By the time we reach six-letter words, conditions for superior ladders are much improved: nearly one-half of six-letter words are heterograms (all letters are different), the fraction of isolanos (words which have no neighbours) decreases to less than one-tenth, there is a reasonable number of onalosis (words which have neighbours for each letter-change), and each word has on average almost six neighbours (one for each letter). In this article, we therefore only consider ladders in which the terminal words are heterograms, with corresponding letters different, and with letters replaced in order. Even so, there are about fifty thousand of them.

In “Snakes and Ladders” in the May 1998 Word Ways, the reader can find four ideal six-letter ladders between heterograms, with terminal words either reversals or related in meaning; however, none changes the letters in order, as required here.

To make a Connoisseur’s Ladder of the semantic type, we only have to find terminal words which bear an apt relationship to one another, and it is hoped the reader will find most of the examples do show such a relationship, whether straightforward or contradictory, amusing or surrealistic, or even satiric. Just as a taster, consider: carton holder, donate saving, fasten lingam, meltyd fusion, randie fucker, tricky rhymes, money’s lustre, gayest wreath, blinks stared, louche sentry.

It is also possible to find, despite the very significant restrictions, ladders in which all the words are instantly recognisable.

At last we find a Connoisseur’s Ladder of the technical variety, in that the terminal words are permutations of each other. Because this was discovered within a few hours of the birth of my first grandson to bear the family name, it is dedicated to him, and will be referred to as

Dominic’s Connoisseur’s Ladder
LANTER (obsolete form of “lantern”)
TANTER (12th-14th century popular Anglo-French form of “tempt”)
TENTER (a frame on which to stretch cloth, hence “tenterhooks”)
TERTER (variant form of “tertre,” a little hill)
TERNER (a student of St. Andrew’s University, Scotland)
TERNAR (alternative spelling of previous word)
TERNAL (threecold, triple).

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All words can be found in the Oxford English Dictionary. This is the longest known technical Connoisseur’s Ladder.

Words in the following lists are OED headwords or obvious derivations thereof unless marked otherwise. The first word in the ladder is earlier in the alphabet than the last. Bl = Bloomsbury Thesaurus, Ch = Chambers, Lo = Longman’s, Tert F = Tertiary Faunas, vf = OED variant form. The same place names may occur in different countries.

Ideal Ladders between heterograms with sequential letter change (about 0.5% of those found)
forward replacement
ALICES (pl. pers name) — SLICES — SPICES — SPACES — SPANES (vf) — SPANKS — SPANKY. Also — SPARKY
ALIGHT — BLIGHT — BRIGHT — BROUGHT (vf) — BROUGHT (vf) — BROWST — BROWSE
AMORES (A of Ovid) — SMORES (OEED) — SPORES — SPARES — SPANES (vf) — SPANKS — SPANKY. Also — SCALDY,
— SCALPY, — SPINAL, — STALKY
AROUSE — CROUSE — CLOUSE (vf) — CLAUSE — CLAISE (vf) — CLAIME (vf) — CLAIMS. Also — CLANSE (vf) — CLANGE (vf)
— CLANGS
AUSTEN (OED, also Pers name) — LUSTEN (vf) — LISTEN — LINTEN — LINGEN (in Herefordshire) — LINGAM
AUSTER (OED wind or light aircraft) — BUSTER — BASTER — BANTER — BANDER — BANDIR (The Electronic Alveary) — BANDIT
BACTON (gas shore terminal in Norfolk) — HACTON (vf) — HOCTON (vf) — HOLTON (in Suffolk) — HOLD ON (OED) — HOLDEN — HOLDER
BANGER — HANGER — HONGER (vf) — HOLGER (Sted) — HOLDER — HOLDUR (OED) — HOLDUP (Web2). Also BANKER —
HANKER — HONKER — HOLKER (in Cumbria)
BANTER — CANTER — CONTER — CASTER — COSHER — COSHAR (vf) — COSHAM (Portsmouth, UK HQ of IBM)
BARLEY — CARLEY — CORLEY (in Warwickshire) — COULEY (vf) — COURLEY (vf) — COURTY — COURTS
BATHER — ITHER — HISHER (OED hsh vb) — HISTER — HISTOR (Gk hist, whence histroy) — HISTON (word, but also near Cambridge)
BATHER — LATHER — LUSHER — LUSTER — LUSTIR (vf) — LUSTIE (vf = lusty)
BAWDIE (vf) — CAWDIE (vf) — COWDIE — CONDIE (OED) — CONGIE (vf) — CONGE (vf) — CONGER
BERLIN — MERLIN — MARLIN — MASLIN — MASTIN (OED) — MASTEN (Ger to feed, whence Eng mast = fruit of oak) —
MASTER, Hitler or Isaiah or Irving
BLACKS — SLACKS — STACKS — STICKS — STINGS — STINGY. Also — STOCKS — STONKS — STONES — STONED, and — STORKS — STORMS — STORMY
BLADES (young men) — SLADES (OED) — SPADES — SPODES — SPORES — SPORTS — SPORTY
BLANKS — PLANKS — PRANKS — PRICKS — PRICEY — PRICEY. Common words
BLINKS — SLINKS — STINKS — STANKS (OED) — STARES — STARED
BLOUSE — CLOUSE (vf) — CROUSE — CREUSE (vf) — CREESE — CREAKE (vf) — CREAKY. Also — CREAME (vf) — CREAMY
BOILED — SOILED — SEALED — SEALED — SEA — BED — SEA — BUD (OED) — SEA — BUG (OED)
BOSCHE (vf = Boche, Germans) — MOSCHE (vf) — MESCHE (Ch, Old Fr, whence match) — MEACHE (vf) — MEASHE (vf) — MEASLE — MEASLY
BOTHER — MOTHER — MOTHER — MOTHER — MASTIR (vf) — MASTIC
BOTHER — TOTHER — TOTHER — TOTHER — TUSHER — TUSKER — TUSKAR (OED = Tuscan). Recent fuss over Tony Blair’s holiday in Tuscan
BURTON (word, also Richard B, actor) — PURTON (in Gloucestershire) — PIRTON (near Letchworth) — PICTON (in Cheshire) — PICK
BUSTLE (activity) — TUSTLE (vf) — TASTLE (vf) — TARTLE — TARDLE — TARDIS (Dr Who’s spaceship)
BUXTON (in Derbyshire, water very hard) — CUXTON (in Medway) — CAXTON — CARTON — CARION (vf) — CARIEN — CARIES
CANTOS—PANTOS (pantomimes)–PONTOS (OED)—POLTOS (Ch Gr, whence poultice)—POLIOS—POLISS (vf)—POLISH
CARTON—HARTON (in Shropshire)–HORTON (in Shropshire)–HOLTON (in Suffolk)–HOLDON (OED)—HOLDEN—HOLDER
CARTON—PORTON (OED under germ.)–POUTON (in UK)—POUR ON (Bl.)—POUREN (Middle Eng. pour)—POURED
CASTLE—TASTLE (vf)—TUSTLE (vf)—TURTLE—TURKIE (vf)—TURKIC (OED)
CAXTON (word, but famous printer)–SAXTON (vf)—SIXTON (The Electronic Alveary)—SINTON (in Worcestershire)–SINovy (vf, sect)—
SINGEN (vf)—SINGER. Also nine other famous singers (!), including DALTON—DORIAN—GALTON—PAXTON
CHIVES—SHIVES—STIVES (OED)—STAVES—STALEES—STARKY
CHORES—SHORES—SPORES—SPARES—SPACKS—SPANKY
CLAIRE—SCLAIRE (vf)—STALIRE (vf)—STEIRE (vf)—STEARE (vf)—STEADE (vf)—STEADY (vf)—STEAMY,
—STOIRE (vf)—STORIE (vf)—STORME (vf)—STORMY
DALTON (famous high school in Mass.)—HALTON (in Buckinghamshire)—HOLTON (in Suffolk)—HORTON (in Kent)—HORSDE
(OED)—HORSENY—HORSEY
DANGER—LANGER (vf)—MONIST—MODIST—MODEST—MODEL T (OED, Ford car)—MODELS
DEVOUR—LEVOUR (vf)—LAVOUR (vf)—LAMOUR (OED)—LAMBUR (vf)—LAMBER—LAMBES (vf)
DITHER—LITHER—LUTHER—LUSTER—LUSTIR (vf)—LUSTIE (vf—LUSTY
DIVERS—SIVERS (OSPD)—SAVERS—SABERS—SABIRS—SABINS—SABINE !!!
DONATE—SANATE (vf)—SANATE—SAVATE—SAYTE (OED)—SAYVIE—SAVING
DORIAN—SORIAN (vf)—SYRIAN—SYLlian (Ch. Old Eng. defile)—SYLVAN—SYVLAN—Sylvia/Sylvie. Sex change
DOUBLE—SOWLE (vf)—STIBLE (vf)—STICLE—STICKE (vf)—STICKY. Also—STIGLE (vf)—STIGME—STIGMA,
—STOBBLE (OED)—STODLE (vf)—STODGE—STODGY
DOUCA—DOUCHE (vf)—STUCHE (OED)—STICHE (vf)—STIGHE (vf)—STIGME—STIGMA
DRAINS—PRINKS—PLINKS—PLACKS—PLACES—PLACED
DWAYNE (pers name)—SWAYNE (vf)—SHAYNE (pers name)—SHRYNE (vf)—SHRENE (vf)—SHREWE (vf)—SHREWD
DWAYNE (pers name)—SWAYNE (vf)—STAYNE (vf)—STEYNE (vf)—STEANE (vf)—STEADE (vf)—STEADY. Also—
STEAME (vf)—STEAMY.—STOYNE (OED)—STORIE (vf)—STODIE (vf)—STODGE—STODGY
DWAYNE (pers name)—TWAYNE (vf)—TRAYNE (vf)—TREYNE (vf)—TRENDE (vf)—TRENDY
FAG-ENDE (OED)—RAG-ENDE (OED)—REGEN (OED)—REMEND—REMAND—REMAID (OED)—REMAIN
FALTER—VALTER (vf)—VELTER (vf)—VERTER (vf)—VERDER (OED)—VERDUR (vf)—VERDUN (warfare in France)
FASTEN—LASTEN (vf)—LISTEN—LINTEN—LINGEN (in Herefordshire)—LINGAN (vf)—LINGAM
FASTER—HASTER—HISTER—HINTER—HINDER—HENDUR (vf)—HINDUS. Also—HOSTER—HOLTHER (OED holt vb)
—HOLDER—HOLDUR (OED)—HOLDUP
FATHER—LATHER—LUTHER—LUSTER—LUSTIR (vf)—LUSTIE (vf)
FICKLE—MICKLE—MUCKLE—MUSKLE (vf)—MUSCLE—MUSCAE—MUSCAT (wine or shiekadom)
FINDER—MINDER—MINDER—MANDER (vf)—MARDER (vf)—MARTER (vf)—MARTIR (vf)—MARTIN (bird or person).
Finder also FUDGES—JUDGES—KINDER—FOILER—FOUler, etc. Some also—MARTY
FORAGE—SORAGE—STORAGE—STOGAE—STORGE—STORME (vf)—STORMY
FORGED—PORGED (OED)—PARGED—PANGED—PANTED—PANTOD—PANTOANTOS (pantomimes)
FORTES—MORTES (vf)—MARTES (OED foumart, 1523)—MATTES—MATIES—MATINS—MATING
FOSTER—MOSTER (vf)—MASTER—MANTER—MAGER—MANGOR (vf)—MANGOS. 17 others incl LOANED, BUSKED
—FUCKER—RUCKER—RACKER—RANCER—RANDIR—RANDIE. 19 other RANDIES, incl DOCKER—FICKER—,
LICKER—POSTER
FUISION—MUSION—MESION—MELION (OED)—MELTON—MELTIN (vf)—MELTIP (vf)
GAMBLE—WAMBLE—WOBLE—WORBLE—WORLLE (vf)—WORLDE (vf)—WORLDS. Also—WORTLE (vf)—
WORTHE (vf)—WORTHY
GAYEST—WAYEST (vf)—WRYEST—WREEST (vf)—WREAST (vf)—WREATT (vf)—WREAT
GIVERS—SIVERS—SAVERS—SABERS—SABIRS—SABINS—SABINE
HAMBLE (river, Southampton)—SAMBLE (vf)—SEMABLE—SEABLE (OED)—SEARLE (Ronald, cartoonist or pharmaceuticals
coy)—SEARCE—SEARCH
HASTEN—LASTEN (vf)—LISTEN—LINTEN—LINGEN (in Herefordshire)—LINGAN (vf)—LINGAM
HELVIN (Marie, very beautiful model, or silicate)—MELVIN (pers name or Loch)—MALVIN (Pull)—MARVIN (pers name)—
—MARGIN—MARGOV (vf)—MARGOT (pers name). Obviously christened wrongly!
HONEST—MONEST (vf)—MENEST (OED feeble, 1450, 2nd pers sing)—MEREST—MERIST—MERITT (vf)—MERITS
HUMBLE—WUMBLE—WOBLE—WORBLE—WORLDE (vf)—WARDEE (OED)—WARDEN. Also—WOMBLE—
—WORBLE—WORLLE (vf)—WORTHE (vf)—WORTHY
JAPERY—PAPERY—PIPERY—PILERY (vf)—PILORY (OED)—PILOTS
JILTER—MILTER—MALTHER—MANGER—MANGOR (vf)—MABOR (OED)
JUMBLE—WUMBLE (Web2)—WOBLE—WORLLE (vf)—WORLDE (vf)—WORLDEL
KAIZER—PAIZER (Old Fr whence pease, or EDD)—PRIER—PROSER—PROVER (vf)—PROFER (OED)—PROFIT
KATION—LATION—LUTION (The Electronic Alveary)—LUSION (OED)—LUSTON (in Herefordshire)—LUSTEN (vf)—LUSTER. — anion!
LAURIE (pers name)—SAURIE (vf)—STURE (vf)—STORIE (vf)—STODIE (vf)—STODGE—STODGY
LAYERS—SAYERS—SKYERS (OED)—SKIERS—SKIRRS—SKIRTS—SKIRTY.
CRINOLINE?
LEMONS—SEMONS (OED)—SOMONS (vf)—SOLON—SOLENS (OED)—SOLIERS (OED)—SOLERA. For those who find
grapes too sweet?
TUSHER—TUSKER—TUSKAR—TUSKAN—TOYMAN.
NIMBLE—WIMBLE—WAMBLE—WARBLE—WARDLLE (vf)—WARDEE (OED)—WARDEN
RASTLE
LUSTER—MUSTER—MASTER—MANTER—MANGER—MANGOR (vf)—MANGER—MARBLE—MARBLY.
SISTE—SISTER—SISTER (OED)—SIS —BALE (vf)—SI LVER—SILVER—SILVER—SILVER.
LOUCHE—SOUCHE (vf)—SOUCHE—SOUCHE—SOUCHE—SOUCHE—SOUCHE.
MOTHER—OTHER—OTHER (OED)—OTHER.
RAMBLE—SAMBLE (vf)—SEMBLE—SEABLE (OED)—SEARLE (Ronald, canoonist, or pharmaceutical coy
MAIDEN—SAIDEN (vf)—SLIDEN (vf)—SLADEN
LUSTRE—MUSTRE (vf)—MASTRE (vf)—MARTRE (vf)—MARBRE (vf)—MARBRE—MARBLE—MARBLE—MARBLE.
MARCHE (Fr meaning. for in English it is wild
LIVERS—SILERS (OED)—SALERS (vf)—SILERS (OED)—SALERS—SALERS (OED)—SABERS SABIRS SABINS SABINE.
LIVERS—SILERS (OED)—SALERS (vf)—SALERS (OED)—SABERS SABIRS SABINS SABINE.
LIVERS—SILERS (OED)—SALERS (OED)—SABERS SABIRS SABINS SABINE.
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LIVERS—SILERS (OED)—SALERS (OED)—SABERS SABIRS SABINS SABINE.
LIVERS—SILERS (OED)—SALERS (OED)—SABERS SABIRS SABINS SABINE.
TROPEZ (STT, S France) — TROPEE (OED) — TROPHE (OED) — TROTHE — TRUTH — TOUTHE — YOUTHE. youth remove their topz at St Tropz

TURKIC — TURKIE (vf) — TURKLE — TURBLE (vf) — TUMBLE — TOMBLE (vf) — WOMBRE (vf, UK children’s TV character)

Also TURPIN —

TUSKAN (vf) — TUSKAR — TUSKER — Tusher — TUTHER (OED) — Tither — Zither

VEROUN — VEROUR (vf) — VEROER (OEO) — VERGER — VENGER — VINGER (OED) — WINGER. Also — WANTER, — WINTER, — WASTER