

ANAGRAMS BY COMPUTER

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Introduction

In a recent issue of *Word Ways*, Harry Stern closed an otherwise wonderful article by impugning the value of computers in finding anagrams. Since I have no talent for finding them by hand, and rely almost entirely on a program, I felt I should rise on behalf of the anagram-impaired--and to defend the honor of the anagram software.

Harry and I agreed on a modern version of "John Henry vs. the steam hammer" (although I do not expect him to die while taking John Henry's side). Ross chose two phrases, and Harry and I spent the summer of 1994 puzzling over **reductio ad absurdum** and **the center cannot hold**.

I used my program *Ars Magna*, which runs on the Macintosh. When you give it a name or phrase, it consults an on-line dictionary and then marches inexorably through all the anagrams it can find. The process can bore one beyond belief, and hours of poring over the output have forced me to think about a future program which would allow you to work more interactively.

But, having only a simple program, I read--or often skimmed-- about 300,000 anagrams (the first phrase yielded 1,152,000, the second 193,000). My work consisted mostly of selecting the cream from this rather large crop. The program prints a given set of words only once, so I do rearrange the words within a given anagram. I also add punctuation and capitalization. On rare occasions I'll spot something by eye and re-run the program on a particular subset of letters after subtracting the word I like. But 90 per cent of the anagrams here come from the program untouched by human hands, not counting shuffling and punctuation.

Incidentally, I feel that Ross's choices of phrases worked well for computer solution. Anything longer would produce more output than one can peruse in reasonable time. Anything shorter would yield fewer anagrams.

Harry and I have not shared our results, but I'll speculate on how ours will differ. The computer will generate a lot of mediocre anagrams for any phrase of reasonable length. Because it works strictly off a dictionary, it won't use imaginative near-words such as 'n' for **and** or **foolin'** for **fooling**. But because it searches so exhaustively (if a foolish human takes the time to slog through the output) the results may include wonderful anagrams which not only apply to the subject but use good grammar.

In my opinion, two examples of wonderful are:

- (1) RONALD WILSON REAGAN | no, darlings, no ERA law
(it took a human reader to turn **era** into **ERA**)
- (2) AMY BETH SOLOMON | oh, so blame Monty!
(Monty and Judy Solomon are the parents of this newborn)

Reductio ad absurdum

Webster's Ninth Collegiate (Digital Edition, of course) defines **reductio ad absurdum** as "disproof of a proposition by showing an absurdity to which it leads when carried to its logical conclusion" (some might argue that spending lots of time reading computer-generated anagrams serves as a fine example of reducing something to the point of absurdity).

The phrase presents considerable difficulties for a computer and, I suspect, for a human. It has no truly difficult letters, but does suffer from an abundance of Us (three of them). This leads to a lot of anagrams which discuss Cuba, bums, druids, rum, and so on.

As I write this, Cuba figures prominently in the news. Quite a number of anagrams seem to refer to Cuban-American relations, though I can't say that these results clarify things.

Armed Cuba did rout U.S.	Cuba matured, or U.S. did	Detour: U.S., Cuba, Madrid
But comrade, a U.S. druid	Cuba, U.S.: duet, dim ardor	Erratum: U.S. did do Cuba
Cuba dread: U.S. mud riot	Detour: U.S. did am Cuba	U.S. aid, dud: Cuba tremor

A couple refer not to Cuba but its leader. The first may allude to some FBI obsession with him.

Bureau: "Castro? Dim dud"	Um, buried Castro, a dud
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A few concern the state of the Cuban tourist industry.

Add tourism? A curb due	Cuba, add rude tourism	Red Cuba: tourism a dud
Cuba tourism? Read "dud"	Dear Cuba, dud tourism	

Before we leave the Caribbean, here are some more to which I'll let you assign a meaning.

Autos did murder Cuba	Cuba: "Oust armed druid"	A sordid duet: rum, Cuba
Cuba admired our dust	Cuba: it's our armed dud	Disarm Cuba, outer dud
Cuba dread? It's our mud	Cuba adds truer odium	Do audit Cuba murders
Cuba rioters, a mud-dud	Admit Cuba—ruse or dud?	Druid dream: oust Cuba
Cuba rum, a steroid dud	Storied Cuba rum, a dud	Duties: add Cuba rumor
Cuba satire: dud or mud	Cuba: "I used dud mortar"	I adored Cuba: rust, mud

Perhaps equally relevant to the cutting edge of current events, we find the following series of anagrams which I think somewhat incoherently describe the saga of the Bobbitts.

Disarm or cut dud beau	I'm cut; a subdued ardor	But docudrama is rude!
Aim, cut—subdued ardor	Dumb cut, adieu ardors	Rude docudrama; I bust
Subdue ardor amid cut	Cut, subdued amid roar	

We also hear a lot about drugs in the news today. While **drugs** itself can't crop up in the anagrams, the subject rears its head in some unusual ways.

Acid dream: drub out U.S. Our addict abused rum Subdue a rumor, addict

Of course, you can make **music** out of the phrase, leading to these musical notes.

A duet: drab, dour music	Music abroad, true dud	Music duet: add a burro
Add curious drumbeat	A dour bard: music duet	Order tuba music, a dud
Dread dour tuba music	Dead curios: drum, tuba	

The preponderance of Us also helps us with daubing mud, mud scrubbing, and so on. For the neatness-obsessed, or neatness-impaired, the following turn up. The first anagram presumably refers to some new-age class in getting dirty.

A course: daub dirt, mud	Buried duds cut aromz	Subdue dirt, cud, aroma
A tedium: scrub our Dad	Crusade: "Out, rabid mud!"	Out, bad air! Cursed mud!

To rephrase Art Linkletter, kids say the absurdest things.

A curious debut, Mr. Dad	Curb a sour tedium, Dad	Ma, Dad: curb our duties
A dumb cruise-tour, Dad	Curious brute: mad Dad	Our idea: must curb Dad
Bruise, cut our mad Dad	Curious, drab, mute Dad	Sad: mud buried our cat
But, Dad, I caused rumor	Dad's a dumb couturier	Um, Dad bruised our cat
But, Dad, I'm our crusade	Dictum: Dad, use a burro	Um, Dad scurried about

One last U-turn brings us to the word druid. Since the druids worked somewhat magically, I guess I shouldn't worry that the following make little sense.

A druid abuts decorum	Bad druid! Cause tumor!	Druid mused about car
Abduct druid, or a muse	Curse a druid: Toad! Bum!	Educator: druid's a bum
Abduct or amuse druid	Daub a druid costumer	Scare out a dumb druid

Bringing up the rear, a random selection of phrases which sound promising but which don't categorize neatly:

Absurd odium, act rude	Discard dumb urea: "Out!"	Odd crust imbued aura
Add curious, mute bard	Drab odium? Cure: a stud	Odd tedium: scrub aura
Adieu, umbra, odd crust	Drab rut caused odium	Odd...a rub cured autism
Aid our sad, dumb truce	Dub tedious cur drama	Rabid toad, rude mucus
Auditor cured bad sum	Dubious, crude Mr. Data	Radio scare but, um, dud
Autism cure? Or bad dud?	Dumb auto crusader, I'd..	Rub out dim dud, Caesar
But add curious dream	Dumb idea: dust our car	Said "Deduct our umbra"
Cure autism, do rub Dad	I cursed our dumb data	U.S. court dared aid bum?
Cured dubious Mr. Data	I doubt a mud crusader	U.S. erotica: add mud, rub
Curious debut: add RAM	I rout dumb dud, Caesar	U.S. abroad: rude dictum
Cursed a dumb auditor	I'd caused our dumb rat	Um, but do discard urea
Daub dried mucus—o, art?	I'm a dud; cut used arbor	Um, curb a dud asteroid
Did beat raucous drum	Mad bard, curious duet	Um, drab U.S. erotica—dud
Did crusade about rum	Mad cur subdued a riot	Um, erotica? Absurd dud
Did mute raucous bard	Mud buries a dud actor	

To finish up, I rank my top ten choices for absurdity:

A dictum: "Subdue ardor!"	Bard: "Rut caused odium"
I crusade: "Out, drab mud!"	Cur did dream about us
Caesar: "Out, dumb druid!"	Dumb U.S. idea: Tudor car
Our dumb idea: custard	Diadem, curds, our tuba
Rub a toad (dried mucus)	Crude modus: I rub data

The center cannot hold

"Things fall apart | the center cannot hold." Things may fall apart, but if we put the letters back together in the right order, we can find some meaning beyond this pessimistic couplet.

Col. Oliver North's run for the U.S. Senate seems to have something to do with things falling apart (before or after he gets elected, depending on where you stand), and it also relates to the political center not holding. The following anagrams trace North (albeit somewhat erratically) from Iran-Contra days through a hypothetical win this fall.

Connect the North deal	He can elect North—don't	Elect North, no hand, etc.
He told Tehran, "Connect"	Do enchant, elect North	Chant "Elect North!" Done!
Nettled North on cache	Oh, elect North—can't end	

I refrain from mentioning that **Ollie North** becomes **O, rot in hell!**

Also in the political arena, we see warnings against letting news-people into politics--and for electing Hawaiian entertainers.

Don't elect anchor, then	Elect trenchant Don Ho
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As I write this, health care looks like a big issue for the fall, which brings us to the following anagrams.

Control ache, then tend	Don't con health-center	Tend to health concern
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Politics has a lot to do with chanting and rallies and the like. Looking at phrases involving chanting, we find the following. I especially like the first, which suggests the importance of chanting loudly when you don't quite know why you're chanting.

Chant, cheer, don't let on	Chant "Cold here! No tent!"	Don't let her chant once
Chant "Need the control"	Chant "Control the Eden"	Don't relent—chant, echo
Chant "Old, hence rotten"	Chant, then elect donor	The nonce—chant, retold
Chant "One-tenth colder"	Don't chant Creole, then	

We can't have rallies without music, and this leads us to these offerings. Does it stretch things too much to claim that the first suggests the Woodstock anniversary?

The concert on the land	Handel: Tenth Concerto	Then once—latent chord
Concert, and then hotel	No, halt! End the concert!	Then halt, end concerto

As usual, I find myself with a miscellany of stragglers, each begging to have me make some sense of it.

A hot clench, not tender	Conan led the North, etc.	Old thatch, recent neon
Cal Tech trend: hot neon	Don't cancel the throne	On to the ardent clench!
Can't hold ten-cent hero	Drench once-hot talent	Once the northland, etc.
Canton, then? Cold there!	Electron and the notch	Rotten; hence can't hold
Catch London ere tenth	Enchant hot, enter cold	Tenth concern: hot lead
Catch London three-ten	Need tenth color, natch	Tenth old ocean trench
Catch lone rodent, then	No, cancel the hot trend	Then conceal hot trend
Catch neon hotel trend	No, no—drench the cattle!	Then control the dance
Clench tooth and enter	Notch etched on antler	Throne, cot, then candle
Cloth can't end—not here	Noted the concern, halt	Trend to enhance cloth
Cold, then hot entrance	Old, hence rotten—natch!	

I wrap up with some favorites. The first two seem rather optimistic. In fact, the former sounds like something Vince Lombardi might have said (hmm...what kind of center are we talking about here?).

Coach, then don't relent Hot chance--don't relent

The next three are otherworldly, with the last having a sort of "death be not proud" ring.

Connect the other land Enchant not, cold ether
Cool, then tender chant

Last, and in my opinion the best, are the following. Two optimistically contradict the original line; two maintain the original fatalism.

Concentrate, then hold No, the center can't hold
Oh, let that concern end He can't control the end

I'd rank this last as the best of the machine-produced anagrams for this phrase--relevant, concise, and complete.

AN AVALANCHE OF ANORAKS

*This is the catchy title of a Crown paperback by Robert J. White, published for \$12.50 in 1994. It contains brief histories (typically 50-200 words each) of approximately 1000 foreign borrowings from 31 languages or language-groups. Words are arranged alphabetically by language, and there is no index, so the book is designed more for browsing than reference. Most **Word Ways** readers are well aware of the book's basic premise - that English is a heavy borrower of other tongues - but some may not know the background stories.*

If the selection is representative, one must conclude that French, at 256 words, is by far the lead contributor. Italian, with 77, is a distant second, followed by Dutch (60), Arabic (46), Spanish (42) and German (35). Czech and Finnish have one apiece (ROBOT, SAUNA), and Hungarian and Basque, only two.

Interestingly, these languages arrived in English at markedly different times. The median Arabic word arrived in 1566, followed by the median words for Dutch and Italian (both 1650), Spanish (1717), Indic (1741) and German (1830); typically, half the sample of words from a specified language arrived here within a century of the median date.