

retain

VERB

Etymology

Summary

A borrowing from French.

Etymons: French *retenir*, *reteigner*.

< **Anglo-Norman** *retener*, *retenier*, *reteigner*, *reteiner*, *reteingner*, *restenir*, *retiner*, **Anglo-Norman** and **Middle French** *retenir* to keep back for oneself, to take possession of, to guard, keep (for someone), to maintain at one's service, to employ, to keep near one, to detain, to make one's prisoner, to hinder, to restrain, to repress, to control, to prevent the action of, to remember, to maintain in good condition or good repair, (reflexive) to refrain from (all 11th or 12th cent. in **Old French**), to keep in one's body, to fail to eliminate from one's body (13th cent.), to engage, hire (c1317), to take note of (late 14th cent.), to restrain or contain (oneself) (1538), to keep, preserve (a name, trait, etc.) (1546), to maintain (a custom, tradition, etc.) (1588) < **classical Latin** *retinēre* to hold fast, prevent from escaping, to detain, to hold back, stop, to restrain, to keep hold of, to hold in place, to contain, to keep, to continue to use or observe, to continue to have, to recollect, in **post-classical Latin** also to keep attached to one's person or engaged in one's service (from 12th cent. in British sources), to engage or keep (as advocate or attorney) (from 14th cent. in British sources) < *re-* **re-** *prefix* + *tenēre* to hold (see **tenant** *n.*). Compare **Catalan** *retenir* (12th cent.), **Spanish** *retener* (12th cent.), **Portuguese** *reter* (13th cent.), **Italian** *ritenere*, *†retenere* (13th cent.). Compare **retentive** *adj.*¹, **retention** *n.*

Notes



With the form variation compare discussion at [maintain v.](#), and compare also [contain v.](#), [detain v.](#), [pertain v.](#), [sustain v.](#)

With sense [1e](#) compare earlier [retained adj. 1a](#).

With the **Older Scots** past participle form *retent* perhaps compare [retent adj.](#)¹

Meaning & use

1.a. *transitive*. To restrain; to hold back, check, or stop; to prevent or hinder. Frequently with *from*.

c1415-

- c1415
(c1390)

Pere bue mony pinges þat schold **reteyne** ȝowe of vengeance takeinge.
G. Chaucer, *Melibeus* (Lansdowne MS.) (1872) §2682
- 1477

Whan..Hercules and..Iason had **retayned** these Centaures, they had eche of them a bowe whiche they bende.
W. Caxton, translation of R. Le Fèvre, *History of Jason* (1913) 10
- 1481

They armed them and **reteyned** theyr peple that began to flee.
W. Caxton, translation of *Siege & Conqueste of Jerusalem* (1893) xlviii. 88
- 1548

He is bound that he should neuer **retayne** the Swyches from the Emperor.
Hall's Vnion: Henry VIII f. ci^v
- 1595

It is hard to **retayne** a mans consent from that which is said vntil he haue read the reasons of the other party.
W. Allen et al., *Conference Next Succession to Crowne of Ingland* ii. ii. 10
- 1639

Barsimee **retained** by a certaine shamefastnesse..would by no meanes yeeld to marry.
S. Du Verger, translation of J.-P. Camus, *Admirable Events* 279
- 1695

He..had killed him if his Brother Robert had not **retained** him.
W. Temple, *Introduction to History of England* (1699) 287
- 1737

The untouchable foot **retain'd** the grave Spaniards from intermedling in so delicate an Affair.
Gentleman's Magazine January 35/1
- 1791

The quantity of emitted particles may well become adequate to the constitution of a shining fluid,..provided a cause can be found that may **retain** them from flying off.
in *Philosophical Transactions* (Royal Society) vol. 81 87



- 1803** What at first **retained** him from profiting by it, was the painful consideration, [etc.].
J. Pickersgill, *Three Brothers* vol. IV. xi. 326
- 1896** The servant of God interceded for him and **retained** them from giving expression to their outraged feelings, at least until the man was able to escape.
translation of K. Dilgskron, *Life Blessed Gerard Majella* xx. 329
- 1922** Renoir was a great intellect, in nothing greater than in this, that his august critical faculty **retained** him from all digression.
Burlington Magazine June 260/2
- 2003** A young employee..is penalized by a lower wage and this may not only frustrate him, but also **retain** him from producing [etc.].
C. Lonien, *Japanese Econ. & Social Syst.* iii. 60

1.b. transitive (reflexive). To restrain oneself; to contain oneself, exercise self-control.

a1500-

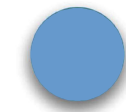
- a1500**
(a1450) For your wurchippe yow most your self **reteyne**, And take a good advise in this mater.
Generides (Trinity Cambridge MS.) 1543 (Middle English Dictionary)
- 1607** He **retayned** himselfe vntill that Supper was ended, then seeing them to enter the Chamber..Hee..first kills the Adulterer, and then his wife.
E. Grimeston, translation of S. Goulart, *Admirable & Memorable Hist.* 31
- 1629** Shee [sc. the soul] can no longer **retaine** her selfe, and..forgetting her selfe, she suffer her selfe to be led and caried away by the violent streame of her passions.
J. Reynolds, translation of L. de Marandé, *Iudgm. Humane Actions* iv. i. 118
- 1703** That they are so accustomed that they can't possibly **retain** themselves.
translation of P. Segneri, *Penitent Instructed* iv. 32
- 1834** Little Margery kept weeping and could not **retain** herself.
W. J. Thoms, *Lays & Legends Germany* xliv. 246
- 1869** Lord Stanley, who **retained** himself during the greater part of the service, was completely overcome.
Daily News 30 October
- 1912** He was beside himself. He talked and laughed aloud repeatedly when alone, scarcely able to **retain** himself.

R. Brown, *When Dreams come True* xxv. 241

- 1999** He noted that the foreign woman **retained** herself implacably. At least she had control.
N. Mones, *Lost in Transl.* i. 20

1.c. *transitive*. Originally: to keep in custody or under control; to prevent from leaving. Later usually of an object: to hold (something) fixed in a place or position; to prevent from becoming separated or detached. **c1515-**

- c1515** My brother and his wyf..I haue **retayned** them in my pryson.
Lord Berners, translation of *Boke of Duke Huon of Burdeux* (1882-7) lxix. 237
- 1577** For empty fystes, men vse to say, cannot the Hawke **retayne**.
H. Rhodes, *Boke of Nurture* (new edition) sig. D.viii
- 1617** On this and the East sides, are two Mills to **retaine** the water when the Sea ebs.
F. Moryson, *Itinerary* i. 51
- 1674** May not one as well curse, whom God blesses, as **retain** or bind whom God remits?
D. Brevint, *Saul & Samuel* 223
- 1720** Cicero..sends immediately certain Senators, to **retain** the People in their Duty.
J. Ozell et al., translation of R. A. de Vertot, *History of Revolutions Roman Republic* vol. II. xii. 242
- 1809** The skin, which alone **retained** his hand to his arm, he cut through.
A. Henry, *Travels & Adventures in Canada* 123
- 1858** In such strictures absorption takes place with remarkable rapidity, by **retaining** catheters permanently in the bladder.
S. G. Wilmot, *On Stricture of Urethra* vi. 129
- 1873** The extra strain on the nails **retaining** it [sc. the bar shoe] to the hoof.
G. Fleming, *Pract. Horse-shoeing* (ed. 2) 100
- 1924** No form of hat was worn, the *tipare* being but a chaplet or band to **retain** plumes.
E. Best, *Maori as he Was* vi. 196
- 1945** The successful design of a cartridge belt requires that the cartridges in it be properly located and **retained** in that position.
C. E. Balleisen, *Principles of Firearms* viii. 82
- 1967** The air escapes through a metal gauze cone, but the animals are **retained** and fall into a collecting jar.



T. Lewis & L. R. Taylor, *Introduction to Experimental Ecology* v. 253

- 2002** A selection of the more traditional prostheses retained by adhesive or aids such as spectacles.
Dental Practice 1 April 14/4

1.d. † intransitive. To refrain from something. Obsolete.

c1540–1602

- c1540** Vespasian..had sic compassion y^t he nicht not retene fra teris.
J. Bellenden, translation of H. Boece, *Hyst. & Cron. Scotl.* iii. xii. f. 34/2
- 1602** They can scarce retaine from bursting foorth In plaine reuolt.
J. Marston, *Antonios Reuenge* v. i. sig. I2^v

1.e. transitive. Medicine. To keep (a substance or tissue, esp. urine) in the body; to fail to eliminate (a substance) from the body or an organ. Occasionally also intransitive.

1569–

- 1569** Remedie the griefes and bloude retayned in the Matrix.
R. Androse, translation of 'Alessio', *4th Bk. Secretes* sig. a4
- 1634** They haue no Intryalls or other inward Organs, by which either to retaine or evacuat.
J. Levett, *Ordering of Bees* 59
- 1657** Melancholly juyce retained in a part doth not so easily putrefie as other Humours.
B. W., translation of B. Bauderon, *Expert Phisician* 24
- 1707** When the String is broke and the Placenta is retained, you must Speedily introduce your Hand..and..bring it away.
translation of de la Vauguion, *Compl. Body Chirurg. Operations* (ed. 2) xviii. 96
- 1797** Others have brought on very tedious..disorders by retaining theur urine too long.
W. Buchan, *Domestic Medicine* (ed. 15) ii. 125
- 1845** By pulling too much at the funis, the placenta may be retained.
E. W. Murphy, *Lect. Nat. & Difficult Parturition* vi. 111
- 1893** It is an appropriate beverage in febrile cases, as it quenches thirst, and can often be retained in the stomach when all other food is rejected.



I. B. Yeo, *Manual of Medical Treatment* iv. v. 89

1949 Their toxins may in some cases be **retained** within the organisms themselves (endotoxins), and are only liberated on their death and disintegration.

H. W. C. Vines, *Green's Manual of Pathology* (ed. 17) vii. 129

1958 Per rectum, in the form of an enema to be **retained**.

Nursing (St. John Ambulance Association) xv. 199

1987 Cows which **retain** the placenta may have abnormally high progesterone and low estradiol-17 β and prolactin concentrations in plasma prior to parturition.

Theriogenology vol. 28 755

2008 At this point, in order to **retain** urine, the detrusor pressure and the disabling micturition neuronal signals increase.

Neurocomputing vol. 71 744/1

medicine

1.f. *transitive*. Of a body, object, material, etc.: to hold or keep something (as liquid, magnetism, etc.) within itself; to contain.

1577-

1577 For the Cleyie ground of it selfe, ouerfast holdeth: but the sandie and rough, in a contrarie maner: so that neyther is wonte to nourish plantes, nor **retayne** water.

Hill's *Gardeners Labyrinth* ii. iii. 5

1646 The subsiding powder dried, **retaines** some magneticall vertue.

Sir T. Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* 68

1702 All their Fields..are made into such Plots as may **retain** the Water on them when they please.

Philosophical Transactions (Royal Society) vol. 23 1207

1773 I cannot forbear mentioning Mr. Brindley's valuable Discovery of making almost any Soil whatever, resist and **retain** Water as well as Clay.

R. Whitworth, *Report & Survey of Canal Waltham-Abbey to Moorfields* 12

1861 To keep our bodies warm, we must either put on warmer non-conducting clothing, to **retain** the heat of the system, or we must consume and digest more food (fuel).

American Agriculturist January 14/3

- 1876** The electro-magnets are excited by a portion of the currents they themselves produce, they **retaining** sufficient residual magnetism to develop the currents.
R. Routledge, *Discov. & Inventions 19th Century* 394
- 1971** Bodies that become electrically charged may **retain** their charge for a very long period and static electric shocks are a commonplace experience.
Journal Atmospheric & Terrestr. Physics vol. 33 581
- 2009** Treating the older skin with niacinamide, which helps skin **retain** moisture, damped down expression of genes related to inflammation.
New Scientist 27 June 11/2

2.a. *transitive*. To keep in one's own hands or under one's own control; to keep back; to keep hold or possession of; to continue to have. Cf. **keep v. II.iii.29a**. Also *intransitive*.

c1425-

- c1425** Sum penyes..he **reteynynd** ..that these with othir of his owne by ofte eschangynge he wolde had multiplied.
Book of Foundation of St. Bartholomew's (1923) 54 (Middle English Dictionary)
- 1438** In youre said covent sustren **reteynen** money and proveis thame selfe privatly ayens the ordir of religion.
in A. T. Bannister, *Registrum Thome Spofford* (1919) 224 (Middle English Dictionary)
- a1475** They may..distreyne & **reteyne** þe distresses tyll þat they be satisfied fully of þe rent.
in A. Clark, *English Register of Godstow Nunnery* (1905) i. 200 (Middle English Dictionary)
- 1583** [He] will yet..notwithstanding **reteane** the same charge, and function to himselfe still.
P. Stubbes, *Second Part of Anatomie of Abuses* sig. N3^v
- 1596** Taking downe the shield, with me [I] did it **retaine** .
E. Spenser, *Second Part of Faerie Queene* iv.x. sig. I7^v
- c1613** To deliver one parte to Mr. Blount, & **retine** another parte for you with the obligation.
in T. Stapleton, *Plumpton Correspondence* (1839) 102
- 1667** His Power no less he seem'd Above the rest still to **retain** .
J. Milton, *Paradise Lost* x. 532
- 1692** For ane quarters retention deduced & **reiteined** by his lordship as the annuelrent..of 3000 merks..granted..to..Patrick Don.

Earl of Galloway's Family Papers 28 April in *Dictionary Older. Scottish Tongue at Retention*

- 1713** We are humbly of opinion..that the Master & Worker..have power to **retain** the Coinage whenever upon the Assay it proves not good.
I. Newton, *Letter* ?December (1976) vol. VI. 51
- 1766** The executor..is allowed to pay himself first; by **retaining** in his hands so much as his debt amounts to.
W. Blackstone, *Commentaries on Laws of England* vol. II. xxxii. 511
- 1810** The sircar, or tusseel-dar, (cash keeper,) receiving one key, and the master **retaining** the other.
T. Williamson, *East India Vade-mecum* vol. I. 209
- 1847** Some men are more competent to acquire than to **retain**.
L. H. Kerr, translation of L. von Ranke, *History of Servia* 288
- 1883** He still aimed at **retaining** the most lucrative of his benefices.
J. A. Froude, *Short Studies* 4th Series i. iii. 27
- 1939** It is usually assumed..that good-will is maximised by cutting prices and **retaining** customers.
Economic Journal vol. 49 543
- 1943** Steps should be taken to **retain** present key-workers and to replace those where production is threatened.
Journal Farm Econ. vol. 25 304
- 1967** There is strong feeling against companies..which **retain** control of an empire with the minimum of capital through 'pyramiding'.
Economist 17 June 1248/4
- 2006** If the buyer withdraws, the vendor will **retain** the deposit.
Place in Sun May 212/2

2.b. transitive. To continue to have or possess (an attribute, quality, etc.).

?a1475-

- ?a1475** The water of Thamyse..floethe by Oxforde, London, vn to the haven of Sandewiche, goenge per in to the este see,
(**?a1425**) **reteynenge** [a1387 J. Trevisa tr. holdeþ; Latin *retinet*] the name of hit paste London by xlti myles.
translation of R. Higden, *Polychronicon* (Harley MS. 2261) (1869) vol. II. 51 (Middle English Dictionary)
- a1500** Oo pynge is souerainly necessary to him..That, all pinges forsaken, he forsake himself..& **reteigne** no ping of propre loue.

translation of Thomas à Kempis, *De Imitatione Christi* (Trinity Dublin MS.) (1893) 55 (Middle English Dictionary)

- 1582** He gaue to the Ports..theyr names, which at this present they doe **retaine**.
N. Lichfield, translation of F. L. de Castanheda, *1st Booke of Historie of Discoverie East Indias* 1 b
- 1637** Still she **retaines** Her maiden gentlenesse.
J. Milton, *Comus* 29
- 1687** A kind of Stone that long **retains** its whiteness.
A. Lovell, translation of J. de Thévenot, *Travels into Levant* i. 10
- 1702** That Aversion most People **retain** against Cold Bathing, as if it would overchil them.
J. Floyer, *Cold Baths* i. ii. 30
- 1756** Shall we borrow and **retain** the faults, the corruptions of the French?
C. Lucas, *Essay on Waters* i. Preface
- 1841** The hills, the forests, and the rivers **retain** their old Celtic names.
I. D'Israeli, *Amenities of Literature* vol. I. 101
- 1871** They always **retain** unchanged their state with respect to heat.
B. Stewart, *Elementary Treatise on Heat* (ed. 2) §12
- 1916** Mr. Green..did think the literary articles obsolete, while to others they **retain** quite a lively interest.
G. Saintsbury, *Peace of Augustans* i. 19
- 1947** The croutons were sauteed in garlic oil, drained, and tossed in at the last minute, to **retain** their crispness.
Gourmet November 4/3
- 1992** Clara always **retained** her diffidence, backing away from the affection she aroused.
L. Gordon, *Shared Lives* ii. 9

2.c. *transitive*. To continue to use, practise, or recognize.

1481-

- 1481** Yf the men in thise dayes vnderstode wel this worde, they wolde **reteyne** more gladly the doctrynes that procede and come fro the mouth of our creatour and maker.
W. Caxton, translation of *Myrrour of Worlde* i. v. sig. b4^v
- 1549** Some [ceremonies] be **retayned** and kept still.
Booke of Common Prayer (STC 16267) Ceremonies f. xxxv*^v

- 1581** The people are not only become warriers, but haue **retained** the customes and rytes of warre.
G. Pettie, translation of S. Guazzo, *Ciuile Conuersation* i. 25^v
- 1605** Which when they found how still I did **retaine**, Th'ambitious course wherein I first beganne.
M. Drayton, *Poems* sig. Hh8
- c1613** I thinke before the Conquest many yeares, We wore the fashion which we still **retaine**.
S. Rowlands, *More Knaues Yet?* 5
- 1654** Both **retein** Communion with the Universal Church.
J. Bramhall, *Just Vindication of Church of England* ii. 7
- 1737** We have good Reason to exclude the 330 Kings..and **retain** only those who have left standing Monuments.
Gentleman's Magazine March 142/1
- 1771** Antient sports of the Highlanders.. **retained** are, throwing the putting-stone, [etc.].
T. Pennant, *Tour in Scotland* 1769 214
- 1855** The Eastern Liturgies still for the most part **retain** the form of asserting the Real Presence.
E. B. Pusey, *Real Presence* (1857) ii. 174
- 1871** It seemed better..to **retain** the order in which Plato himself has arranged this and the two companion dialogues.
B. Jowett in translation of Plato, *Dialogues* vol. III. 320
- 1903** That young generation of 'Intimists' who seem to have **retained** the best principles of the Impressionist masters.
P. G. Konody, translation of 'C. Maclair', *French Impressionists* ix. 196
- 1946** We have deemed it desirable to **retain** the word 'myosin' and to add a prefix which suggests this specific relationship.
Nature 23 March 369/1
- 1999** Single-sex teaching is **retained** up to the age of 16 with co-education in the Post-16 phase.
Times Educational Supplement 7 May (Appointments Supplement) 30/1 (advertisement)

2.d. *transitive*. To pronounce (a sin) unforgiven. Cf. **remit** *v.* I.3a.

1483-

[Translating or with reference to John 20:23, post-classical Latin *quorum retinueritis, retenta sunt*, Hellenistic Greek *ἀν τινων κρατῆτε, κεκράτηνται*].

- 1483** And of whom ye **reteyne** the synnes, they shal be retheyned.
W. Caxton, translation of J. de Voragine, *Golden Legende* f. xxvij/2

- 1526** Whosoever synnes ye remyt, they are remitted vnto them: And whosoever synnes ye **retayne**, they are retayned.
Bible (Tyndale) John xx. f. clj^v
- 1567** Quhais Sinnis ȝe **retene**, ar retenit vnto thame.
Compendious Book of Godly Songs (1897) 7
- 1609** I will so remit wrongs..and so **reteine** them, as I may not induce God to retaine mine to him.
Bishop J. Hall, *Meditations & Vowes* (new edition) vol. I. 598
- 1651** Refuse entrance into his Kingdom, to those whose Sins were **Retained**.
T. Hobbes, *Leviathan* iii. xlii. 277
- 1674** Where the power of Loosing and Remitting, follows close to that of **Retaining** and Binding.
D. Brevint, *Saul & Samuel* 222
- 1711** A Laick's pretending to Bind and Loose, to Absolve and **Retain** Sins.
R. Laurence, *Sacerdotal Powers* v. 123
- 1784** That St. Peter or his successors should have a power of..remitting or **retaining** sins, is too great a power to be intrusted in men,..precluding the divine retribution of justice.
E. Allen, *Reason* xiii. §4. 455
- 1827** The prince of the apostles, to whom Jesus Christ had granted the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and power to remit or to **retain** the sins of men.
J. Thomson, *Letters Moral & Relig. State South Amer.* 132
- 1885** Several professing 'priests', conspicuous..for arrogating to themselves the power to remit or **retain** the sins of others.
R. T. McMullen, *Priestly Pretensions* 12
- 1921** The whole penance system sprang out of 'a commission formally and authoritatively given by our Lord' by which the Apostles were authorized to remit or to **retain** sins.
Journal of Religion vol. 1 438
- 2000** It is to be his presence in the world, the sign and reality of God's saving love, forgiving and **retaining** sins.
L. McTaggart, *Being Catholic Today* xi. 93

liturgical

† *intransitive*. To continue, remain. *Obsolete. rare.*

a1631

a1631 No more can impure man **retain** and move In that pure region of a worthy love.
J. Donne, *To Countess Huntingdon in Poems* (1633) 109

2.f. transitive. To allow (something) to remain in place, instead of discarding or removing it; to preserve.

1683–

- 1683** Whereas that conjunction does disturb the sense,...I am of opinion, that 'tis to be removed. Yet the Fuketian Copy **retains** it.
translation of H. de Valois in translation of Eusebius et al. *Hist. Church* 660 (margin)
- 1758** So many crosses, serving to superstition, ought rather to be removed than **retained**.
T. Newton, *Dissertations on Prophecies* vol. III. xi. 155
- 1764** Whether we ought to **retain** or remove the Accents from our future impressions of Greek books.
Monthly Review April 333
- 1802** Many of the old words are **retaind** which neither the reciter nor copier understood.
W. Scott, *Letter* 10 May (1937) vol. XII. 218
- 1835** But still to this day are **retained** the massive walls.
E. Bulwer-Lytton, *Rienzi* vol. I. ii. i. 177
- 1874** People..still insisted upon calling him 'Sergeant' when they met him, which was in some degree owing to his having still **retained** the well-shaped moustache of his military days.
T. Hardy, *Far from Madding Crowd* vol. II. ix. 100
- 1938** The porch and the entrance were **retained** and improved.
American Home January 58/4
- 1952** In almost every design, a modest number of electronic triggers is **retained**.
Electronic Engineering vol. 24 30/1
- 2008** Lossy compression: A way to reduce the size of digital files that discards data but **retains** essential information.
Indianapolis Star 13 January (Early edition) (Indy Sunday section) 9/2



transitive. To engage, hire, esp. on a temporary basis; to secure the services of (a person).

1437–

In later use perhaps an extended use of sense 3b.

- 1437** He wold require þe sherrief to **reteine** a panel & to sitte for þe pees.
in H. Nicolas, *Proceedings & Ordinances of Privy Council* (1835) vol. V. 39 (Middle English Dictionary)
- 1476** þat no plaier..be conducte and **reteyned** to plaie but twice on þe day of þe saide playe.
in L. T. Smith, *York Plays* (1885) p. xxxvii (Middle English Dictionary)
- 1525** Thei haue **retained** Mathew Ellerton..& John Trumpere, Mynstrells as for the Cite of Couentre.
(1423) *Coventry Leet Book* (1907) vol. I. 59
- 1687** Having **retained** Mules for myself and Company, I made Provisions of Bread, Wine [etc.].
A. Lovell, translation of J. de Thévenot, *Travels into Levant* i. 161
- 1846** If the voter **retained** an agent, is not that professional person included in the costs?
Report of Select Committee Bridport Election Petition (Minutes of Evidence) 110
- 1938** Specialists **retained** as consultants or employed to direct a specific project.
Research—National Resource (Rep. of National Sci. Comm. to National Resources Comm.) vol. III. 44/1
- 1991** Testimony from scientific 'experts', some of whom are **retained** by corporations to cast doubts on the..claims of environmentalists.
20th Century Brit. History vol. 2 146

3.b. *transitive*. To engage (a lawyer, esp. a barrister) by the payment of a preliminary fee, in order to secure his or her services if required.

1541–

- 1541** He **retained** aduocates in pore mens causes.
T. Elyot, *Image of Gouvernance* v. f.10
- 1548** *Clients*..is also he whiche hath **retayned** a lawyer to susteyne his matter.
T. Cooper, *Bibliotheca Eliotæ* (revised edition)
- 1602** Let me **retaine** you this terme for my cause.
2nd Part Returne from Parnassus iv. ii
- 1644** In those large pewes, where those that were **retained** in causes did plead.
J. Bulwer, *Chirologia* 52

- 1745** You must therefore file a Bill in Chancery, and **retain** a Lawyer belonging to that Court.
J. Wesley, *Farther Appeal* ii. 38
- 1775** If the Matter was communicated to the Attorney or Solicitor, as a Secret, before he was employed or **retained** in the Cause.
J. Rayner, *Readings on Statutes* 116
- 1837** 'Mr. Pickwick is the defendant in Bardell and Pickwick, Serjeant Snubbin,' said Perker. 'I am **retained** in that, am I?' said the Serjeant.
C. Dickens, *Pickwick Papers* xxx. 325
- 1892** The erroneous impression that the **retaining** of a barrister consists mainly in the retention of the fee by the barrister retained.
Pall Mall Gazette 4 July 2/2
- 1901** The proceedings are of so simple a character that it is seldom necessary to **retain** a barrister, and the services of a solicitor can often be dispensed with.
W. B. Odgers in *Cent. Law Reform* vii. 234
- 1967** The nurses and the minister **retained** separate attorneys.
J. Barth, *Floating Opera* (revised edition) x. 89
- 2000** He informed them that he was the barrister **retained** by Cleo Anderson's solicitor.
A. Perry, *Twisted Root* ix. 229

law

4.a. *transitive*. Originally: to maintain as a follower or dependent; cf. **retainer** *n.* **2b**. Later also more generally: to keep engaged in one's service; to employ. Now chiefly *historical*.

1449-

- 1449-50** The said duke..beyng **reigned** with you, in your wages of werre..hath often..opened to hym [sc. the king of France]..the privite..of your seid counseill.
Rolls of Parliament: Henry VI (Electronic edition) Parl. November 1449 §23. m. 5
- 1489** I suppose that a capytayne with a companye of folke be **reteyned** in to the kynges wages.
W. Caxton, translation of C. de Pisan, *Boke of Fayttes of Armes* iii. viii. 182
- 1536** The kinges pleasour is ye shal there **reteyne** onely foure clerkes.
T. Cromwell in R. B. Merriman, *Life & Letters of Thomas Cromwell* (1902) vol. II. 38

- 1540** Syr ther was also layde vnto my Charge at myne examenacyon that I hadde **retaynyd** contrarye to your lawse.
T. Cromwell in R. B. Merriman, *Life & Letters of Thomas Cromwell* (1902) vol. II. 267
- ?1542** Many noble men.. **retayne** seruantys, & neuer gyue them peny wagys.
H. Brinkelow, *Complaynt of Roderick Mors* xix. sig. E5^v
- 1623** If this bee done with a single Vowcher, you are to **retaine** three Sergeants.
T. Powell, *Attourneys Acad.* 123
- 1698** The Suffee **retains** several [physicians] in Ordinary and others in Extraordinary.
J. Fryer, *New Account of East-India & Persia* 376
- 1761** A great number of knights were **retained** in his service.
D. Hume, *History of England to Henry VII* vol. I. viii. 168
- 1784** The duties of the secretary at War, Master of ordnance and the..command of any troops which might be **retained** in service.
H. Knox, *Letter* 3 January in G. Washington, *Papers* (1992) Confederation Series vol. I. 6
- 1817** The magistrate..shall **retain** in his service..jesters, and dancers, and athletics.
J. Mill, *History of British India* vol. I. ii. vii. 315
- 1882** Mr. Levy.. **retained** as contributors and critics men who were at least equal to those upon the staff of either of its contemporaries.
C. Pebody, *English Journalism* xix. 145
- 1912** The hospital **retains** a large staff of permanent head-nurses.
M. L. Lyman et al. in L. L. Dock, *Hist. Nursing* vol. IV. iv. 141
- 1962** Earl Thomas of Lancaster in the reign of Edward II..had a large number of men.. **retained** for lifelong service in peace and war in return for grants of land or annual rents.
G. Holmes, *Later Middle Ages, 1272-1485* ii. 29
- 2000** The cost of **retaining** clerks to assist him in keeping tenants' accounts certainly reduced his intake.
R. Hoffman, *Princes of Ireland* iii. 119

historical

† intransitive. With to or unto. To be a retainer to a person; to be a dependant or adherent of. Also in extended use. Obsolete.

1547-1710

In quot. 1710 in figurative context.

- 1547** To whom they sayde they dyde **retayne**.
in *Bulletin of Institute of Historical Research* (1928) vol. 5 189
- 1548** He was **reteynyng** to Sergius Paulus, whiche was proconsull.
N. Udall et al., translation of Erasmus, *Paraphrase Newe Testamente* vol. I. Acts 48 b
- 1548** *Clients*, is he that belongeth or **reteyneth** to som man in authoritee, to haue his defence and assistance in honest causes.
T. Cooper, *Bibliotheca Eliotæ* (revised edition)
- 1591** As many **retaine** unto Noblemen, not to doe them any service, but to have their countenance.
H. Smith, *Sermon* (1637) 156
- 1612** Those other Rils to Seuerne which **retaine**, And 'tended not on Teame.
M. Drayton, *Poly-olbion* viii. 121
- 1646** Not only the Sadduces and such as **retaine** unto the Church of God.
Sir T. Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* 42
- 1681** Most of the Members..thought it an honour to **retain** to some great Lord, and to wear his blew Coat.
H. Neville, *Plato Redivivus* 135
- 1710** Idea! wait a while till I have examin'd thee, whence thou art, and to whom thou **retain'st**. Art thou of ambition's train?
Lord Shaftesbury, *Soliloquy* 320

5.a. *transitive*. To keep or hold in one's mind; to remember.

1474–

- 1474** Longe talis & historyes whiche they can not alle **reteyne** in her mynde.
W. Caxton, translation of *Game & Playe of Chesse* (1883) iv. viii. 183
- 1500** Now vnderstand & **reteyne** wel my wordes.
Melusine (1895) 38 (Middle English Dictionary)
- 1517** Yf you wyll do as I shall to you saye And all my lesson **retayne** in memory.
S. Hawes, *Pastime of Pleasure* (1928) ii. 16
- 1589** Easier to beare away and be **retained** in memorie.

- G. Puttenham, *Arte of English Poesie* i. iv. 5
- 1666** That the said Citizens..may **retaine** the Memoriall of soe sadd a Desolation.
Act 18 & 19 Charles II c. 8 §26
- 1697** The Tune I still **retain**, but not the Words.
J. Dryden, translation of Virgil, *Pastorals* ix, in translation of Virgil, *Works* 43
- 1738** With what Attention I listened to all their Discourses, the better to **retain** them in my Memory.
J. Swift, *Complete Collection of Genteel Conversation* p. lxxviii
- 1782** It requires a pretty good memory to **retain** these distinctions.
J. Priestley, *History of Corruptions of Christianity* vol. I. i. 113
- 1812** In waking thoughts she still **retains** The memory of these wildering pains.
J. Wilson, *Isle of Palms* i. 322
- 1883** The mind..unable to **retain** any but the simplest thought.
H. Wace, *Gospel & Witnesses* iv. 85
- 1902** I am speaking of the facts as I have **retained** them.
Journals House of Commons Canada vol. 37 App. 26
- 1970** His spontaneous speech was frequently interrupted by word searching which resulted from the fact that he was unable to **retain** whole sentences.
D. Bowden, translation of A. R. Luria, *Traumatic Aphasia* v. 138
- 2008** These details struck Dostoevsky so forcibly that he **retained** them from his early reading.
P. Meyer, *How Russians read the French* iii. 94

5.b. *intransitive*. To have or use the faculty of memory; to be able to keep or hold things in the mind.

1581–

In earlier use frequently of the memory itself.

- 1581** That witte maie conceiue and learne well, memorie **retaine** and hold fast.
R. Mulcaster, *Positions* v. 28
- ?1608** It is a painefull thing to vnderstand well, and vnderstanding to retaine well, and **retaining** to vse and practise well.
S. Lennard, translation of P. Charron, *Of Wisdome* iii. xix. 475

1651	Memory to retain, digest and apply. T. Hobbes, <i>Leviathan</i> ii. xxvi. 147
1771	With sense to feel, with memory to retain. T. Gray, <i>Ess. I</i> in W. Mason, <i>Memoirs of Life & Writings</i> (1775) 195
1785	A well-constructed brain, Keen in pursuit, and vig'rous to retain. W. Cowper, <i>Tirocinium</i> in <i>Task</i> 524
1824	They learn exceedingly fast, and retain well. <i>Relig. Misc.</i> 11 July 388/2
1891	To acquire and retain well, the body and mind should be in a healthy condition. E. Brooks, <i>Mental Science</i> 161
1910	The quick learner appears to retain as well as the slow. E. B. Titchener, <i>Text-book Psychology</i> vol. II. 405
1932	Even a boy who didn't retain very well could make a kite out of two or three sticks. <i>New Yorker</i> 23 July 17/3
1995	21 could not remember much of what they heard and 147 only could retain well by listening when they were interested in what they were learning. R. S. Dunn & S. A. Griggs, <i>Multiculturalism & Learning Style</i> i. 2

6. † transitive. To receive (a person) as a guest; to entertain; to harbour. *Obsolete.*

c1540–1748

c1540 (?a1400)	The grekes fayne of þat freike.. Retaynit hym with Reuerence. <i>Gest Historiale Destruction of Troy</i> 10936
?1545	Retayne thou a straunger well, accordyng to his degre. H. Rhodes, <i>Boke of Nurture</i> sig. C.iv
1585	God is woont euer to blesse the countrie, for reteining and releeuing godlie religious strangers. Archbishop E. Sandys, <i>Sermon</i> xiv. 235
1664	Which mov'd Lycurgus to forbid his Citizens to travel or retain strangers above 24 hours in their City, for fear the contagion of vice should come to corrupt the good manners of the Lacedemonians. G. Havers, translation of T. Renaudot et al. <i>General Collection Discourse Virtuosi of France</i> lxxxvii. 511

?1748 The Porter..shall acquaint the Master..if he shall suspect, upon good Reason, any of them to lie out of the Hospital, or to **retain** any Stranger therein.
Rules & Orders rel. to Charterhouse 24

7. † *transitive*. To keep free *from* something. *Obsolete. rare.*

1661–1863

- 1661** When that oppression endanger'd a Lethargick or Apoplectick torpour, he was **retain'd** from that by the flux of blood.
J. Fell, Life Hammond iii. 226
- 1863** He has **retained** the two women from the remotest charge of unfemininity.
C. C. Clarke, Shakespeare-characters viii. 197

Phrases

retain and transfer *noun*

1938–

British Football (Soccer) (now historical). A system in which players at the end of their contracts are placed by clubs on either a list of those to be retained or a list of those to be transferred, their transfer being at the club's discretion; chiefly *attributive*.
The system existed (with various modifications, notably in 1963 and 1978) from the late 19th cent. to 1995, when it was fully abolished under the Bosman ruling; see **Bosman n.**²

- 1938** A result which had completely vindicated the **retain and transfer** system and declared it to be legal.
C. E. Sutcliffe et al., Story of Football League xiii. 120
- 1961** In January the Professional Footballers' Association received a letter from the League Secretary agreeing to the players' interpretation of the new terms, with particular reference to the vexed question of 'retain and transfer'.
Times 15 April 9/3
- 2000** Despite the *Eastham* case [in 1963] the 'retain and transfer' rules—although improved and less oppressive—remained in place.
A. Caiger & J. O'Leary in A.Caiger & S. Gardiner, Professional Sport in EU 201



soccer British English historical

Pronunciation

BRITISH ENGLISH

/rɪˈteɪn/ 
ruh-TAYN

U.S. ENGLISH

/rəˈteɪn/ 
ruh-TAYN

/riˈteɪn/ 
ree-TAYN

Pronunciation keys ▼

Forms

Variant forms

1.



late Middle English	resteyne (probably transmission error), retenne , reteygn , reteygne , reteyign
late Middle English–1500s	reteign , reteigne
late Middle English–1600s	retayne , reteine , retene , reteyn , reteyne
1500s–1600s	retaine , retayn , reteane , retein
1500s–	retain
1600s	retine

Scottish

pre-1700	ratine , retaine , retean , reteane , reteene , retein , reteine , retene , retent (past participle), reteyne , retine , retyne
pre-1700; 1700s–	retain

2. *New English Dictionary* (OED first edition) (1908) also records forms

late Middle English	reteyene , retine
pre-1700	retenne (<i>Scottish</i>)

Frequency

retain is one of the 5,000 most common words in modern written English. It is similar in frequency to words like *border*, *dominate*, *hole*, *investigate*, and *limitation*.



typically occurs about 40 times per million words in modern written English.

retain is in frequency band 6, which contains words occurring between 10 and 100 times per million words in modern written English. [More about OED's frequency bands](#)

Frequency data is computed programmatically, and should be regarded as an estimate.

Frequency of *retain, v.*, 1750–2010

* Occurrences per million words in written English

Historical frequency series are derived from Google Books Ngrams (version 2), a data set based on the Google Books corpus of several million books printed in English between 1500 and 2010.

The overall frequency for a given word is calculated by summing frequencies for the main form of the word, any plural or inflected forms, and any major spelling variations.

For sets of homographs (distinct entries that share the same word-form, e.g. *mole*, n.¹, *mole*, n.², *mole*, n.³, etc.), we have estimated the frequency of each homograph entry as a fraction of the total Ngrams frequency for the word-form. This may result in inaccuracies.

Frequency of *retain*, v., 2017–2024

* Occurrences per million words in written English

Modern frequency series are derived from a corpus of 20 billion words, covering the period from 2017 to the present. The corpus is mainly compiled from online news sources, and covers all major varieties of World English.

Compounds & derived words

Sort by Date (oldest first) ▾

retainable, adj. 1445–

That may be retained (in various senses of the verb); capable of being retained.

retainment, n. 1449–

The action or an act of retaining a person or thing (in various senses of the verb); retention; an instance of this.

retainer, n.¹ 1453–

A sum paid to secure a person's services as and when required.

retain, n. 1455–1621

The action or fact of retaining or keeping hold of someone or something; retention.

retaining, n. c1460–

The action of retain, v. (in various senses); retention; an instance of this.

retainer, n.² 1508–

A contrivance or device which holds something in place.

retained, adj. 1526–

That is or has been kept on or allowed to remain; maintained; preserved; persisting; (also) kept hold of. Originally with modifying adverb, as long...

retaining, adj. 1611–

Serving to retain or hold by physical force or resistance.

retainal, n. 1754–

= retainment, n.

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