

UNDERGROUND

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[Assignment: First, explain the original meaning and etymology of a word. Next, explain today's meanings. Continue by attempting to explain why that word's original meaning transformed into today's meanings.]

(1) The English language is unparalleled in its ability either to invent new words, or to modify the meaning of old words to fit a particular situation. Often, though, the original meaning of the word is forgotten, and the term takes on a modified meaning. Tracing the origins of such words is the best way for a student to realize the changes that meanings undergo as time passes. Sometimes, a student will find that a word's meaning does not change at all, and other times a student will find that a word totally changes meaning. Still other terms gain meanings that are more relevant to modern times, while not losing their original meaning. "Underground" is such a term. Tracing the history of "underground" provides students with a prime example of a word getting a new, more relevant definition, while at the same time, keeping its original definition.

(2) The Oxford English Dictionary defines "underground" as "found beneath the surface of the ground." These are the two meanings that most people associate with the term "underground." The prefix "under-" is of Old English origin, from a word of the same spelling. The first known use of the word with this meaning was in 1578, when Florio wrote "of or pertaining to things underground." The spelling of underground in Florio's text is an older, less-widely used spelling, but is nonetheless correct.

(3) According to Webster's Third International Dictionary, underground can also mean "conducted or conveyed by stealthy means." The first use of this meaning is documented by the OED to be 1820. In that year, J.W. Croker wrote "Brongham . . . I believe has been for some time in underground communication with the Carlton House" (OED). The portion of the definition referring to secrecy came into widespread use during the American Civil War.

(4) During the Civil War, underground was used to describe the system for allowing slaves to escape to free territories. The "underground railroad," as it was called, provided a series of safe places for escaping slaves to stop and rest during their journey to freedom. Since helping a slave to escape was just as severe a crime as the slave himself escaping, actions and movements were carefully planned to escape the watchful eyes of the bounty hunters. Thus, the use of the word underground to mean secretly first took root in America during the Civil War.

(5) Since the mid 19th century, underground has taken on another meaning. Now, underground also pertains to "a group or movement organized to work against the existing regime, often by violent means." (OED supplement). In foreign countries, this primarily suggests an organization forming in an attempt to one day overthrow the government. In the United States, plots to overthrow the government are not large in magnitude, but many anti-establishment groups do exist. A good example of an underground society working against the government is the organized crime syndicate. While their intentions are not to weaken the country, they are trying to get around the country's established laws.

(6) The term underground has followed the path of many other words in the English language: it has developed several alternate meanings. These meanings are the result of the happenings during the time period in which they developed. The correlation between underground and secret came about during a time period in which secrecy and wrongdoing flourished. The definition related to anti-establishment is a result of a time period during which crime and law breaking were prevalent. The alteration of a word's meaning depends upon the particular time period in question. The English language will always be able to cope with the changing times because of its ability to add new words, or to change existing ones.