

WORDS FORMED BY RADIO CALL LETTERS

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Call letters are assigned to AM radio stations by the Federal Communications Commission: four letters beginning with W in the eastern US, four letters beginning with K in the western US. (In the early days of radio, three letters were also assigned, and a few radio stations of this kind can still be found.) It is interesting to ask whether or not AM radio station owners have a preference for call letters which form common English words. According to the 1979 Broadcasting Yearbook, an industry source on broadcasting data put out by Broadcasting Publications, Inc. of Washington, D. C., there are 4547 commercial Am stations operating in the US (as of December 1978). Of these, the following 72 stations have call letters which form four-letter words found in boldface type in the Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary:

KALE	Richland WA	WEAN	Providence RI
KEEL	Shreveport LA	WEED	Rocky Mount NC
KEEN	San Jose CA	WEEN	Lafayette TN
KEEP	Twin Falls ID	WEEP	Pittsburgh PA
KELP	El Paso TX	WEIR	Weirton WV
KICK	Springfield MO	WELD	Fisher WV
KILT	Houston TX	WEND	Ebensburg PA
KINE	Kingsville TX	WENT	Gloversville NY
KING	Seattle WA	WERE	Cleveland OH
KITE	Terrell Hills TX	WEST	Easton PA
KNEW	Oakland CA	WHEN	Syracuse NY
KNOT	Prescott AZ	WHET	Waltham MA
KNOW	Austin TX	WHIM	Providence RI
KOOK	Billings MT	WHIP	Mooreville NC
WAGE	Leesburg VA	WHIR	Danville KY
WAIL	Baton Rouge LA	WHIT	New Bern NC
WAIN	Columbia KY	WHIZ	Zanesville OH
WAIT	Chicago IL	WICK	Scranton PA
WAKE	Valparaiso IN	WIDE	Biddeford ME
WALK	Patchogue NY	WIFE	Indianapolis IN
WALL	Middletown NY	WILD	Boston MA
WANT	Richmond VA	WILE	Cambridge OH
WARD	Pittston PA	WILL	Urbana IL
WARE	Ware MA	WILY	Centralia IL
WARM	Scranton PA	WIND	Chicago IL
WASP	Brownsville PA	WINE	Brookfield CT
WATT	Cadillac MI	WING	Dayton OH
WAVE	Louisville KY	WINK	Fort Myers FL
WEAL	Greensboro NC	WIRE	Indianapolis IN

WHAT Philadelphia PA
 WIRY Plattsburgh NY
 WISE Asheville NC
 WISP Kinston NC
 WITH Baltimore MD
 WOKE Charleston SC
 WOLD Marion VA

WOLF Syracuse NY
 WOOD Grand Rapids MI
 WOOF Dothan AL
 WORD Spartanburg SC
 WORM Savannah TN
 WRAP Norfolk VA
 WREN Topeka KS

In addition, WAYS Charlotte NC, WIGS Gouverneur NY, WINS New York NY and WITS Boston MA are plurals of common three-letter words, and WHAM Rochester NY, WHEE Martinsville VA and WHOP Hopkinsville KY are slang words not in the Pocket Dictionary.

Does this demonstrate a bias in favor of common words? There are $17576 = 26 \times 26 \times 26$ possible combinations of four letters beginning with W, and a similar number beginning with K; AM radio stations have used $4547/2(17576) = 0.13$ of the total. On the other hand, the 72 words listed above form 0.55 of the 130 four-letter boldface words beginning with K or W in the Pocket Dictionary, a significantly greater fraction.

The reason behind the choice of a particularly word for a radio station is occasionally obvious. Four appropriate choices are WIND for Chicago (the Windy City), WING for Dayton (the home of Wright-Patterson AFB and the Air Force Museum, as well as the birthplace of Orville and Wilbur Wright), WOOD for Grand Rapids (home of many furniture manufacturers), and WEST for Easton (the opposite of East).

On the other hand, some words were selected accidentally, as a by-product of other considerations. WARE is in the town of Ware, and KING is in King County, Washington; WEIR is in Weirton, and WALL is in Middletown, in the Wallkill valley.

Finally, it is worth asking why certain common words do not appear in the above list. KEPT, KILO, KIND, KINK, KISS, KNIT, KNOB, WARP, WART, WARY, WASH, WHOM, WIVE, WONT and WORK have been assigned to FM radio stations. Call letters not currently assigned to either AM or FM forming common words are listed below; the number is the count of occurrences in the Kucera and Francis list of one million words sampled from English-language printed sources of 1961 (see the August 1978 Word Ways).

well 897	wore 65	knee 35	kids 32	warn 11
week 275	kill 63	weak 32	wars 26	wool 10
wish 110	wear 36	keys 34	worn 23	wipe 10

It seems unlikely that KILL, WEAK or WARS will ever be used, and WEAR, WORE, WORN and WIPE have negative connotations as well.

The affinity of radio stations for extremely common words is striking: the five commonest words (with, were, when, will, what) are all used, and only five of the top 37 words are not represented on either AM or FM.