



HaggardHawks

WORDS, LANGUAGE & ETYMOLOGY



HOMEPAGE

7 March 2015
Ampersand

This:

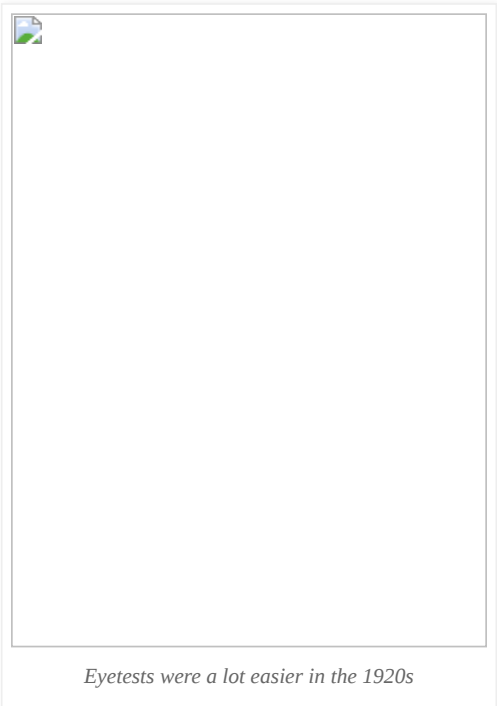


is called an ampersand. It's derived from a handwritten combination of the letters E and T, as in *et*, [the Latin word for "and"](#). You might have already known that. But whether you did or you didn't, the fact is that the swirly thing you usually call an "and sign" actually has a name. And if it has a name, then there's a *reason* for it having that name. Which is where we come in.

Up until as recently as the mid 1900s, it was standard practice when reciting the alphabet to use [the Latin phrase *per se*](#) (literally "by itself") to differentiate between individual letters of the alphabet—like A, I, and O—and single-character homographic words—like *a*, *I* and *O*.

So the letter A would be read as "*A per se A*", to ensure it was distinguished from the indefinite article *a*. The letter I, similarly, would be "*I per se I*" to differentiate it from the pronoun *I*. And the letter O would be "*O per se O*" to differentiate it from the interjection *O!*

But because it was just another character representing just another unit of the English language, the symbol & was also once considered a letter of the alphabet, and was included after Z in twenty-seventh place. And so to differentiate & from the conjunction *and*, the alphabet once ended with a final “X, Y, Z, and & *per se* &”.




Sometime in the early nineteenth century, this “and *per se* and” ran together into a single word, and, eventually, the name *ampersand* was born.

& that’s that.

HaggardHawks at 00:15

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