

WORDS THAT NEVER STRAY

RICHARD LEDERER

San Diego, California

What do the following words have in common: *bread*, *clams*, *dough*, *cabbage*, *lettuce*, *peanuts*, and *chicken feed*? Each is a food that is metaphoric slang for “cash.”

What do these words have in common: *galore*, *extraordinaire*, *akimbo*, *aplenty*, *aweigh*, *incarnate*, *fatale*, *royale*, *par excellence*, *immemorial*, *aforethought*, and *manque*? The answer is that the dozen are “deferential words.” While the vast majority of adjectives usually precede the nouns they modify, the words in this list always come after the noun they modify.

What characteristic do the following words share: *any*, *beady*, *cagey*, *cutie*, *decay*, *easy*, *empty*, *envy*, *essay*, *excel*, *excess*, *icy*, *ivy*, *kewpie*, *seedy*, and *teepee*? Turns out that each word is cobbled from the sounds of two letters—*NE*, *RT*, *BD*, *KG*, *QT*, *DK*, *EZ*, *MT*, *NV*, *SA*, *XL*, *XS*, *IC*, *IV*, *QP*, *CD*, and *TP*.

None of these clusters approaches the fascination of another group of words that I have been tracking for decades. Read on, O fellow verbivore, and I trust that the category will gradually come into focus.

Hoping to make some clean lucre to slake my hunger, I’m going to get a discussion in edgewise about a special category of words. Unless I give this topic long shrift, I’ll be in rotten fettle. Please don’t hurl aspersions at these words. I’d prefer that your dander and hackles be down and that you wait on tenterhooks with bated curiosity. Even after searching every cranny, don’t just sit there twiddling your toes.

The above paragraph was pretty weird, wasn’t it? In fact, it was anything but in kilter. That’s because lucre can never be clean, only filthy, thirst is the only need that can be slaked, and only a word can be gotten in edgewise. Although some people are given a lot of time to shrive (confess), we can speak about shrift only as being short. Fettle must be fine, and aspersions can only be cast—never hurled, spoken, or written. Dander can be only gotten up and hackles raised. Nothing can ever be *off* tenterhooks, and *bated* can modify only *breath*. Crannies come only with nooks, and the only body part we can twiddle is our thumbs.

What’s so odd about words such as *lucre*, *slake*, *edgewise*, *shrift*, *fettle*, *aspersions*, *dander*, *hackles*, *tenterhooks*, *bated*, *cranny*, and *twiddle*? Their commonality is that they are always yoked to one—and only one—other word or phrase.

My verbivorous friend Al Gregory is a retired New York postman who lets neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stay him from delivering a clever idea in language. Al calls these “monogamous words” because they are always married to one specific word or phrase, and those marriages have withstood the ravages of time. Please bear in mind that a monogamous word is pledged to one—and only one—other word. Thus, an exhibit such as *daylights* doesn’t quite qualify because it has two mates: *scare* and *beat*, as in “scare the daylights out of” and “beat the daylights out of.” Similarly, *boggles* seems to me to be twice married—to *the mind* and *the imagination*—one can *wreak* havoc or vengeance, one can be taken or caught *unawares*, and *pickings* can be both *slim* or *easy*.

I also exclude reduplications, such as *razzle dazzle*, *super duper*, *namby pamby*, and *hurly burly*, and specialized medical terms, such as sleep *apnea*, *corroded* artery, *ectopic* pregnancy, *macular* degeneration, acid *reflux*, and *varicose* veins.

Linguist and lexicographer David Grambs labels these idiosyncratic words “special-team players, not all-round or all-game players.” Marshaling another analogy, Grambs writes, “Such words are today virtually one-idiom-only words, having almost no life in the English language beyond the discrete phrase they’ve become a part of, like fossilized insects preserved in amber.”

Many of these single-idiom words have fascinating origins: *Shrift* is the noun form of *shrive*, “to confess before a priest.” The compound *short shrift* originally referred to the brief time that a condemned prisoner had to make a confession and receive absolution. *Tenterhooks* are hooks that hold cloth on a tenter, a framework for stretching cloth. To be *on tenterhooks* is to be in a state of great tension or suspense. *Bated* is a shortened form of *abated*. That’s why *waiting with bated breath* means waiting with breath held back.

Let’s make a game of it. Here, alphabetically, are 130 additional examples of monogamous, special-team words. Fill in each blank with the one and only word or phrase that completes each idiom. Only after you’ve tried your very best may you turn to “Answers to Games and Quizzes.”

1. _____ aback 2. _____ afield 3. _____ aforethought 4. _____ aggrandizing 5. _____
- akimbo 6. _____ amok 7. _____ arrears 8. artesian _____ 9. _____ askance 10. _____ astray
11. _____ _____ auspices _____ 12. _____ aweigh 13. _____ awry 14. bald-
- faced/barefaced _____ 15. _____ behest 16. _____ bended _____ 17. bide _____
18. blithering _____ 19. bogged _____ 20. _____ breather
21. breakneck _____ 22. briny _____ 23. _____ bumpkin 24. busman’s _____ 25.
- _____ bygones _____ bygones 26. _____ cahoots 27. champing _____ 28. dandle
- _____ 29. _____ dint _____ 30. dipsy _____
31. _____ dragout 32. _____ _____ druthers 33. _____ dudgeon 34. eke
- _____ 35. extenuating _____ 36. figment _____ 37. fine-tooth _____ 38.
- foregone _____ 39. _____ forfend 40. _____ fritz
41. gainful _____ 42. _____ geezer 43. gibbous _____ 44. gird _____ 45. grist
- _____ 46. gung _____ 47. _____ gussied _____ 48. halcyon _____ 49. _____
- haywire 50. _____ heeler
51. hunker _____ 52. _____ immemorial 53. _____ inroads 54. _____ intentioned 55.
- _____ kibosh _____ 56. _____ klatch 57. _____ lam 58. lickety _____ 59.
- _____ lieu _____ 60. _____ loggerheads

61. _____ madding _____ 62. _____ middling 63. misspent _____ 64. _____
muckamuck 65. neap _____ 66. noised _____ 67. _____ nothings 68. _____ nth
_____ 69. _____ offing 70. opposable _____

71. _____ petard 72. peter _____ 73. pinking _____ 74. Pyrrhic _____
75. raring _____ 76. _____ riddance 77. _____ roughshod 78. rumpus _____ 79.
runcible _____ 80. _____ sanctum

81. scot- _____ 82. _____ scruff 83. self-fulfilling _____ 84. _____ shebang 85.
shored _____ 86. sleight _____ 87. suborn _____ 88. _____ suasion 89. _____
tat 90. _____ thataway

91. _____ throes _____ 92. toed _____ 94. _____ trice 95. _____
trove 96. _____ turpitude 97. ulterior _____ 98. _____ umbrage 99. unsung _____ 100. vale

101. vantage _____ 102. wend _____ 103. whiled _____ 104. _____
_____ whippersnapper 105. wishful _____ 106. _____ wont 107. _____
workaday _____ 108. _____ wrath 109. _____ yore 110. zoot _____

Now try some pairs connected by *and*:

111. _____ abet 112. _____ alack 113. _____ be-all _____ end-all 114. beck
_____ 115. betwixt _____ 116. _____ caboodle 117. dribs _____ drabs 118.
_____ fro 119. hale and _____ 120. _____ haw

121. _____ intents _____ 122. kith _____ 123. null and _____ 124. _____
spick _____ 125. hither and _____ 126. scrimp _____ 127. _____ sundry 128. _____
vim _____ 129. whys _____ wherefores 130. _____ yon