

SYLLABILITIES

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The August 1969 and February 1970 issues of Word Ways contained several comments on word lengths as measured by the number of letters and the number of syllables. Obviously, it is high time to examine these problems in detail. Before we start, we establish ground rules. Our authority shall be Webster's New International Dictionary, Third Edition; only if this is exhausted, or some special case arises, may a different authority be used.

Part I

We start with one-syllable words with one letter. There are 25 of these: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, X, Y and Z. Surprised? Each letter of the alphabet is a legitimate word.

We next consider two-syllable words with two letters. Symbols and abbreviations, even if they are also used as nouns, are excluded, since they ordinarily contribute nothing of interest. We find:

AA	rough lava	IO	hawk
AI	three-toed sloth	MR	masculine title
AU	swordfish	OK	all right
BB	shot pellet	OO	Hawaiian bird
BC	(with soil) type	QT	quiet
CB	(with cap) size	RH	(with factor) type
CQ	start of wireless message	RX	prescription
EA	river	SS	plural of S
FF	member of first family	TD	clay pipe
GI	military	VT	(with fuse) proximity
HS	plural of H	XS	plural of X
IE	screw pine	ZS	plural of Z

We move on to three-syllable words with three letters. Unfortunately, we must reject the example in the February 1970 Word Ways. This word, OII, the muttonbird, is not in the Third Edition. Is all lost? Is there no three-syllable, three-letter word? No, indeed.

We find: FBI government agency, OIC lard-type swine, and PBX private branch switchboard.

On to four-syllable, four-letter words! This seemed so difficult, if not impossible, that the last two issues of Word Ways considered the easier problem of three-syllable, four-letter words. My list of these (omitting definitions) reads:

AERO	AREA	IIWI	ODEA	UNIO
AERY	ARIA	IORA	O HIA	URAO
AIDA	ARIE	IOTA	O HIO	UREA
AGIO	ARUA	IOWA	O LEA	URIA.
AKIA	ARUI	ITEA	OLEO	UTIA
AMIA	EOAN	IXIA	OLIO	UVEA
ANOA	IDEA	KOAE	ULUA	

All except ARUA, ARIE, IORA and KOAE appeared in the February issue of Word Ways. However, we must reject AANI, AARU, AGAO, EDEA, ELIA, ELOI, ERIA, INIA, IOLE, OIIS, OKIA, UBII and UTAI because they are not in the Third Edition. ELIA appears in the Third Edition only by inference, but not as an entry. The words AGAU and OMAO, given as three syllables in the Second Edition, have been downgraded to two syllables in the Third Edition, and so are out. The previously-listed EVOE appears to be an error; only in the alternate spelling of EVOHE is it three syllables in the Second. Of the four new words in the above list, ARIE appears also in the Second Edition and therefore was missed in the earlier tabulation. Before, it was a Biblical name; now it appears as a plural of ARIA.

Is this new list complete? I doubt it. But, why worry? There does, in fact, appear to be a four-letter, four-syllable word in the Third Edition. Searchers of the Second Edition missed it, but it was there, too, all the time: IEIE Hawaiian screw pine. Thus, the three five-letter, four-syllable words in the February 1970 Word Ways -- AALII, ILIAU and LAUIA -- have been surpassed. And it's just as well, too, since the Third Edition has downgraded all of them to three syllables.

Short words of five or more syllables offer an open field for research. Can readers of Word Ways find a five-syllable word having seven or fewer letters, or a six-syllable word having eight or fewer letters?

Part II

What is the longest word of one syllable? The August 1969 Word Ways listed six that were nine letters long:

SCRATCHED
SCREECHED

SCROUNGED
SQUELCHED

STRENGTHS
STRETCHED

To this list may be added STRAIGHTS. Can we do better? Yes, by forming plurals:

SCRATCHEDS
SCREECHEDS

SCROUNGEDS
SQUELCHEDS

STRETCHEDS

And still higher? The Second Edition lists STRENGTH as a verb. Hence, STRENGTHED. And, furthermore, STRENGTHEDS. Our work is now cut out for us. Find a one-syllable word of eleven letters or more in Webster's Third.

Shall we look for long two-syllable words? The most common one in BREAKTHROUGHS, of thirteen letters. This is easily matched by:

DRAUGHTBOARDS
STRAIGHTEDGED

STRAIGHTFORTH
STRAIGHTHEADS

STRAIGHTNECKS

Plurals allow us to move up one notch to STRAIGHTEDGEDS and STRAIGHTFORTHES. Are we trapped at fourteen letters? Webster's Second gives the hyphenated word STRAIGHT-TRUNKED. Pluralized, this becomes STRAIGHT-TRUNKEDS. This appears to be the upper limit; however, it is marred by a hyphen. We may remove the hyphen in the following way. The Second Edition gives the adverb THROUGHSTITCH, which is defined equal to THOROUGHSTITCH, which in turn is defined equal to THOROUGHSTITCHED. We conclude that we are entitled to form the word THROUGHSTITCHED, and the plural of this is THROUGHSTITCHEDS.

Can any reader find a sixteen-letter, two-syllable word? And do it using the Third Edition? What is the longest three-syllable word?

Part III

We now enter that mysterious and fascinating area beyond the believable. Earlier, we examined both the shortest and the longest words having a specified number of syllables. Turning the problem around, can we determine the word that has the most syllables, regardless of the number of letters? As often happens, the seemingly impossible is very simple. There are 776 syllables in the 1913-letter word for tryptophan synthetase A protein given in the February 1968 Word Ways. Since it takes up a whole page, it is not repeated here.

We next seek words having more syllables than letters. First, we recheck words of two syllables in the Third Edition. Remember,

we do not allow symbols or abbreviations, even if also used as nouns:

A 1	first rate	3-D	three-dimensional
C 3	third-rate	V-2	German rocket

Each of these has only one letter, but two syllables. These are marred by having numbers. But Z, when pronounced izzard, is a pure two-syllable, one-letter word. And, we knew all along, that W has but one letter for three syllables.

Using abbreviations, we can go still higher. ETC is pronounced (pronounced, not just defined as) and so forth. Not very interesting, as it yields three syllables for three letters. But it is given as sometimes pronounced et cetera -- four syllables for three letters. Of course, the abbreviation WW has six syllables for two letters.

With such success, we reimpose our ban on abbreviations. K^2 is the name of a mountain, given in the Second Edition. My copy gives no pronunciation; perhaps it's K to the second power. No such luck; the Collegiate gives K two. Returning to Webster's Third, the word MHO is listed. Some physicists pronounce it reciprocal ohm, but Webster's gives only the one-syllable mo. Too bad!

Undaunted, we search on. Victory! On page 2355 is the word 1080. No letters at all -- yet pronounced with three syllables: ten eighty. Furthermore, 606 is listed as equivalent to SIX-O-SIX. Thus, 606, with one less non-letter, is another no-letter word pronounced with three syllables.

Can we reverse the pattern -- that is, find a word with letters but no syllables? We end with the ineffable name of JEHOVAH. The Third Edition gives, under YHWH, the alternates YHVH, JHVH, JHWH and INVH. These are translations of the Tetragrammaton. For twenty-three centuries, certain devout Jews have not pronounced it. Significantly, Webster's Third International Unabridged Dictionary gives no pronunciation for the word YHWH.