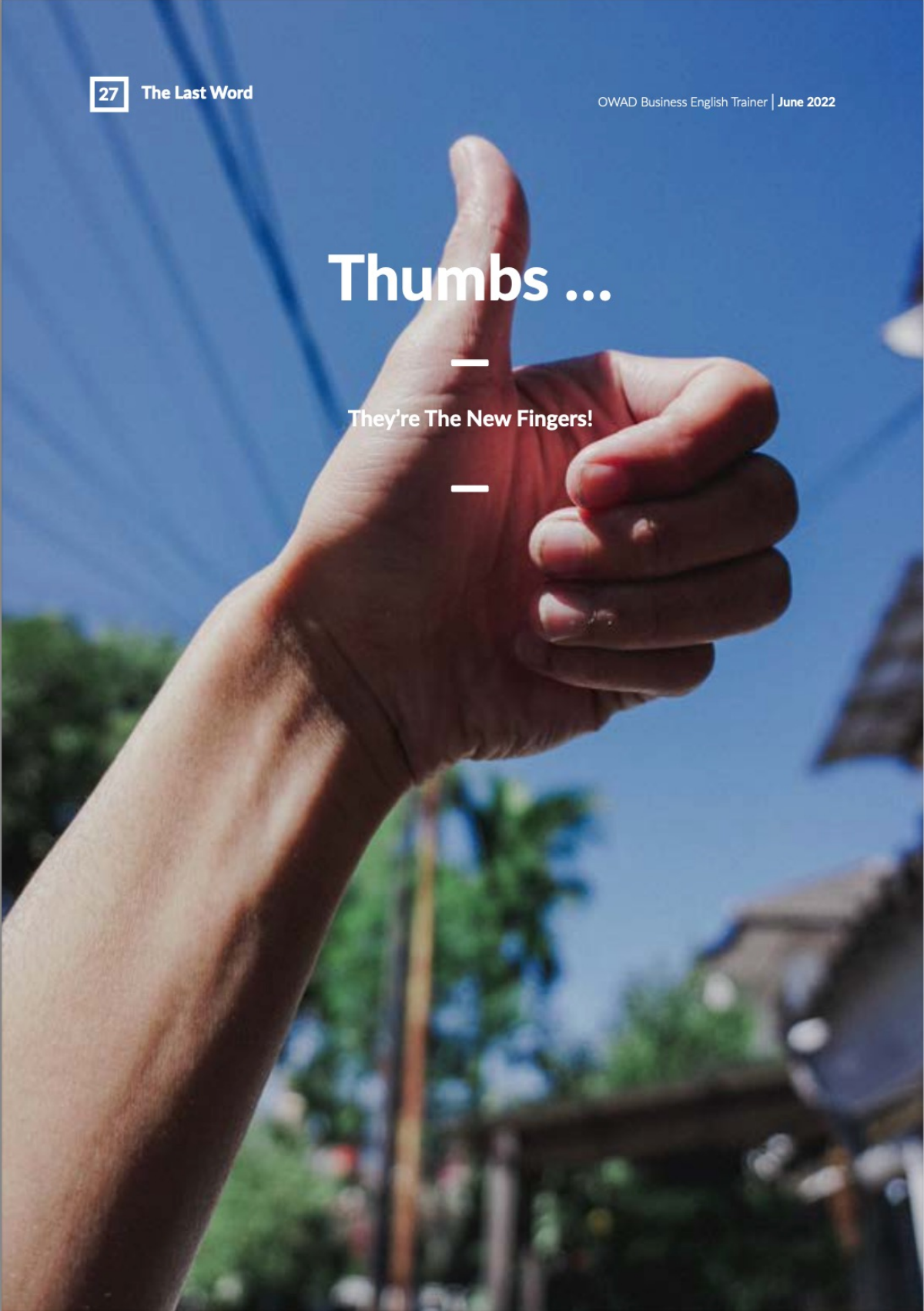


Thumbs ...

—
They're The New Fingers!
—





Want to learn a new English word every day? If so, check out: www.owad.de

If someone is 'all fingers and thumbs' it means that they move their hands in an awkward or uncoordinated way. So, should you drop something on the floor, or spill some beer or wine, you might remark, 'Oh dear, I'm all fingers and thumbs today!'

This expression dates all the way back to the 16th century when it was used to describe **clumsiness** or a lack of **manual dexterity**.

It's ironic that the thumb should be **singled out** for an expression of clumsiness because the transverse human thumb gives Homo sapiens superb manual dexterity and was an important anatomical feature enabling precision toolmaking and, ultimately, writing.

In modern times, the **ubiquity** of smartphones and other hand-held devices may be leading to a physical mutation of the human hand.

Research has shown that the thumbs of teenagers and young adults have overtaken their fingers as the hand's most muscled and dexterous **digit**.

In Japan, such is the extent of this change that young people have been nicknamed the 'thumb tribe' or the 'thumb generation'. Instead of using fingers for common tasks such as pointing or ringing doorbells, they have started using their thumbs.

Dr Sadie Plant, author of the global study 'Thumbs are the new fingers' writes: 'The relationship

between technology and the users of technology is mutual, we are changing each other', echoing the earlier words of Winston Churchill who famously said 'We shape our buildings, then they shape us.'

Language also shapes us. How familiar are you with the following 'thumb idioms'?

- to twiddle one's thumbs = to be waiting with nothing useful to do, to pass the time by twirling one's thumbs
- thumbs down = a sign of disapproval or refusal
- to be under someone's thumb = to be under another's authoritarian control
- to stand (or stick) out like a sore thumb = to be very obviously and often embarrassingly different from the surrounding people or things
- to thumb (or hitch) a ride = to get a ride from a passing motorist
- a rule of thumb = an approximation or guideline, a general principle developed through experiential rather than scientific means.

Here are three interesting rules of thumb:

1. A surname starting with 'Mc' is more likely to be Irish; one starting with 'Mac' is more likely to be Scottish.
2. If you have to choose between

two barbers in a shop, choose the one with the worst haircut: barbers cut each other's hair.

3. 97% of people believe that odd numbers are more believable than even numbers.

Regarding building your English vocabulary, a good rule of thumb for choosing words is: wait until you read or hear a new word or phrase on three different occasions, then you can be reasonably sure that it is statistically important and is therefore worth learning.

Do you have any rules of thumb for learning English? I'd love to hear them!

Paul Smith

P.S. If you have any comments or questions about this article, just drop me a line at: paul@smith.de. I'm always happy to hear from you.

Vocabulary Trainer

• clumsiness	Ungeschicklichkeit
• manual dexterity	handwerkliches Geschick/ Handfertigkeit
• to single sth./ sb. out	etw./jdn. herausgreifen
• ubiquity	Allgegenwart
• digit	Finger/Daumen/Zeh