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[guide to the dictionary](#)



THE USAGE PANEL

The Usage Panel is a group of nearly 200 prominent scholars, creative writers, journalists, diplomats, and others in occupations requiring mastery of language. Annual surveys have gauged the acceptability of particular usages and grammatical constructions.

[The Panelists](#)



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re·fer  (rĭ-fûr)

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v. re·ferred, re·fer·ring, re·fers

v.tr.

1. To direct to a source for help or information: *referred her to a heart specialist; referred me to his last employer for a recommendation.*

2. To submit (a matter in dispute) to an authority for arbitration, decision, or examination.

3. To direct the attention of: *I refer you to the training manual.*

4.

a. To assign or attribute to; regard as originated by.

b. To assign to or regard as belonging within a particular kind or class: *referred the newly discovered partita to the 1600s.* See Synonyms at [attribute](#).

v.intr.

1.

a. To relate or pertain; concern: *questions referring to yesterday's lecture.*

b. To serve as a descriptor or have as a denotation: *The word chair refers to a piece of furniture.*

2. To speak or write about something briefly or incidentally; make reference: *referred during our conversation to several books he was reading.*

3. To turn one's attention, as in seeking information: *refer to a dictionary.*

[Middle English *referren*, from Old French *referer*, from Latin *referre* : *re-*, *re-* + *ferre*, to carry; see [bher-¹ in the Appendix of Indo-European roots](#).]

ref er·a·ble (rĕf ər-ə-bəl, rĭ-fûr -) *adj.*

re·fer ral *n.*

re·fer rer *n.*

Usage Note: Some people consider the phrase *refer back* to be redundant, since *refer* contains the prefix *re-*, which was brought into English from Latin and originally meant "back." But such an argument is based on what linguists call the "etymological fallacy"—the assumption that the meaning of a word should always reflect the meanings of the words, roots, and affixes from which it was derived. In fact, most words change their meanings over time, often to the point where their historical roots are completely obscured. Such change is natural and usually goes unnoticed except by scholars. We conduct *inaugurations* without consulting soothsayers (*augurs*), and we don't necessarily share bread (*pānis* in Latin) with our *companions*. In fact, *refer* is quite often used in contexts that don't involve the meaning "back" at all, as in *The doctor referred her patient to a specialist* or *Please refer to this menu of our daily specials*. As for *refer back*, the Usage Panel's position has shifted dramatically over the years. In 1995, 65 percent of the Panel disapproved of this construction, but by 2011, 81 percent accepted it in the sentence *To answer your question it is necessary to refer back to the minutes of the previous meeting*. In such cases, where the "back" meaning of *re-* has largely disappeared, adding *back* can provide useful semantic information, indicating that the person or thing being referred to has been mentioned or consulted before. The Panel remains somewhat less tolerant of constructions like *revert back*, in which the verb retains the sense "back" as part of its meaning: in 2011, 67 percent accepted *revert back* in the sentence *After his divorce he seemed to revert back to his adolescence*. In this context, *back* may simply be used to provide emphasis, perhaps suggesting a greater step backward than the verb by itself would. In any case, the prevalence of phrases that combine *back* and words prefixed with *re-* indicates that such constructions are a robust feature of English, even if they do appear to be logically redundant.

Indo-European & Semitic Roots Appendices

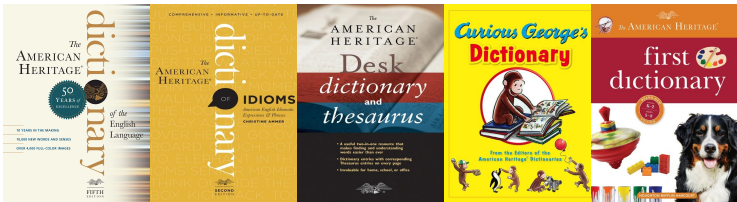
Thousands of entries in the dictionary include etymologies that trace their origins back to reconstructed proto-languages. You can obtain more information about these forms in our online appendices:

[Indo-European Roots](#)

[Semitic Roots](#)

The Indo-European appendix covers nearly half of the Indo-European roots that have left their mark on English words. A more complete treatment of Indo-European roots and the English words derived from them is available in our [Dictionary of Indo-European Roots](#).

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