

CREATIVE CHRONOGRAMS

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Chronogram? What's that? A new digital watch?

Not quite. It's an intriguing form of word play, more popular several centuries ago than it is today. If you like tinkering with words and enjoy a creative challenge, then chronograms are for you. But a note of caution is in order: chronograms can be addicting.

I was addicted after I saw my first chronogram in Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary of Unusual, Obscure, and Preposterous Words, where the following entry is tucked in between CHRISOM and CHRYSOLOGY:

CHRONOGRAM: an inscription containing the correlative date in Roman numerals

I was fascinated by the possibilities and immediately set about making my own. My first success was not particularly brilliant, but it was enough to hook me. For the record, here it is:

1969 (first lunar landing): MCMLXIX
Man Can Make Lunar eXcursions In eXtravagance

Others quickly followed:

1492 (Columbus discovers the New World): MCDXCII
"Made Certain Discoveries eXtraordinaire!" Columbus Informed Isabella

1776 (Declaration of Independence): MDCCLXXVI
Modern Democracy Created Certain Laudatory eXperiment eX-tolling Virtuous Independence

If you too are starting to be fascinated by the possibilities, why not try creating some of your own? All you'll need is a table of Roman numeral conversions (found in most dictionaries), lots of scratch paper, some spare time, and either a history book or a friend with an eidetic memory (to provide dates).

When you're all set, you'll find it easier to get started if you pick dates which convert into short Roman numerals, as seen here:

410 (barbarians plunder Rome): CDX
Christians Develop Xenophobia

1215 (Magna Carta): MCCXV
Magna Carta Contract eXhibits Virtue

You need not limit yourself to dates correlating with specific historical events. Another area of endeavor is to describe a person's life using his (her) birth or death date:

1847 (Jesse James' birth): MDCCCXLVII
Male Desperado Caught Carrying Cash eXcites Local Vigilantes
Into Interference

You can also make personal chronograms by commemorating important events in your own or a friend's life. This area of approach opens up quite a few dates -- birth, graduation, marriage, and so forth.

Finally, you can use chronograms as a quiz to share with others. In the following examples, I have provided only the chronogram. Convert the inscription to its corresponding date, then try to guess the event. Answers are given in Answers and Solutions at the end of this issue.

1. Many Daring Colonists Venture In Isolation
2. Man's Creativity Manifested In Impossible Invention
3. Majestic Comet Marvels eXperts
4. Man Conquers Mountain's Last Incredibly Intriguing Impediment

Editor's Note: Paul Hellweg has placed more constraints on the chronogram than its early practitioners did; all that was required was that the Roman letters in the date be used somewhere within the phrase, in any order. For example, the date 1652 (MDCLI) was included on the title-page of a book by concealing it in the author's name: franCIIs goLDsMIth. In one tour de force, each line of a 100-line poem contained the letters in 1634 (written in various forms, such as MCCCCLLLLXVVVVIII or MCCCCLLLL VVVVVVIII). The first and last lines:

angeLe CæLIVogI MIChaeL LVX UnICa CætUs
VersICVLIs InCLVsa, fLVent In sæCVLa CentVM

Note that there are no extra examples of M, C, L, V or I used in the line, a restriction that Hellweg does not impose.