

# deal

VERB

## MEANING & USE

### I. To divide, distribute, share. Mainly *transitive*.

#### I.1. † *transitive*. To divide. *Obsolete*.

Old English–1570

**OE** *Dividet eum* **dæles** hine [c1000 *Ags. Gosp.* todælp hyne].

*Lindisfarne Gospels* xxiv. 51

...

**1570** Our Lords are now **delt** in twa sydis.

in J. Cranstoun, *Satirical Poems Reformation* (1891) vol. I. 128

#### I.2. †

#### I.2.a. To separate, sever. *Obsolete*.

Old English–1400

**OE** Swa no man scyle his gastes lufan wið gode **dælan**.

*Daniel* 21

...

**ca1400** He gaf him wittes fyue, To **delen** þat vuel from þe good.

*Poems of Vernon Manuscript* 358

#### I.2.b. *intransitive* (for *reflexive*). To separate oneself, go away, part (*from*). *Obsolete*. *rare*.

Old English–1275

**OE** Efne ic feor gewite, fleame **dæle**.

*Anglo-Saxon Psalter* liv. 7 [lv. 7]

...

**c1275**  
**(?ca1200)** Iulius þe kaisere. mid alle þan Romanisce here **dalden** [c1300 *Otho MS.* wende] from  
þan fihte.

Lazamon, *Brut* (Caligula MS.) (1963) l. 3772

#### I.3. †

**I.3.a.** *transitive.* To divide (property, etc.) among a number so that each may have his due share; to distribute in shares; to portion out, apportion. *Obsolete.*

**Old English–1535**

**OE** Onfoð and **dælað** betwux eow.

*West Saxon Gospels: Luke* (Corpus Christi Cambridge MS.) xxii. 17

...

**1535** Ye shal **deale** amonge you their spoyle & catell [amōge in text].

*Bible* (Coverdale) Joshua viii. A

**I.3.b.** To share (property, etc.) *with others.* *Obsolete.*

**Old English–1533**

**OE** Næfre Ismael wið Isace, wið min agen bearn yrfe **dæleð**.

*Genesis* 2788

...

**?1533** If thou geue vs aboundaunce..geue vs an harte to vse it..and to **deale** with oure neyboures.

W. Tyndale, *Exposicion vppon Mathew* vi. f. lxxij

**I.4.a.** To distribute or bestow among a number of recipients; *esp.* to distribute in the form of gifts or alms. Now mostly *figurative*, or *with out*: see [I.2b](#).

**Old English–**

In sense [I.3](#) the main notion is the division into shares; here it is the giving away or bestowing.

**OE** Nænig manna is under heofonhwealfe, hæleða cynnes, ðætte areccan mæg oððe rim wite hu ðrymlice, þeoda baldor, gasta geocend, þine gife **dælest**.

*Andreas* (1932) 548

...

**1815** In comments they **deal** to the public dull diet.

W. H. Ireland, *Scribbleomania* 227

**I.4.b.** **to deal out**; †formerly also **to deal abroad**, **to deal away**, **to deal forth**, etc.

**c1384–**

**c1384** He schal.. **dele abroad** his spuylis.

*Bible* (Wycliffite, early version) (Douce MS. 369(2)) (1850) Luke xi. 22

...

**1866** To **deal out** a certain number of herrings to their servants.

J. E. T. Rogers, *History of Agriculture & Prices* vol. I. xxiv. 609

**I.4.c.** † *absol. or intransitive. To make distribution of. Obsolete.*

**1297–1456**

Also with the recipients as indirect object (dative) or with *to*.

**1297** Of his fader tresorie..He **delde** uor his soule.

*Robert of Gloucester's Chronicle* (Rolls) 7866

...

**1456** And pore men of thy gode thou **dele**.

*How Wise Man taught Son* 154 in W. C. Hazlitt, *Remains of Early Popular Poetry of England* (1864) vol. I. 175

**I.5.** To deliver or give (to a person) as his share; to apportion. Also with *out*.

**c1400–**

**c1400** **Dele** to me my destine & do hit out of honde.

**(?c1390)** *Sir Gawain & Green Knight* (1940) I. 2285

...

**1850** The same measure was **dealt** out to the family of Napoleon.

H. Martineau, *Hist. Eng. during 30 Years' Peace* vol. II. iv. xiii. 168

**I.6.a.** † To bestow, give forth, render, deliver. *Obsolete except as in I.2b, I.4c.*

**a1250–1540**

**a1250** He mihte bet speken a sele, þan mid wrappe wordes **dele** [*variant reading deale*].

*Owl & Nightingale* 952

...

**c1540** And the dom þat he **dulte** [*? dalte*] duly was kept.

**(?a1400)** *Destruction of Troy* 5646

**I.6.b.** *esp.* To deliver *blows*.

**c1330–**

(The earlier notion was that of distributing them (as in sense I.4) among several opponents or in various quarters, in all directions, now more definitely expressed by *deal about*; later, the sense becomes either 'to give one as his portion' (as in I.5), or simply 'to deliver'.)

**c1330** Strokes hij togider **delden** ywis On helmes & on briȝt scheldes.

**(?c1300)** *Guy of Warwick* (Auchinleck MS.) I. 2219

...

**1878** Fortune or fraud soon gave Scipio the chance of **dealing** a decisive blow.

R. B. Smith, *Carthage* 337

I.6.c. Hence in various expressions, apparently arising out of I.6b.

1642-

**1642** He was perfect in the devilish art of **dealing** an ill turn.

T. Fuller, *Holy State* v. vii. 385

...

**1813** We **dealt** about the wit, or what passes for it, after midnight, jovially.

C. Lamb in *Philanthropist* January 49

I.7. Cards.

I.7.a. To distribute (the cards to be used in a game) to the various players; to give a player (such or so many cards) in distributing. Also with *out*, and *absol*.

1560-

**1560** Were it as parellous to **deale** cardes at play.

J. Heywood, *Fourth Hundred of Epygrams* To Reader sig. A<sup>v</sup>

...

**1891** At baccarat..the stakes are made before the cards are **dealt**.

*Speaker* 2 May 534/2

cards

I.7.b. To include (someone) *in* those to whom one deals cards for a game; frequently *figurative*, to include (a person) *in* an undertaking; to give (someone) a share or part. *colloquial* (originally U.S.).

1942-

**1942** Give a share,.. **deal** one in (on).

L. V. Berrey & M. Van den Bark, *American Thesaurus of Slang* §369/4

...

**1969** If they won't **deal** us in we may end up having to steal it.

W. Garner, *Us or Them War* xvi. 121

cards

U.S. English

colloquial and slang

I.8.a. † In *Hurling*, etc.: To deliver or throw (the ball). *Obsolete*.

1602-1826

**1602** Then must hee cast the ball (named **Dealing**) to some one of his fellowes.

R. Carew, *Survey of Cornwall* i. f. 74

...

**1826** *Cornish Hurling*... The ball..[is] thrown up, or **dealt**.

hockey

I.8.b. Of a horse.

1740-

**1740** His Carriage, and Way of **dealing** his Legs.

H. Bracken, *Farriery Improv'd* (ed. 2) vol. II. i. 34

**1740** There are Horses that lead, or **deal** their Legs well.

H. Bracken, *Farriery Improv'd* (ed. 2) vol. II. ii. 77

II. To take part *in*, have to do *with*, occupy oneself, do business, act. Mainly *intransitive*.

II.9. † *intransitive*. To take part *in*, share or participate *in* or *with*, be a partaker of.

c1175-1481

*Obsolete.*

**c1175** Pu aȝest to hatien wel his sunne, þet ðu ne dele noht þer inne.

*Pater Noster* 225 in *Lambeth Homilies* 67

...

**1481** Ye shal be partener of my pylgremage, and **dele** of the pardon that I shal..fecche ouer the see.

W. Caxton, translation of *History of Reynard Fox* (1970) 44

II.10. †

II.10.a. To engage *with* in conflict; to contend.

Old English-1667

[Cf. Old Norse *deila við* to be at feud or quarrel with, to contend.]

**OE** Betere..ðonne we swa hearde hilde **dælon**.

*Battle of Maldon* 33

...

**1667** Brutish that contest and foule, When Reason hath to **deal** with force.

J. Milton, *Paradise Lost* vi. 125

II.10.b. *transitive*. To contend or fight about. *Obsolete.*

c1275

**c1275** Nu wit scullen **delen** [c1300 *Otho MS. deale*] þene dæd of mire maȝen.  
**(?a1200)** Laȝamon, *Brut* (Caligula MS.) (1978) l. 12997

**II.11.a.** *intransitive*. To have to do with (a person); to have intercourse or dealings with; to associate with. *archaic* (and now associated with 13).

**c1380-**

**c1380** Þei **delen** not wiþ þes newe ordris, but supposen hem heretikes.  
J. Wyclif, *Select English Works* vol. II. 404

...

**1869** One of the charges against him was that of **dealing** with a familiar spirit.  
E. A. Freeman, *History of Norman Conquest* (1876) vol. III. xii. 98

archaic

**II.11.b.** † Of sexual intercourse. *Obsolete*.

**a1387-1662**

**a1387** Þey eteþ nouȝt, noþer **delep** wiþ hir wifes.  
J. Trevisa, translation of R. Higden, *Polychronicon* (St. John's Cambridge MS.) (1876) vol. VI. 37

...

**1662** They go not to Church the day they have **dealt** with a woman, till they have wash'd themselves.  
J. Davies, translation of A. Olearius, *Voyages & Travels of Ambassadors* 94

**II.12.** To have business communications with; to carry on negotiations, negotiate, treat with; sometimes implying secret or sinister dealings. *archaic* (and now associated with 13).

**1393-**

**1393** The grete clerken..com..To tret upon this lordes hele, So longe they to-gider **dele** [etc.].  
J. Gower, *Confessio Amantis* vol. I. 267

...

**a1715** Wilkinson, a prisoner for debt..was **dealt** with to accuse him.  
Bishop G. Burnet, *History of Own Time* (1724) vol. I. 506

archaic

**II.13.a.** To carry on commercial transactions; to do business, trade, traffic (*with* a person, *in* an article).

**a1627-**

**a1627** I **deal** in dogs leather.

T. Middleton, *Mayor of Quinborough* (1661) iii. iii. 40

...

**1866** Such persons **dealt** in finished goods.

J. E. T. Rogers, *History of Agriculture & Prices* vol. I. xxi. 530

economics and commerce

**II.13.b.** † *transitive*. To offer for sale. *Obsolete. rare.*

**1760**

**1760** You would not have..the flints!.. Every pebble of 'em..He shall **deal** them as new pavement.

S. Foote, *Minor* ii. 56

**II.14.** To have to do *with* (a thing) in any way; to busy or occupy oneself, to concern oneself *with*.

**a1400-**

**a1400** lobaal..Was first loger, and fee **delt** [*Fairfax MS.* dalt] wit.

**(a1325)** *Cursor Mundi* (Vespasian MS.) I. 1517

...

**1893** That part of the Companies Act 1862 which **deals** with guarantee companies.

*Law Times* vol. 95 26/2

**II.15.** With *in*: To occupy, employ, or exercise oneself in (a thing); to have to do with, to make use of. (Now often approaching a figurative use of 13.)

**1581-**

**1581** Among the best writers, that **deale** in this kinde.

R. Mulcaster, *Positions* ix. 54

...

**1885** Lord E. F—.. **deals** in vague outlines, as if afraid of being too specific.

*Manchester Examiner* 6 July 5/2

**II.16.** (a) **to deal with**: to act in regard to, administer, handle, dispose in any way of (a thing). (b) to handle effectively; to grapple with; to take successful action in regard to.

**1469-**

**1469** He said that..he wold **deele** with you & yours, both be the law & besides the law.

in T. Stapleton, *Plumpton Correspondence* (1839) 23

...

**1891** Restraining the defendants from selling or otherwise **dealing** with the shares.

II.17.a. **to deal with:** to act towards (any one), to treat (in some specified way).

a1400-

**a1400** ludas..be-hald and se Hu vile þat þai wit him delt.

**(a1325)** *Cursor Mundi* (Vespasian MS.) l. 16461

...

**1874** The Commons were dealing roughly with the agents of the Royal system.

J. R. Green, *Short History of English People* viii. §6. 521

II.17.b. With *by* (= in regard to) in same sense.

1573-

**1573** That he wuld not deale so hardly bi me.

G. Harvey, *Letter-book* (1884) 3

...

**1877** It will not be found that I have dealt unjustly by any one.

M. E. Braddon, *Weavers & Weft* 324

II.18. **to deal on, upon:** to set to work upon. *archaic*.

1597-

**1597** Two deepe enemies, Foes to my rest..Are they that I would haue thee deale vpon.

W. Shakespeare, *Richard III* iv. ii. 75

...

**1828** 'There is a man thou must deal upon, Bonthron,' said the knight.

W. Scott, *Fair Maid of Perth* iii, in *Chronicles of Canongate* 2nd Series vol. III. 93

archaic

II.19. To act towards people generally (in some specified way); to conduct oneself, behave, act.

c1400-

**c1400** Þay dronken & daylyeden & dalten vntyȝtel, þise lordez & ladyez.

**(?c1390)** *Sir Gawain & Green Knight* (1940) l. 1114

...

**1711** They had better give up now, if she will not deal openly.

J. Swift, *Journal to Stella* 17 December (1948) vol. II. 441



II.20. † To take action, act, proceed (usually *in* some matter or affair). *Obsolete.*

1470–1600

1470–85 Wel said syr Vwayne go on your waye and lete me dele.

T. Malory, *Morte d'Arthur* iv. xiii

...

1600 Do not you meddle, let me deale in this.

W. Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing* v. i. 103

II.21. † *transitive.* To treat. *Obsolete. rare.*

1586

1586 A late and weightie cause dealt in this Parliament.

*Let. Earle Leycester* 1

### Additional sense (2007)

a. *intransitive.* To sell illegal drugs. Also with *in*.

1958–

1958 I know they used to deal but I don't know if they're dealing now.

W. Motley, *Let No Man write my Epit.* 130

...

2001 Apparently he was still dealing up there, and was doing better than he had in London.

G. Joseph, *Homegrown* xiii. 181

drug use

b. *transitive.* To sell (illegal drugs).

1965–

1965 If you were dealing horse, junkies were always around you.

C. Brown, *Manchild in Promised Land* v. 147

...

2000 Ramirez dealt cocaine.

'E. McBain', *Last Dance* 160

## ETYMOLOGY


### Summary

A word inherited from Germanic.

A common **Germanic** verb: **Old English** *dælan*= **Old Frisian** *dêla*, **Old Saxon** *dêljan*, **Middle Dutch, Dutch, Middle Low German** *deelen*, **Old High German** *teilan*, **German** *teilen*, **Old Norse** *deila* (**Swedish** *dela*, **Danish** *dele*), **Gothic** *dailjan*, derivative of *\*daili-z*, **Old English** *dælan* **deal** *n.*<sup>1</sup>, part, division.

## PRONUNCIATION

### BRITISH ENGLISH

/di:l/ 

deel

### U.S. ENGLISH

/di:l/ 

deel

## FORMS

### Variant forms

Past tense and participle **dealt** ( **delt**). Forms: *infinitive* Old English **dælan**, Middle English **dealen**, Middle English **dælen**, **deale(n)**, Middle English **delen**, Middle English–1500s **dele**, (Middle English **del**, Middle English **daile**, Middle English–1500s *Scottish* **deill**, Middle English **delyn**, **deele**), 1500s–1600s **deale**, 1500s– **deal**. *past tense* Old English–Middle English **dælde**, Middle English **delet**, Middle English **deld(e)**, Middle English–1500s **delt**, Middle English **dalte**, Middle English **dalt**, **delte**, **delit**, Middle English–1500s **deled**, **delid**, **delyd**, Middle English **dellyd**, Middle English–1500s **dealed**, **dealid**, **dealyd**, 1500s **dealte**, 1500s– **dealt**. *past participle* Old English **dæled**, Middle English **i-deld**, Middle English **ideled**, Middle English–1600s **delt**, Middle English–1500s **dalt**, 1500s **dault**, Middle English– as *past tense*.

## FREQUENCY

*deal* is one of the 1,000 most common words in modern written English. It is similar in frequency to words like *category*, *eat*, *red*, *share*, and *watch*.

It typically occurs about 90 times per million words in modern written English.

*deal* is in frequency band 6, which contains words occurring between 10 and 100 times per million words in modern written English. [More about OED's frequency bands](#)

\* Occurrences per million words in written English

Historical frequency series are derived from Google Books Ngrams (version 2), a data set based on a corpus of several million books printed in English between 1500 and 2010. The Ngrams data has been cross-checked against frequency measures from other corpora, and re-analysed in order to handle homographs and other ambiguities.

The overall frequency for a given word is calculated by summing frequencies for the main form of the word, any plural or inflected forms, and any major spelling variations.

### Frequency of *deal*, v., 2017–2023

\* Occurrences per million words in written English

Modern frequency series are derived from a corpus of 20 billion words, covering the period from 2017 to the present. The corpus is mainly compiled from online news sources, and covers all major varieties of World English.

## COMPOUNDS & DERIVED WORDS

Sort by

**bedeal**, v. **Old English–1275**

transitive. To deprive, bereave, free of.

**dealer**, n. **Old English–**

One who deals in merchandise, a trader; spec. one who sells articles in the same condition in which he has bought them; often in combination, as...

**ydeled**, adj. **1297–1387**

As past participle: divided.

**dealing**, n. **a1300–**

Intercourse, friendly or business communication, connection. Now usually plural.

**undealt**, adj. **a1400–**

Not dealt with.

**misdeal**, v. **1481–**

Cards. intransitive. To make a mistake in dealing. Also transitive: to deal (cards, etc.) wrongly.

**plain-dealing, adj.** 1567-

Straightforward, direct, and honest in speech and behaviour; free from deceit or subterfuge.

**well-dealing, adj.** 1584-1848

Fair in dealing with others; honest.

**double-dealing, adj.** 1587-

Using duplicity.

**deal, n.<sup>2</sup>** 1588-

An act of dealing or buying and selling; a business transaction, bargain.

**interdeal, v.** 1609-

intransitive. To deal or negotiate mutually.

**fair-dealing, adj.** a1622-

That deals justly and honestly with people, esp. (in later use) in business affairs.

**dealth, n.** 1637

Portion dealt.

**round-dealing, adj.** 1642-1849

Plain and honest in speech and behaviour; free from deceit or subterfuge.

**well-dealt, adj.** a1644-

Skilfully dealt (in various senses); esp. (of a blow) well-delivered.

**dealable, adj.** 1667-

Capable of being dealt with; suitable for dealing.

**overdeal, v.** 1789-

intransitive. To deal too much or to too great an extent.

**redeal, v.** 1834-

transitive. To deal (a card or cards) again. Frequently figurative or in figurative context. Also intransitive.

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