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 the steam hammer" (although I do not expect him to take 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 matches 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 percent 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 absurdim**

Webster's Ninth Collegiate (Digital Edition, of course) defines *reductio ad absurdim* 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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anagram</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armed Cuba did rout U.S.</td>
<td>Cuba matured, or U.S. did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But comrades, a U.S. druid</td>
<td>Cuba, U.S.: duel, dim ardor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba dread: U.S. mud riot</td>
<td>Detour: U.S. did arm Cuba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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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 |

A few concern the state of the Cuban tourist industry.

Add tourism? A curb due | 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.

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<tr>
<td>Autos did murder Cuba</td>
<td>Cuba: &quot;Oust armed druid&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba admired our dust</td>
<td>Cuba: it's our armed dud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba dread? It's our mud</td>
<td>Cuba adds truer odium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba rioters, a mud-dud</td>
<td>Admit Cuba—ruse or dud?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba rum, a steril dud</td>
<td>Storied Cuba run, a dud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba satire: duel or mud</td>
<td>Cuba: &quot;I used dud mortar&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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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.

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<td>Disarm or cut duel beau</td>
<td>I'm cut; a subdued ardor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim, cut—subdued ardor</td>
<td>Dub cut, adieu arders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subdue ardor amid cut</td>
<td>Cut, subdued amid roar</td>
</tr>
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</table>

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.
Of course, you can make music out of the phrase, leading to these musical notes.
A duet: drab, dour music
Add curious drumbeat
Dread dour tuba music
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: dub dirt, mud
A tedium: scrub our Dad
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
Abduct druid, or a muse
Abduct or amuse druid
Bringing up the rear, a random selection promising but which don't categorize neatly:
Absurd odium, act rude
Add curious, mute bard
Addieu, umbra, odd crust
Aid our sad, dumb truce
Auditor cured bad sun
Autism cure? Or bad du?
But add curious dream
 Cure autism, do rub Dad
Cured dubious Mr. Data
Curious debut: add RAM
Curse a dumb auditor
Dumb dried mucus—o, art?
Did beat raucous drum
Did crusade about run
Did mute raucous bard
To finish up, I rank my top ten choices for absurdity:
A dictum: "Subdue arord!"
I crusade: "Out, drab mud!!"
Caesar: "Out, dumb druid!!"
Our dumb idea: custard
Rub a toad (dried mucus)
A duet: drab, dour music
Add curious drumbeat
Dread dour tuba music
Music abroad: true du
A dull bard: music duet
Dead curious: drum, tuba
Music of phrases which sound absurd:
Discard dumb urea: "Out!!"
Drab odium? Cure: a stud
Drab rut caused odium
Dumb tedious cur drama
Dumb, crude Mr. Data
Dumb crusader, I'd..
Dumb ideal: dust our cat
I cursed our dumb data
I doubt a mud crusader
I rub data, Caesar
I rout dumb dad, Caesar
I'd caused our dumb rat
I'm a dumb dad, cut used arbor
Mad bard, curious duet
Mad cur subdued a riot
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To finish up, I rank my top ten choices for absurdity:
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 told Tehran, "Connect" He can elect North—don't Elect North, no hand, etc.
Netted 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 newspaper people into politics—and for electing Hawaiian entertainers.

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

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

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
Then once-latent chord
Concert, and then hotel Then once-latent chord

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.
Gal Tech trend: hot neon Don't cancel the throne
Can't hold ten-cent hero Drench once-hot talent
tosh, then Gold there!
Canton, then! Gold there!
Catch London three-tent Electron and the notch
Catch tenth color, catch
Catch London three-tent Need tenth color, catch
Catch London three-tent No, cancel the hot trend
Catch London three-tent No, no—drench the cattle!
Catch London three-tent Notch etched on antler
Catch London three-tent Noted the concern, halt
Catch London three-tent Old, hence rotten—match!

Old thatch, recent neon
On to the ardent clench!
Once the northland, etc.
Rotten; hence can't hold
Tenth concern: hot lead
Tenth old ocean trench
Then conceal hot trend
Then control the dance
Then halt, end concerto
Then once-latent chord
Then once-latent chord
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.