



# The Big Johnson Project: Digitizing the Dictionary

<http://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com>

Brandi Besalke

## LEXICO'GRAPHER.

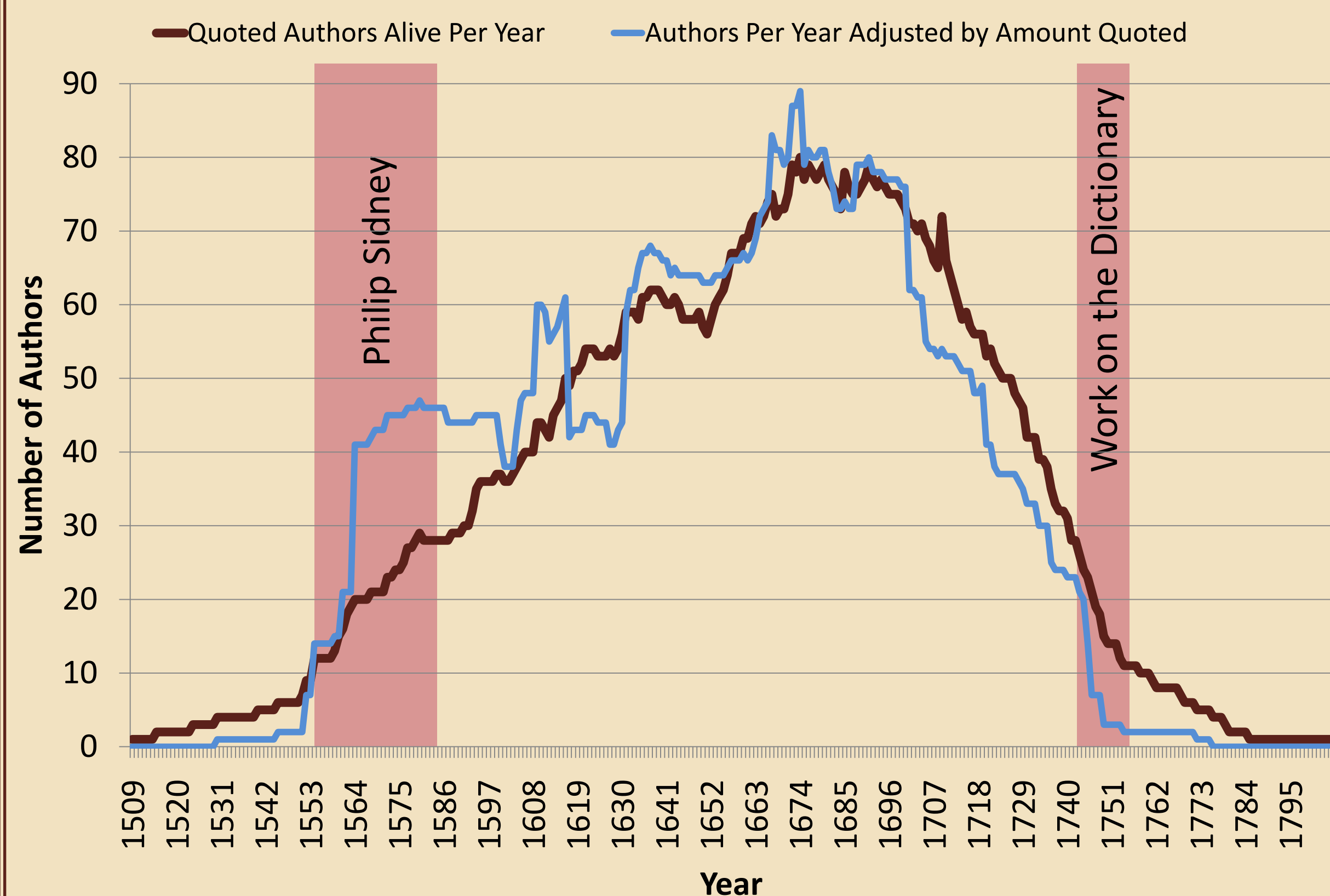
*n.s.* [λεξικόν and γράφω; *lexicographe*, French.] A writer of dictionaries; a harmless drudge, that buies himself in tracing the original, and detailing the signification of words.

Samuel Johnson's dictionary was not the first lexicon of the English language, but it was the first "authoritative" one (Lynch 73). The academies in France and Italy had issued large dictionaries for their respective languages, attempting to fix their languages in a *prescriptive* fashion, to keep them from becoming corrupted. The Académie Française, for instance, had forty scholars working for forty years on its dictionary (86). Johnson, working alone, completed his work in nine years and adopted a *descriptive* approach to his dictionary, realizing that language constantly changes; it was not his job to be a "dictator" or "pope," but to record the language as it was actually used (82). To achieve this, Johnson poured through books, marking words in context to use as illustrations to his definitions. Because of this, his dictionary is also "one of the largest dictionaries of quotations" (92). Citations from *The Lexicographer's Dilemma: The Evolution of "Proper English" from Shakespeare to South Park*. Jack Lynch. New York: Walker & Company, 2009.

**WRI'TER.** *n.s.* [from *write*.] One who practises the art of writing. An authour.

"My purpose was to admit no testimony of living authors... I have been cautious lest my zeal for antiquity might drive me into times too remote, and croud my book with words now no longer understood. I have fixed *Sidney's* work for the boundary, beyond which I make few excursions." (*Preface*).

### How well did Johnson stick to his time-period restrictions?



I was amazed to discover that there was no free, easily-searchable version of the first edition of Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) online. I started the website on November 26, 2010. As each entry is entered, the quoted authors are tagged, providing me with the data seen here. The data on this poster reflects the state of the project as it reached 3% completion (1285 entries out of 42773\*). \* According to Wikipedia. When the project is complete, I will know whether or not it is accurate.

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A DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
A DIGITAL EDITION OF THE 1755 CLASSIC BY SAMUEL JOHNSON

Dictionary of a [dictionary, Latin.] A book containing the words of any language in alphabetical order, with explanations of it

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

A  
DICTIONARY  
OF THE  
ENGLISH LANGUAGE:  
IN WHICH  
The WORDS are deduced from their ORIGINALS,  
AND  
ILLUSTRATED in their DIFFERENT SIGNIFICATIONS  
BY  
EXAMPLES from the best WRITERS,  
TO WHICH ARE PREFIXED,  
A HISTORY of the LANGUAGE,  
AND  
AN ENGLISH GRAMMAR,  
By SAMUEL JOHNSON, A. M.  
IN TWO VOLUMES.

Cum tabulis animum censoris sumet honesti:  
Audebit, quaecumque parum splendoris habebunt.  
Et sine pondere erunt, et honore indigna ferentur.  
Verba movere loco; quamvis invita recedant,  
Et versentur adhuc inter penetralia Vestae:  
Obscurata diu populo bonus eruet, atque  
Proferet in lucem speciosa vocabula rerum,  
Quae prisca memorata Catonibus atque Cethegis,  
Nunc situs informis premit et deserta vetustas. Ho.

LONDON  
Printed by W. STRAHAN,  
For J. and P. KNAPTON; T. and T. LONGMAN; C. HITCH and L. HAWES;  
A. MILLAR; and R. and J. DODSLEY.  
MDCCLV

Contents.

- About this Project
- History of Johnson's Dictionary
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Random Entry:

Achiever

An **Achiever**. *n.s.* He that performs; he that obtains what he endeavours after.

A victory is twice itself, when the **achiever** brings home full numbers.  
*Shakespeare's Much ado about Nothing.*

SOURCES: MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING LEAVE A COMMENT EDIT THIS

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Random Entry

Dictionary Progress  
Main Entries Entered So Far  
1184 of 42773 entries

RECENT COMMENTS

- Brandi on D
- Darwin Stagner on D
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- smurfthumper on E

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Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language (1755)

You like this. Unlike

Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language (1755) This week's Word of the Week has 68 definitions!

"'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none go just alike, yet each believes his own."  
(Alexander Pope)

Go (verb neuter)  
johnsonsdictionaryonline.com  
To walk to move step by step.

Facebook social plugin

**BEST.** *adj.* the *superlative* from *good*. Most good.

"I have determined to consult the best writers... and perhaps I may at last have reason to say... that my book is more learned than its author" (*Plan*, 1747).

### Who are the "best writers?" Who does he quote the most?

#### Top 10 Quoted Sources (# of Entries Quoted In)

- |                              |                              |
|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. William Shakespeare (336) | 6. Jonathan Swift (107)      |
| 2. John Dryden (241)         | 7. Francis Bacon (96)        |
| 3. John Milton (150)         | 8. The King James Bible (86) |
| 4. Joseph Addison (127)      | 9. John Locke (80)           |
| 5. Alexander Pope (115)      | 10. Edmund Spenser (76)      |

#### Most Quoted Works of Shakespeare

- | Then                           | Now <sup>1</sup>              |
|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. Macbeth (40)                | 1. Hamlet (221)               |
| 2. King Lear (37)              | 2. Macbeth (123)              |
| 3. Merry Wives of Windsor (30) | 3. Othello (103)              |
| 4. Merchant of Venice (27)     | 4. King Henry IV, part 1 (95) |
| 5. Cymbeline (26)              | 5. Merchant of Venice (94)    |

#### Most Quoted Books of the Bible

- | Then                 | Now <sup>1</sup>  |
|----------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Genesis (15)      | 1. Matthew (170)  |
| 2. Ecclesiastes (11) | 2. Psalms (153)   |
| Job (11)             | 3. Proverbs (116) |
| 4. Psalms (10)       | 4. Isaiah (104)   |
| 5. Deuteronomy (9)   | 5. Job (89)       |
| Exodus (9)           |                   |

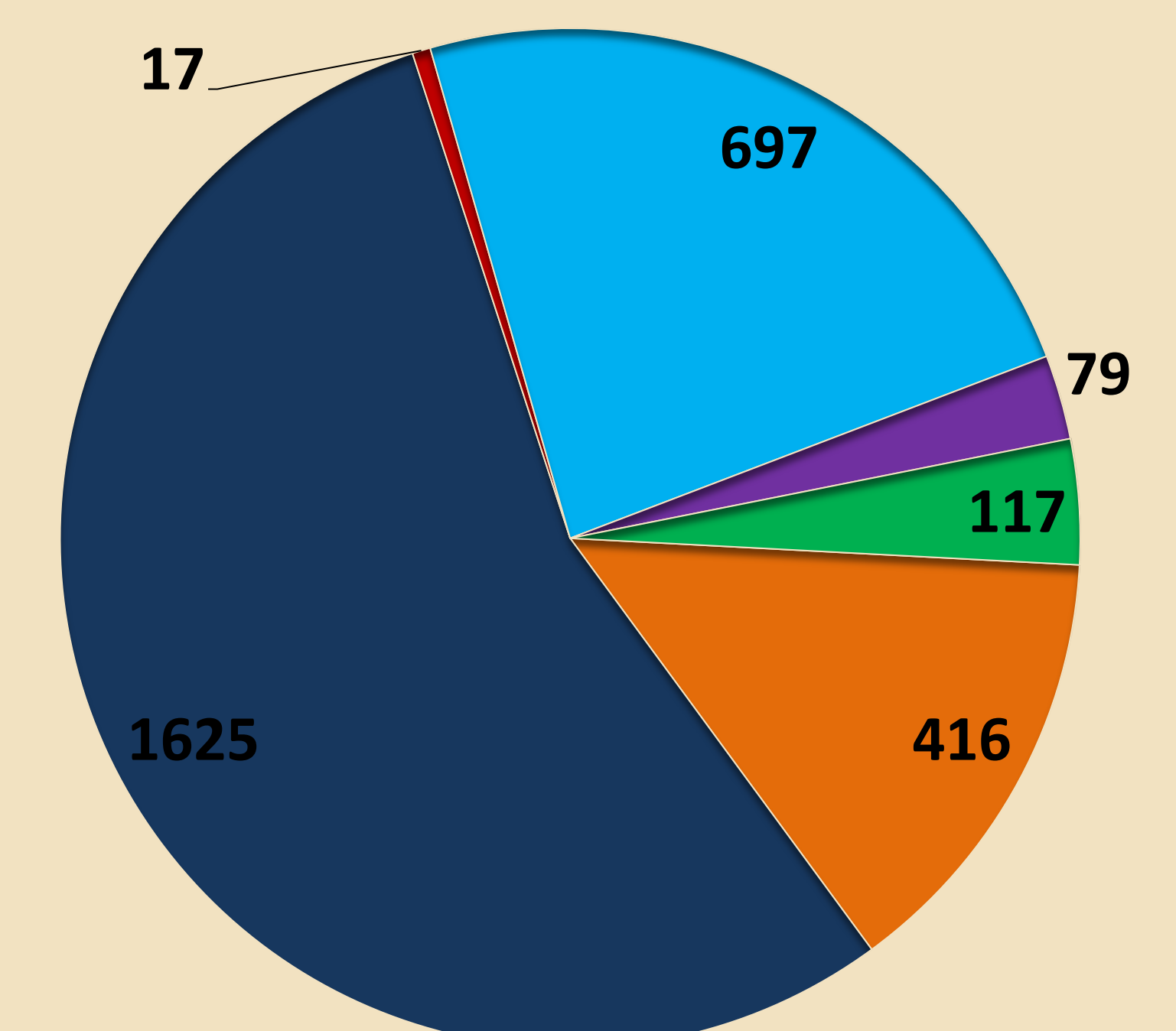
<sup>1</sup>"Now" Statistics Based on the Number of Quotes in *Bartlett's Quotations* (16<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1992). According to *TopVerses.com*, the top five quoted Bible books are 1. Ephesians, 2. James, 3. Titus, 4. 1 John, and 5. 2 Peter.

## COMPOSIT'ION. *n.s.* [*compositio*, Latin.]

The act of forming an integral of various diffimilar parts.

### Quotes by Type

Religious Literary Legal Scientific Linguistic Historic



**Scientific** quotations include philosophy, pedagogy, mechanics and mathematics, as these would all be considered scientific inquiries in Johnson's time. **Linguistic** quotes are from lexicographical resources (dictionaries, encyclopedias, etymologies, etc.).