju:]) frequently asked questions;

IRA: 1) When used for Irish Republican Army, pronounced as letters in English [ai a: ei], but as a word in Spanish ['ira]

2) When used for Individual Retirement Account, can be pronounced as letters or as a word [aire]

• Pronounced as a combination of names of letters and a word: CD-ROM: Compact Disc Read-only Memory

IUPAC: International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry

• Pronounced only as the names of letters:

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

CNN: Cable News Network

DNA: deoxyribonucleic acid

USA: United States of America

HIV: human immunodeficiency virus

• Shortcut incorporated into name:

MMMC: Minnesota Mining and Manufacturing Company

EEE: Electronic Entertainment Exposition

WWWC: World Wide Web Consortium

• Multi-layered acronyms:

FRC: FIRST Robotics Competition, i.e., For Inspiration Recognition of Science and Technology Robotics Competition

The acronyms can therefore be used for various purposes: for simple amusement, for finding unknown meanings, for illustrating and emphasizing points in training, speaking or presentations, and for examples of how language and expressions develop and evolve. Whatever, acronyms add colour and texture to the written and spoken word, and to life in general. They are a fascinating reflection of the development of communications, language and social attitudes.

Acronyms, whether true acronyms or not, add colour, fun and interest to our language, and thereby they act as memory devices. Many technical and process-related acronyms greatly assist in memory retention and learning. Many acronyms when used properly can certainly enhance communications, because they act as "short-hand" and therefore increase the efficiency of communications; in other words, more meaning is conveyed in less time and fewer words.