

FOUR BYTE WORD TEXT NEWS

JOHN HENRICK
Seattle, Washington

Had he been a novelist, rather than a lyricist, Cole Porter might never have made the musical claim that contemporary novelists use only four-letter words in their writings. Whether the assertion is viewed as prevarication or exaggeration, one thing is clear. No known novel, present or past, has the characteristic proclaimed in "Anything Goes".

Word mavens can easily see why. The most essential building blocks of English are words which fall within the one-, two- and three-letter range. In a corpus of more than a million words, Henry Kucera and W. Nelson Francis found that over twenty per cent of the words were merely repeated occurrences of six, all of them articles, prepositions, or conjunctions: **the, of, and, to, a** and **in**. Prose text of any significant length would be almost unreadable without them.

Of course, titles and individual sentences composed exclusively of four-letter words are possible. All's Well That Ends Well is a Shakespearean example of both. But a whole story?

Proverbially, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. In search of a subject simple enough to provide a starting point, I first considered writing a tale about Dick and Jane, who of course would be referred to throughout as "Dick plus Jane" or "Dick, also Jane". The traditional opening, "Once upon a time", is slightly flawed. To substitute "Some time past" is worse, but paradoxically better. Our old friend "The End" must give way to the strange "Stop Here". Between these extremes, things go from bad to worse, or as one came to write, "from poor unto very poor".

Only palindromists would call such stuff intelligible prose. But could it pass in poetry? I had to try. My first production, mercifully short, was slight in every respect. Its only claim to distinction may be as a rare example of spondaic monometer, to wit:

JULY FOUR, LAST YEAR

Cold dogs,
Warm Coke.
Bugs, rain -
Swat, soak.

Loud bang,
Ears ache;

Stub toes -
Pete sake!

Poetry surpasses prose in syntactic plasticity, but regular meter and rhyme are still encumbrances. In quest of something more substantive, I returned to Shakespeare for ideas. After all, hadn't he provided the splendid title quoted previously? The words were not there, of course, but a thematic model of sorts turned up in As You Like It, Act 11, Scene 7, in the familiar passage beginning "All the world's a stage". The description of the seven ages of man became the focus for my second attempt. Emphatically, this poem is not intended as a simple word conversion of the cited text. No one should experience an Avon calling type of déjà vu. Commonality is confined to rudimentary structural similarity, with not a trace of neo-Tudor tour de force.

MAN'S AGES

Come live.

Once born, bawl. Suck milk, burp, toss back whey. Chew mush, much mush. Leak upon laps. Then grin, fast.

Find toes; suck same. Grab hold, pull, rise, lose grip, fall. Once more. Rise, weak step, trip, fall down. Snap back, firm step; more. Good!

Walk, skip, jump, race. Talk, sing, wash face. Open toys, play.

Next, come away from your room, your home. Into home room. Draw, form clay, mark down your name. Make your mark with math. Read this book, then that. Know what each said.

Fill your mind. Cram. Your goal: pass each exam.

Grow tall, hang cool, don't lose your cool. Look free, some days even feel free.

Date foxy lady; meet nice girl; know love.

Find wife, also home with lawn, tree, view. Have kids. Keep pets. Weed yard.

Toil, earn, save, stay late, look very busy. Show boss your best side.

Take care. Don't bust your butt. Play golf; just putt. Hunt, bowl, pump iron, chop wood. Back pack down some back road. Feel good, like once each week.

Plan. Make huge cash pile. Reap kudo upon kudo. Take bows.

Once over hill, don't sulk. Lean back, seem wise, gain bulk.

Slow down, take your time, grow gray, bald - even both.

Stay away from rush hour pace; take naps; wait.

Some year soon, note that arms, legs will grow thin, weak. More days pass, then mind goes into daze.

One's eyes peer into haze, seek form. Form fogs, fogs form. Skin hues turn pale, fade.

Last, life ebbs away, just goes - slow flow, over, back, away, dark, gone.

Dies irae.

WHOLLY HOLEY HOLY

In a 203-page privately-printed paperback, *Wholly Holey Holy*, J. Frank Summers examines the idiosyncrasies of English orthography. His basic approach to the subject is that of the scientist (before his retirement, Summers was an engineer, a meteorologist, and an oil company executive): he compiled this book over a five-year period by sorting words from unabridged dictionaries into various patterns and inferring from these spelling rules (some well-known, others no doubt original). A sample:

Rule of Natural Assimilation: prefixes such as *ad-*, *ex-*, *in-* change the second letter to match the first letter of the root (*affix*, *immune*, *effeminate*)

Rule of Taboo: certain letters never appear doubled in English (*y*, *x*, *q*, *j*) and no letters appear tripled except with a hyphen intervening (*cross-stitch*)

Rule of Wide and Narrow Consonants: words ending in *e* drop this letter before adding suffixes beginning with *l*, *m* or *n* (*abridgment*, *fledgling*)

Not surprisingly, most such rules are riddled with exceptions, leading to his general Rule of Contempt: very familiar or very strange words violate conventional rules more often.

Linguistic establishmentarians may be discomfited by the author's discussion of orthography in terms of human sexuality. In particular, he divides the alphabet into 13 female letters (*a*, *f*, *h*, *j*, *l*, *n*, *o*, *r*, *s*, *u*, *v*, *w*, *z*), 9 male letters (*b*, *d*, *e*, *i*, *k*, *m*, *p*, *q*, *y*) a trio of transsexual letters (*c*, *g*, *t*) and a single hermaphroditic letter (*x*, the union of *k* and *s*). A typical discussion: "Without *k* the final *c* of *picnic* would either soften or would remain hard and turn Lesbian...the *c* in *mackintosh* is hard, male, and virile, but the *c* in *Macintosh* is butch Lesbian: hard, female."

But it would be a mistake to put this book down for such a reason. There is a wealth of information on English spelling and pronunciation within its pages; I know of no other spelling text that so comprehensively covers the subject. Many people may, in fact, welcome the refreshing iconoclasm of a linguistic outsider. The author's enthusiasm for his subject is evident on every page; this is a labor of love. To order a copy, send \$12.95 to Educational Geodesics, P.O. Box 604, New Braunfels TX 78130 (money back if returned within 15 days).