

DCTNR WRDS WHT VWLS

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Despite the promise of the title, this article is not concerned with the intelligibility of dictionary words without vowels (that is, with the letters AEIOUY removed), but instead with that tiny group of words which contain no vowels at all. For the sake of completeness, we include a considerably larger group of words which appear vowelless, but in reality are not -- words which use the letters V or W to represent vowel sounds. On the other hand, we do not include two burgeoning classes of vowelless words quite familiar to the average reader -- abbreviations such as MR., MRS. or DR. which are pronounced as if the full word were present, and acronymic words such as TV, DDT, MPH or TNT, usually printed in capitals and invariably pronounced by spelling out the individual letters. A crossword puzzle using all these types of vowelless words (of three letters only) was presented by Darryl Francis in the August 1975 Word Ways.

Our examples are drawn from two sources, the Oxford English Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster Unabridged (Second and Third Editions). We do not claim completeness, but feel that we have located most of the examples in boldface type, together with occasional textual examples. Additions are welcome, as well as extensions to other dictionaries.

Perhaps the commonest class of vowelless words are interjections which onomatopoeically represent various sounds -- usually human-produced, but occasionally by animals or inanimate objects.

BRRR a sound of shivering
GRR sound of a dog
HM H'M expression of assent
HSH hush
PST to attract attention, or enjoin silence
SH hush
ST silence, quiet
TCH vexation and disgust
TCK surprise and displeasure
TPRW imitation of the sound of a horn
TST hissed sound enjoining silence

Of these, **BRRR** and **TPRW** are found only in the OED (the latter in a quotation from 1430). The difficulty with onomatopoeic words is in ac-

curately representing the underlying sound; as Maxey Brooke showed in "Hark the Bark" in the February 1975 Word Ways, the same sound can be represented in substantially different ways by different nationalities. Even within a nationality, variation is encountered; for example, the OED has under SH illustrative quotations spelling it s-s-sh, 'sh, shshshsh, sh-sh-sh and s-s-s-s-s-s-sh. Readers of comic strips encounter a far wider variety of idiosyncratic spellings of sounds.

A second class of vowelless words is represented by contractions, usually (but not always) written with an apostrophe. The following list, probably incomplete, is taken from the OED and Webster's Second.

CH pronoun, an aphetic form of ich
 'LD colloquial contraction for would or should
 'LL colloquial contraction of will
 N'T NT colloquial contraction of not
 'RT contraction of art
 SH' elision of she, as in sh'as (she has)
 'ST contraction of hast
 TH TH' contraction of the

In addition, Webster's Third explicitly lists all the letter plurals, both with and without apostrophes (BS, B'S).

Are there any no-vowel words that are neither onomatopoeic nor contractions? We know of only one: NTH, found in both Webster's and the OED.

Nearly all of the apparently vowelless words -- those that use V or W to represent vowel sounds -- date back several centuries; the only modern examples we know of are:

CWM /koom/, a Welsh word meaning 'cirque'
 CRWTH /krooth/, a variant of 'crowd', a Celtic stringed instrument

These are found in both Webster's and the OED. The other examples are purely OED, and are given below with their century of citation (minus 10). V is an abbreviation for 'variant of'.

BRWK 6v brook; BWRCH 5v burgh
 CRWD, CRWTH v crowd (Welsh fiddle); CWM cirque
 DRW 5v drew; DRWN 5-6Scv drown; DW 6Scv do; DWK 5v duke;
 DRW 6Scv door
 FLW 5v flue (fishing-net); FRWT 6Scv fruit
 GRW 5v grow
 HV 3v how; HVNT MEv hunt; HW 3-4v how; HWNT 4Scv hunt;
 HWR 6v whore; HWS 6Scv house; HWSZ 6Scv house
 MV v mew (in 1440 quote); MWFF 5v move; MWK 6Scv muck;
 MWNK 6Scv monk; MWR 4-5Scv moor; MWT 3-6Scv moot;
 MWTHT 6Scv mouth
 NV 2-3v now; NW 4v now; NWN 5Scv nun
 PLWCH 6Scv plough; PRW 3-4v prow (profit); PWF 6Scv puff;

PWL 5cv pool; PWN 5cv pun; PWNT 5cv point; PWT 6Scv put
 RVN 6Scv run; RWCH 6Scv rough; RWD 5Scv rood
 SCHW 6v she; SCHWLL 5Scv shovel; SCHWT 5Scv shoot; SCWCH
 6v such; SKWFF 6Scv scoff; SNWK 4-5v snook (promontory);
 SPRWS 4v spruce; SPVRN 6v spurn; SPWRN 5Scv spurn; STW
 5v stew; SWK 4-5Scv suck; SWLC 3v such; SWLCH 3v such;
 SWLD v should; SWM 5cv some; SWN 4v sun; SWRD 6Scv sword;
 SWT 6v suit; SWTH 6v sooth
 THRW 4Scv through; THRWCH 6v through; THWS 4Scv thus; TRW
 6v true; TRWMP 4Scv trump (sound a trumpet); TVV v two
 (950 quote); TWCH 6v tough; TWM 5cv toom (vacant); TWN
 5-7Scv tun; TWNG 4-6Scv tongue; TWRN 4-6Scv turn; TWRSS
 5v truss; TWITH 6Scv tooth
 VCH MEv each; VD v uds (an oath, in 1611 quote); VDS v uds (an
 oath, in 1607 quote); VG, VGG 5-6v ug (inspire with disgust);
 VH v uh (a coughing sound, in 1605 quote); VLM v elm (in 1382
 quote); VM v um (them, in 1606 quote); VMB v umbe (around,
 in c1400 quote); VMH v umh (umph, in 1614 quote); VMFF v
 umph (in c1568 quote); VN v on (in c1400 quote); VNCT v unct
 (anoint, in 1596 quote); VND v und (wave, in 1592 quote); VP
 4-7v up; VPP 4-6v up; VR v our (in c1300 quote); VRN 5v urn;
 VS 3-7v us; VSS 7v us; VSSH 5v ush (come out); VSZ 6v use;
 VT v out (in c1250 quote)
 WGG 6v ug (inspire with disgust); WLF 3-4v wolf; WLT 5-6v vult
 (face); WNT 4-5Scv wont; WP 5-6Scv up; WR 4v our; WRD 3v
 word; WRM 3,5v worm; WRN 6Scv urn; WRS 3v worse; WRST
 3-4v worst; WRT 3v wort; WS 7Scv us; WSCH 5-6v ush (come
 out); WSS 5-6Scv use; WSZ 6Scv us
 XWLD 5v should