

If it's alright with you, it's alright with me... if that's alright?

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Are you alright? Or are you all right? Is alright one word or two? A number of people feel rather strongly about the issue; and, in particular, some of them are adamant that alright is totally wrong. My question is: why do they think that?

What the Oxford English Dictionary has to say about alright is very interesting and revealing. The dictionary gives the main entry as "All right" but then states: "The form alright is frequent, although more widespread in non-literary printed sources (eg newspapers and journals) than in literary texts. Compare the standard spellings of already, altogether, always. Although these analogues exist, the form is strongly criticized in the vast majority of usage guides, but without cogent reasons."

It is that last phrase that interests me. People object to the spelling alright, but they give absolutely no reason for doing so – and the experts at the Oxford English Dictionary can't think of one either. So why would anyone find fault with alright? Nobody argues that we

should write the words although, always and albeit as all though, all ways and all be it. And even a thousand years ago, Anglo-Saxon scribes were writing alright as one word.

English is my native language, and the native language of the majority of EDP readers too. Surely it is obvious to most of us, when we think about it, that alright is a single word? The most common pronunciation of the word, "orright", helps to confirm that too.

It's true that if you go far enough back in time, alright originated as a combination of two words, all and right. But so did the words already and although. It is a very common process as languages change for two words in a fixed expression to merge into one. Week end became weekend and then weekend. Cup board became cupboard. In the Oxford English Dictionary entry I just quoted, newspapers and widespread were both originally two words. The technical term for this completely normal merging process is univibration. It can even occur with three-word combinations, such as albeit and nevertheless.

Perhaps, though, the most important point here is that all right and alright actually have different meanings. Just think about the distinction between "They are all right", meaning that all of them are correct; and "They are alright", meaning they are OK. That difference is concealed if we write the two forms identically.



■ It's alright for Griff... Griff Rhys Jones, host of ITV's *It'll Be Alright on the Night*.

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