

'Widget' - W-I-D-G-E-T. Widget. It has a nice, friendly sound to it. It sounds a bit like it should be a small animal or bird. But it isn't. What is it then?

A widget can be many things, but most recently the word has come to describe small applications which run on your computer. You might have been given the option to download a widget and wondered what it meant. Widgets can have all sorts of functions – you can download a weather widget, so you can predict the weather (never an exact science in the UK!) or a calendar widget, or a twitter widget. You name it, there's probably a widget out there which does it.

I first remember hearing the word in the early 1990s from a series of beer adverts. The great thing about the beer's new can was that it had a widget inside it. This meant that when you opened the can, the beer came out like a draught beer, the beer you get on tap in a pub. How it did this was a mystery to most people. All we knew was that it contained a widget.

'Widget' is thought to have come from the word 'gadget'. The original meaning of this seems to be to describe something that you couldn't think of the word for. According to some etymologists (people who research the origins of words), 'widget' was a variation of the word 'gadget' which arose in the 1920s or 1930s in the US. Before this, the word 'gadget' seems to have been used by British sailors in the mid to late 19th century to describe something which they had forgotten the word for. Used in this way it may have come from a French word 'gachette', meaning a type of lock mechanism. Nobody really seems sure. What we can say though, about both 'widget' and 'gadget' is that they are normally used for something which is not easy to define exactly, something usually mechanical or more recently in relation to computers.

One of the more intriguing possible origins of the word 'widget' can be found in the Routledge dictionary of historical slang which lists the word 'wiffrow-gadget'. The meaning of this and another nice expression 'hook-me-dinghy' is apparently 'anything whose right name has temporarily slipped one's mind'.

Widgetry, the art of designing widgets, has given rise to a couple more new words, for example, 'widgeteer' – a person who designs widgets, and 'to widgetize' – the process of turning something into a widget.

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