

ABLE, BAKER, CHARLIE ...

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Much time has been spent on devising lists of the best words for transmitting initial letters unambiguously (A as in Able, B as in Baker, C as in Charlie ...). Even so, mistakes occur all too frequently. What then would be the confusion if one used instead the worst possible words from Webster's Second Unabridged Dictionary? This masochistic exercise, suggested by Henry Pollak of Bell Laboratories at Murray Hill, N.J., resulted in the compilation given below.

In this list, each letter is followed by a word beginning with that letter; its misleading pronunciation is given in parenthesis. I was unable to find a suitable entry for N, or for F; can Word Ways readers help? The entry for R had to be taken from the Gazetteer; a replacement from the main dictionary would be welcome.

Note that the letter P is especially amenable to misuse; it can be converted into B (Peiping), F (phase), N (pneumatic), S (psalm), or T (ptomaine). Interestingly, almost all words beginning with X are misleading, for they sound as if they begin with Z; the only common exceptions are Xmas and X-ray.

A as in aisle (EYEL)
 B as in bdellium (DEL-i-yum)
 C as in czar (ZHR)
 D as in djinn (JIN)
 E as in extra (X-trah)
 F as in
 G as in gnu (NOO)
 H as in hsien (SEEN)
 I as in ius (USE)
 J as in jnana (NYAH-nah)
 K as in knew (NOO)
 L as in Llew (HLE-you)
 M as in mnemonic (NEE-mah-nic)
 N as in
 O as in oesophagus (ess-OFF-ah-gus)
 P as in psalm (SAHLM)
 Q as in quay (KEY)
 R as in Rzeszow (ZHE-shoof)
 S as in sgraffito (z'grahf-FEE-toe)
 T as in tmesis (MEE-sis)
 U as in uang (WAHNG)

V as in vlei (FLAY)
 W as in wrung (RUNG)
 X as in xylophone (ZI-low-foen)
 Y as in ylem (EE-lem)
 Z as in zwieback (TSVE-bahk)

To really give your listener fits, consider the following incomplete alphabet suggested by Dick Anderson of Bell Laboratories at Holmdel, N.J.

A as in aye (or are)
 C as in cue (or cay)
 E as in eye (or el, em or en)
 H as in hay (pronounced 'ay by a Cockney)
 S as in sea
 W as in why
 Y as in you

Using this list, a word like CHASE should come out KARCI, and YES should change into UNC.