ANAMONICS

JEFF MYERS
Granville, Ohio
myers@infinet.com

Attention, recreational linguists! Scrabble® players of the world have expanded their reach well beyond memorizing massive word lists and anagramming racks of letter tiles. They do not just sit across a multicolored board from each other and smack their chess clocks and shake their tile bags. For the past two decades or more they have created and are perfecting a little-known niche of word play called *anamonics*.

At the board they use the products of this field of endeavor. Away from the tournament room, though, they apply their best perseverance, humor, and creativity to invent these tools. Then, rather than keep these "tricks" secret, they have a habit of sharing them with their future opponents!

This form of word play is far too entertaining to be kept secret.

Basics

Given the seven letters shown, can a 7-letter word be found? In this case, anamonics can help. If a player knows that the word STATUE has ana anamonic phrase I BID ON RODIN'S COMPOSITION, that player can be certain that a 7-letter word can be formed from these letters because the rack contains STATUE + B, and the phrase contains a B. Seven-letter words can be formed with STATUE and *every letter in the phrase*.

Then, armed with the knowledge that this rack contains a word, the player might have a good chance of unearthing the only word possible: BATTUES.

The art of anamonic-writing involves choosing a "stem" like STATUE -- generally something likely to occur randomly -- finding its set of anahooks, then writing a memorable phrase containing all of its anahook letters. In the case of STATUE, the anamonicist wrote a phrase containing at least one of each of the anahooks: BCDIMNOPRST -- and no other letters.
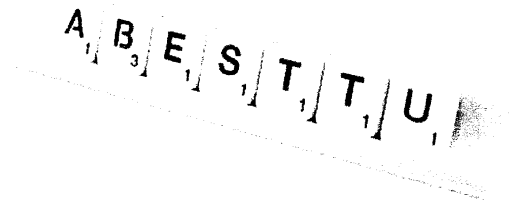
Anahooks: the letters which can be added (*hook*ed) to a certain stem word and then *ana*grammed to make longer words.

Anamonics: phrases which help you remember the anahooks for a given stem.

Context

I have started with an example which is valid for virtually all English-language tournament Scrabble® players. In fact, there are two major lexicons in use: one which I will call TWL06 (generally used in the United States, Canada, Israel, and Thailand), and one commonly called SOWPODS which is used by everyone else, and which is also used in world championships.

Many anamonics only work for one dictionary or the other. The STATUE + B example above happens to work for both. From here on out my examples will be taken from the TWL06 simply because I'm familiar with it. If you'd like to get the UK, Australia, New Zealand, etc. slant on these, check out John Chew's wonderful online list[1] of anamonics.

Anamonics could apply to any games involving anagramming the letters of a word, but they are especially useful if words of a certain length are targeted. In Scrabble®, a significant bonus is given for using all 7 tiles on one's rack, so this places a premium on 7-letter and loner words. These are called "bingos" or "bonus plays."

More six-stems

When a blank tile arises in Scrabble®, anamonics can also assist. If you have the rack shown and if you know that one anamonic for GIRDLE is SWADDLE EUDORA*[3], then you know what 7th letters to try (in order to try to form a 7-letter word). Obviously an S makes GIRDLES or GLIDERS, but those might not fit on the Scrabble® board at the moment. Maybe LEDGIER, RIDGELS, or WERGILD is a word that can be played.

Now it's your turn:
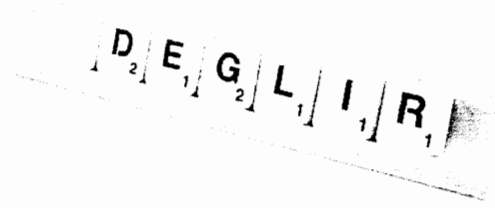
Q1: The word PARENT has anahooks GHILORST. Try your hand at creating a phrase which contains one or more of each of those letters -- and no other letters. Ideally it should relate (at least in your mind) to PARENT. Then compare your anamonic to ones created by others on the answer page.

Q2: The 6-stem DETAIN has anahooks DFIMPRSTUV. Invent an anamonic. [I have yet to find one that really "clicks" for me. Not having A or E or O adds to the challenge.]

Challenge!

A significant part of Scrabble® play is judging words that your opponent plays. This is the defensive side of the anamonics coin.

If your opponent plays OTARIES, one way to tell whether it is good (especially if you have seen OTARY in various contexts for years) is to notice that the rack contains TORIES. One anamonics for this is BUNCH OF OLD GRUMPS. It can be challenged off the board. (Apparently those "eared seals" live in SOWPODS[2]-land. It *is* included in that lexicon.)

Q3: Based on anamonics seen so far in this article, how can you be sure that your opponent's last play of GRINDLE is a phony and can be "challenged off the board"?

Fairly often, the set of anahooks does not contain a vowel[3]. The standard solution is to append an asterisk in front of the anamonic. Then you may use any vowels you want. For example, ARIOSE has anahooks BCDNPV. One anamonic is "*DIVINE BEBOP PACE." The asterisk says "ignore all of the vowels in what follows."

Q4: Try writing an anamonic for ROADIE which has anahooks DLNSVX.
[Start with an * and then freely use A, E, I, O, and/or U.]

Sixes Top Ten List

Here are a few famous anamonics for six-stems which occur fairly frequently:
AROUSE: *ORGAN DECIDES
GERMAN: LOST TO ALLIES
NATURE: VISIT GOD'S SCHOOL
ORANGE: DO WORMY ORBS COST?
RAINED: DAMP RAINS BROUGHT HAVOC
RETAIL: HUCKSTERS PEDDLE; MEN BUY
RETINA: THE RED PUPIL PREFERS MUCH WINKING
SENIOR: OLD MVP JOGS WITH A CRUTCH
SENORA: GLUM SUPERBITCH
WAITER: A MAN RAN PANS

When I first saw lists of these mnemonics a few years ago, I was amazed at the connections between stem and anamonic. But having created quite a few of my own, I now see it as an interesting and unending challenge, but not nearly as mystical.

A Bit of History

According to Joe Edley, three-time U.S. National Scrabble® Champion, the study of sets of anahooks seems to have begun in the 1980s. A number of expert players began independently investigating them. Mike Baron's *WordBook* contained one of the first published lists of anahook sets in 1987.

The term *anamonic* appears to have been coined by Bob Lipton in a letter to Nick Ballard in about 1991. The term shows up heavily in various issues of *Medleys*[4]. Ballard & Carroll state, in 1992, that anamonic is short for "<u>ana</u>hook <u>bingo</u> mn<u>emonic</u>."

Seven-stems

When used to find a word to play, six-stems are all about working with the 7 tiles on your *rack*. Seven-stems, on the other hand, address playing an 8-letter word by using a letter which is available on the *board*.

For simplicity, I covered sixes first. *Medleys*[4], back in 1992, began introducing anamonics with lists and contests involving *sevens* first. Sixes were investigated later..

Consider the rack at the right. A player who knows the anamonic FENCEABLE PLACES for NATIONS can begin searching the board for F, or E, or N, etc. If an A is available in the right location, SONATINA could be played. If F, FONTINAS might fit the board. Etc.

Q5: Anagram practice:
NATIONS + F = FONTINAS
NATIONS + E = ?
NATIONS + N= ?
NATIONS + C= ?
NATIONS + A= SONATINA
NATIONS + B = ?
NATIONS + L= ?
NATIONS + P = ?
NATIONS + S = ?

Sevens Top Ten List
Here are some memorable anamonics for seven-stems:
ADOPTER: BE A GAL'S PARENT
APRONED: *CHEF MIXED GOOD TARTS
CALORIE: *BLINTZES PER HOUR
COINAGE: *MONEYS
LATRINE: MOVING FUNNY SPICES
OVARIES: *DEEP, DELICATE ORGANS
PAINTER: GATHERED OILS
READING: BED HABIT MOSTLY
SLANDER: CALL GOD A PIOUS CHUMP
TOENAIL: *GRIPS BED

Q6: Using the anamonic phrases above, which of these words is/are not valid?
ATELONIC, BOVARIES, COVARIES, PURATINE, and RATLINER

Q7: Try writing an anamonic for RESTAGE. Its anahook set is BDEMNRST. If you prefer, tackle ERGATES (worker ants) instead. In either case, your only vowel ie E.

Q8: Is there any chance that PRESTAGE is good?

Change Is Good

As I have mentioned in the references[2], English-speakers currently play under different dictionaries. Sometimes, SOWPODS anamonics might need an extra letter or two. Try a TWL06-to-SOWPODS challenge:

 Q9: In the TWL06 lexicon, one anamonic for LANDER is BALD EAGLE DOUBLES BACK HOME. The larger SOWPODS dictionary includes DEARNLY, so a Y must be added to the anahooks for a SOWPODS anamonic. Try it.

Our prior lexicon, TWL98, gave us the amusing anamonic SARDINE: VAPOROUS TROUT ON A BAGEL. In 2006, SARDINE became a *verb* which meant that the anahook set gained the letter D. Changing "trout" to "darter" ('snail darters' are a famously endangered species in the U.S.) would work, but I have decided to honor the new (squeezing in) meaning of the word with PLANE'S OVERBROAD GUEST. Not nearly as funny, but it has meaning for me!

UNIDEAL used to have *HOLE IN CANOE as one anamonic. The new 2006 word UNMAILED adds an M to the anahook mix. Fortunately, a surprisingly simple fix is to switch to *HOLE IN OOMIAC. Unfortunately, OOMIAC, OOMIACK, OOMIAK, UMIAC, UMIACK, UMIAK, and UMIAQ all exist in our dictionary, so the user will have to know which one!

Q10: TWL98's fairly standard amanomic for DANCER was LEPT HUSKILY which also reminded players of the less common spelling of the verb. Back at that time I figured I would forget about LEPT/LEAPT, so I rewrote it as SYLPH LIKES TUTUS. TWL06 adds the words ACORNED and DRACENA, so both "O" and "A" need to occur in the anamonic now. Bring both the standard anamonic and mine up to date.

Shock Value

One of the first anamonics I ever read, back in 1998, was PRIEST: EVERYONE COMPLAINED OF THE SODOMY. I couldn't believe it. The letters in that phrase -- no more and no less -- could combine with PRIEST to make 7-letter words. Someone with humor and/or a political agenda took the anahooks of PRIEST and came up with a famously memorable phrase.

Under TWL06, PRIEST + U = PERITUS. This demands that the phrase above now include a U. One simple fix is: EVERYONE COMPLAINED OF YOUTH SODOMY. Now maybe even more startling.

In writing mnemonics, shock value can help make the word "stick." But if that wording doesn't impress you, an alternative is to invent a new phrase which somehow makes sense with STRIPE. Or SPRITE. Etc. Any phrase which incorporates the letters ACDEFHILMNOPRSTUVY and no others, with any number of duplications, would suffice. Of course some more-or-less logical connection to the stem is a plus.

A well-known anamonic for INCEST (under TWL98) was somewhat shockingly worded. One player changed this to INSECT: I SPY A JAR OF HORSEFLIES when it became awkward to explain the classic phrase to a young relative. I adopted his change. Then in 2006, when anahooks N and U were added, I modified his to HAPPILY A HORSEFLY SOJOURNS.

Psychology

I find that the search for a word on my rack has a much greater chance of success if I know in advance that a word *can* be found. For one thing, I'm willing to spend a bit more time at the task. Also, as a not-very-good poker player, I imagine that opponents can "read" me with great accuracy, so knowing a word is in there helps.

More than once I have found the most feasible-sounding word that I could and played it. And more than once my opponent, who also knew that those letters could make a word (possibly via anamonics) accepted my play even when it was not good.

Variations

Beyond the standard anamonics described so far, some anamonicists have:
* studied *unistems* - stems with exactly one anahook letter:
    for example, learning that ROADEO, HOAGIE, OURARI, CURARI, GUITAR, HAIRDO,
    and thousands of others, have only S as an anahooks, no matter how you anagram things
* ignored the real meaning of a word altogether, as with:
    ALIENER: *GUIDES SPACECRAFT
* taken some non-word stems and split them into pairs of words:
    *ICE-ART: PHOTOGS LOOK NORTH[3]
    *EAR-TUNE: *DO I HEAR CHIMES?
* relaxed the standards of what is a word:
    *TOADIER: *SLICKER VARMINT[3]
    *CELINE: TORTUOUS CHORDS
* memorized lists of words which have no anahooks at all (called *null stems*):
    EATERY, GOTTEN, MOATED, and YONDER have no anahooks at all

Some players, including the coiner of the term *anamonics*, like to attack the longer phrases in reverse. They write *negamonics* which focus on the letters NOT included in a set of anahooks. For example, the six-stem TISANE has a regular anamonic of MAKES EXCELLENT HERB TEA; GIVES FOOD A POWERFUL BUZZ. The negamonic approach finds a way to remember that all letters work except for J, Q, and Y.

Surprise Application

My wife's love of poetry has an unexpected practical use. When she needs to get through, say, a 60-minute MRI exam in a cold, cold room, she can calmly work her way through *The Highwayman* or Frost's *Mending Wall*. I admit to having felt jealous, since all I knew were couple of limericks.

But now, with a few hundred anamonic phrases under my belt, I have discovered a non-Scrabble® use for them. They provide me with an always-available set of puzzles. While undergoing my second session of root canal work on tooth #15, I conjured up my anamonic for LOITER which is UP JUMPS TV FUN, and tried to mentally come up with the anagrams for LOITER + U, LOITER + P, etc. Frankly I didn't do too well, but it succeeded in keeping my mind off #15.

Lastly

Anamonics are useful tools, at least for Scrabble® players. For many of us the real value is in the writing. And the best of both worlds is to create an anamonic and then call upon it in the heat of battle!

I apologize in advance for challenging off your REPOMAN over a Scrabble® board in Boston someday. You see, I know MOANER: CHILD IS CAVILING PITIFULLY!

REFERENCES:

1. John Chew maintains a website where anamonics can be found. It can be accessed at www.math.toronto.edu/jjchew/scrabble. His email address is jjchew@math.toronto.edu. John's "TWL2" and "TWL2005" are the same as my "TWL06."

2. For simplicity, the tournament-Scrabble®-playing world calls A, E, I, O, and U the vowels. Not Y. Not W, even though we have CWM and CRWTH.

3. Asterisks (*) are used in three ways:
> at the beginning of an anamonic phrase, * means "ignore A, E, I, O, and U";
> after a word within the phrase, an * is a reminder that the word is not a legal word in itself;
> at the beginning of a stem an * reminds us that the stem is not a word.

4. *Medleys* (produced by Nick Ballard & Charlie Carroll from 1991-1993) is available on CD from Joel Wapnick at jwapnick@music.mcgill.ca .

How can I find Oscar Thumpbindle?