To Put It Succinctly

What is the shortest word or phrase that can be used to describe without ambiguity the group William Henry Harrison, John Tyler, Zachary Taylor, and Millard Fillmore? The description must be such as to enable anyone to reproduce the group without excluding or adding individuals. We doubt that the job can be done more concisely than by the phrase "The Whig Presidents". If more people were well-versed in mid-19th century U.S. politics, this would be recognized as a natural or common grouping. Most readers are aware that for a period of time there was a Whig party that was predominant in this country, but very few could name all the Whig presidents (or, indeed, any of them). Thus, the grouping is anything but common nowadays.

In the examples below, we give the individuals that comprise a more or less common grouping and invite you to come up with the concisest possible designating phrase (we won't quibble about small words such as the). It is much more pleasurable to exercise our power of recognition than our power of recall. If you agree with this thesis and enjoy the quiz, please send more along similar lines. Half right on this quiz is pretty good:

1. Cayuga, Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Seneca, Tuscarora
2. turmeric, fenugreek, ginger, black pepper, cayenne pepper, cumin, coriander, caraway
3. helium, neon, argon, krypton, xenon, radon
4. terrapins, tortoises, turtles
5. Adrastus, Amphiaraus, Capaneus, Hippomedon, Parthenopaeus, Polynices, Tydeus
6. Henry VII, Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary I, Elizabeth I
7. Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujaira, Ras al Khaima, Sharja & Kalba, Umm al Qaiwan
8. whales, dolphins, porpoises
9. Stheno, Euryale, Medusa
10. Dover, Sandwich, Romney, Hastings, Hythe
11. Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Turkey

Incomparable

It's a horrible sin if you are BARBARIC. Ignoring the logically impossible, Webster's Jumbo superlatives are VERY to the right. You are thoroughly right. RIGHT? More Telephone Quiz

The subscriber has been enabled by dialing the number advertising the question which each of our sights, crashed by a key (Z unkeyed), cable combined telephone grid (UNHIBITED), are easy to remember advertising or ASTRIDE, in which the question is answerable but not answerable, and send the answer on bet that at least which each of the telephone grid (UNHIBITED), cable combined telephone number is which our sights in

1. Perhaps
12. Julius, Augustus, Tiberius, Gaius, Claudius, Nero, Galba, Otho, Vitellius, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian
13. Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, Tyrone
14. Aello, Cypete, Podarge, Celaeno
15. Fluorine, chlorine, bromine, iodine, astatine
17. 100 meter run, 400 meter run, 1500 meter run, 110 meter high hurdles, javelin throw, discus throw, shot put, pole vault
18. South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Texas, Arkansas, North Carolina, Virginia, Tennessee
19. Lincoln's, Gray's, The Inner Temple, The Middle Temple
20. Aglaea, Euphrosyne, Thalia

Incomparable!

It's a hot day, and you and your pal go skinny-dipping. Which of you is BARER? If you are joined by a third friend, is he the NUDEST? Ignoring the bad pun, Les Card asserts that these two words are as logically impermissible as the comparatives of pregnant and unique. Webster's Pocket Dictionary doesn't agree, for the comparatives and superlatives of both adjectives are found there. Webster's also admits VERY to the club, as well as FALSE and TRUE (people, unlike propositions, are allowed to exhibit degrees of truthfulness or falsity). Les is thoroughly baffled, however, by two other entries in the latest edition: RIGHT has no comparative or superlative listed, but WRONG does!

More Telephonemnemones

The subject of using keywords in order to memorize telephone numbers has been brought up in this department before. For over a decade the Hollywood, California Dial-a-Prayer exchange could be reached by dialing the letters GODDAMN, and only recently was the number retired from the active list. In the greater New York area, Channel Lumber advertises that you can reach them by dialing CHANNEL. We raised the question of alternate keywords, such as BOATING-COATING, which are easy to generate, and went on to pose the question of alternate non-crashing keywords, i.e., keywords such as CONTOUR and AMOUNTS or ASTRIDE and CRUSHED (both pairs by courtesy of Walter Penney) in which the two do not share a common letter in the same position. Discovery of other pairs of 7-letter non-crashing keywords is formidable but not hopeless, and readers are invited to generate their own and send them on. But the difficulty in obtaining them makes it an odds-on bet that no trio of mutually non-crashing 7-letter words exists in which each word keys the same 7-digit telephone number, much less words. So we abandon the quest and lower our sights in two different ways:

1. Perhaps there is a non-crashing group of three (call we call them

...
isotels?) of length less than seven. If we allow short telephone numbers such as might have existed in Davenport, Iowa in 1902, we might stand a better chance of finding our three non-crashing isotels. For single digit numbers, the problem is trivial, so we start with two digit numbers and quickly find the task is hopeless, not only with the 125 2-letter words in Webster's, but with the expanded list of 247 assembled by Darryl Francis in the November 1974 issue. Proof of impossibility is not difficult: since the eight telephone groups from ABC to WXY all contain at most one vowel (counting Y as a vowel), three non-crashing isotels must contain at least one word made up of two consonants. What about word lengths from 3 to 6? We suggest you turn your attention to 3-letter or 4-letter words, as the longer words are undoubtedly harder. The first discoverer receives a vacation trip for two to Davenport, Iowa.

2. Why confine the problem to the telephone format? Discard any two of the letters of the alphabet, and arrange the rest in eight groups of three. What is the largest n for which you can produce a trio of non-crashing n-letter words in which the three letters at each position are all in the same group? At first blush, the challenge appears easier than it really is since your arrangement into groups of three is arbitrary. But using three words with no letters in common won't get you a very good N. If you want to get a much better score than five with, say, DINGY, SPARK and THUMB, you'll have to allow letter repeats. Suppose, in order to keep enough vowels to complete the job, you start frugally with KHLAT and XANTHYL. What word completes the trio? No word. The L and T in fourth position must be in the same group. Likewise for the T and Y in sixth position, and the S and L in seventh position. Then L, T, Y and S must all be together in the same group of three -- a neat trick.

The second challenge, a problem in creative design, we consider much more promising than the first. In the first, the longest qualifying trio, if it exists at all, is probably of length 3 or 4. In the second, there is no doubt of existence, and we suspect the record length will be 9.

Fem Lib Notes

Women -- better make that "wopersons" or better yet "woperchildren" -- assert that the theory that females (people) are poor drivers is nothing but an old husbands' tale.

The September 15 issue of Forbes magazine, relayed to us by Harry Hazard, contains a letter by Joel Weiss of Northbrook, Illinois which points out that all-purpose he/she pronouns (such as our favorite xe) are discriminatory because no consideration is given to those third person pronouns which do not have the attribute of sex. To be totally indiscriminate, says Weiss, we need a word to represent he, she or it. He suggests the double contraction h'orsh'it, which has the virtue of being easily assimilated into the thinking of bureaucrats and politicians.

For Transplanted

Are you two different? We won't puzzle. Although words, we have and the ability. Although an unwillingness to perform.

From a (for example) letters and necessary. But in words, you are not without an involved for all is summar.

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For Transposaphiles

Are you good enough at anagramming to supply within five minutes two different transposals of CINDERS? Or of LO-FAT? Or LARGELY? We won't pursue the question, because we're not certain that it signifies. Although the quiz below also involves rearranging letters to form words, we have found no correlation between pure anagrammatic ability and the ability to separate jumbled letters into meaningful groups. Although anagrammarians have shown a tolerance for (perhaps even a willingness to attack) problems such as are offered in this quiz, their performance is no better than that of non-anagrammarians.

From a list of letters, you are asked to find words of a unified class (for example, metals) which comprise these letters. If the list has nine letters and divides into three 3-letter words, no clues should be necessary. But if the list has sixteen letters and breaks into four 4-letter words, your intuition must be unusually sharp for you to find the words without an additional clue. Clues (the unified classes used) are provided for all entries, but don't use them unless you have to. Scoring is summarized in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>Solved Using Clue</th>
<th>Failed to Solve Even With Clue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>16 letters</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 letters</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A qualifying score is 12. 16 is a fine score, and 18 is incredible, as you will see. Oh, yes, the anagrams asked for at the top of the page are DISCERN RESCIND, ALOFT FLOAT, and GALLERY REGALLY.

The clues are:
1. numbers
2. barnyard animals
3. conjunctions
4. pronouns
5. prepositions
6. insects
7. birds
8. body members
9. Indian tribes
10. questions
11. prepositions
12. weather reports
13. metals
14. colors
15. numbers
16. birds
17. fish
18. cities
19. countries
20. pagan deities.

Have A Marginally Acceptable Day

Not every song lyricist can be on target all the time, but a new record has been set by the tune "Have A Real Nice Day", which has been high on the national sales charts for several weeks running. The rec-

Telephone numbers are 1902, we might add. For example, with the list of 247 isotels. Proof reading Y as a one word from 3 to 6?

Odd words, proofreading XANTHYL. A neat trick. We consider (for example, metals) which comprise these letters. If the list has nine letters and divides into three 3-letter words, no clues should be necessary. But if the list has sixteen letters and breaks into four 4-letter words, your intuition must be unusually sharp for you to find the words without an additional clue. Clues (the unified classes used) are provided for all entries, but don't use them unless you have to. Scoring is summarized in the table below:

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ord boasts of no fewer than three "close, but no cigar" rhyming pairs: HURT-WORK, SEEDS-PREACH, and BELIEVE-MELODY.

Rines (a term coined by Leon Hale, a columnist appearing in the Houston Post) occur not only in popular songs, but also folk songs, Christmas carols and even nursery rhymes. Kickshaws would love to see Maxey Brooke, who called our attention to Hale, write an article about rines.

Syllables

We introduced syllabic transmutations in the last issue, involving stepwise transformations of one word into another, each step consisting of the change of one syllable. Although pronunciation need not be preserved (PALACE to PALTRY is allowed), syllabic integrity must be respected -- each division into syllables used in a transmutation must be supported by a modern English dictionary. Some correspondents went wrong on this point.

Two readers achieved very quick transmutations from YELLOW to PURPLE. Philip Cohen did it via YELPER SIMPER SIMPLE and YELPER DAPPER DAPPLE. Tom Pulliam made an even quicker transmutation via WARLOW and WARPLE. He found several ways of getting from DOCTOR to LAWYER in four steps, such as CANTOR CANMAN LAWMAN. He even found what we would have bet heavily could not be done - transmutation of WHISKEY into VODKA! The intermediate steps are WHISKIN PARKIN PARKA. We will not challenge him lightly in the future.

Every reader who tried to go from SECOND to MINUTE began with SECANT. However, we could find no dictionary that syllabifies these words in any way other than SECOND and SECANT, so the step is illegal and that transmutation challenge is still open.

We could offer any number of new syllabic transmutation challenges that we haven't the skill or the patience to meet ourselves (TINSEL to SILVER, NICKEL to DOLLAR, HONEY to SUGAR, OCEAN to DESERT), but each reader is capable of making up his own challenges. We're much more curious about a more general challenge implied in Tom Pulliam's transmutation of WHISKEY into VODKA, involving as it did the loss of two letters. Let us call the number of letters gained or lost in a transmutation the "shift" and the number of words in the transmutation, from first to last, the "span." Two-syllable words can vary in length from 2 letters (JO) to at least 13 (BREASTSTROKES). What is the longest shift, irrespective of span, that you can obtain by syllabic transmutation of 2-syllable words? And what is the greatest shift to span ratio achievable? The answer to the latter is most likely based on a span of only two words. We modestly offer A-DO into A-GAINST as a starter, with a shift to span ratio of 2.33.

You'd expect the transmutation from SERGEANT to COLONEL to be a formidable challenge, nicht wahr? We were planning to dazzle you with the quick transmutation PAGEANT PANEL, but Webster's (which we almost fail to like) doesn't. As in "HAR-IO," petting game, and illusory your dictionary with the tradition that it is an arbitrary ending transmutation. COLONEL is --

More About Syllables

"How many syllables

The Roman alphabet, but they experimented with the literal alphabetic symbols for 400 or 500 different words each. Wouldn't understanding in that manner, and then become more etymologically diminutive. Consequently, the one, are the only changes in our system to occur.

On the other hand, if you are familiar with the shorthand.

The use of a practical, as Midas graved on ancient Mycenaean Greek inscriptions, is still relatively rare. It is possible. With length and depth..."
we almost failed to consult) tells us that the transmutation is illegal. It's SER-GEANT, which sounds right to us, but PAG-EANT, which doesn't. As if that weren't enough, it's not COLO-NEL but COL-O-NEL, putting the word with its three syllables outside the scope of our game, and illustrating the thesis that the syllabification provided by your dictionary is not solely based on pronunciation. It has to do also with the traditional manner in which printers break up words when they reach the end of a line of manuscript. To some extent, then, there is an arbitrary element which must be accepted with good grace by the transmutation player. You were right in any case -- SERGEANT to COLONEL is a formidable challenge.

More About Syllables

"He put riddles to them. He asked 'What is the cleverest animal in the world?' and after the thirteen-year old girl had guessed the ape, the elephant, the horse, he said, 'No. it must be the hippopotamus,' because in Japanese that animal is kaba, the reverse of baka, 'stupid.'" 

Hiroshima, by John Hersey

The Roman emperor Claudius added several letters to the Roman alphabet, but these were promptly discarded after his death. He also experimented with what he thought would be a great improvement over the literal alphabet, by listing all Latin syllables and creating distinctive symbols for them. He had as much success with his syllabics as with his alphabet. But was he wrong? Suppose we memorized about 400 or 500 distinctive syllables and the script and printing symbols for each. Wouldn't we be able to read and write faster and with better understanding in the first case and facility in the second? Undoubtedly we would, and there would be other indirect advantages, but as our lives become more complex, our willingness to venture into uncharted territory diminishes to the vanishing point. Also, as we get older we get lazier. Consequently, since active adults, who control the lives of everyone, are the ones whose lives stand to be disrupted most by major changes in our methods of communicating, such changes are unlikely to occur.

On the other hand, if you want to adopt your own syllable-based system in order to enable you to write quickly, you can always take shorthand. If enough people did, they might begin to publish books in shorthand.

The use of syllable rather than literal characters is not solely theoretical, as Michael Ventris demonstrated in 1953 when he proved that what was thought to be a mysterious, possibly Semitic language, engraved on ancient Cretan tablets (Linear B), was in fact syllabified Mycenean Greek. We bring it up merely because we believe there is logical potential in syllables. The transmutation game is only one (still relatively unexplored) area in which syllables can be successfully substituted for letters. How about cryptedgrams? Definitely possible. With frequency counts for syllables, and the greater message length and depth merited by syllables, syllabic cryptedgrams should be
interesting to compose and challenging to solve. How about crossword puzzles? Definitely tougher to compose, if we are any judge, but that suits us fine. There are too many mediocre crossword puzzles being published; we could do with fewer if they were better. We would like to invite readers to compose a syllabic crossword puzzle, to their own design if they prefer or to the simple design given at the left in which 1, 3 and 5 are horizontal words of 2, 3 and 2 syllables respectively, and 1, 2 and 4 are vertical words with similar syllabic patterns. We sincerely hope they have better luck than we had, because we much prefer working crossword puzzles to creating them.

Syllabic palindromes should be easier to make than literal ones. Words like ARENA or DORADO are self-contained palindromes. By going from the graphic to the phonic, a new door is opened to the palindromist, who is now permitted such a flight of fancy as SEAMAN ROW? NECROMANCY! But we hope they will be more particular. As for anagrams, MARO, the surname of Virgil, is an anagram-reversal of ROMA and, depending on how ERNEST is syllabified, its syllabic anagram-reversal is either NESTOR or ASTERN. TUNING CAR is a transposal of CARTOONING, and DONATOR is both a literal anagram and a syllabic anagram-reversal of TORNADO. Let’s see what the experts can do, given that they need not be as scrupulous about syllabification as in the case of transmutations.

Dualogism

"She wants very much to be au fait, but she has a long way to go. She asked me what wine goes with peanut butter sandwiches."

The Missing Letter

Dmitri Borgmann has brought to our attention the fact that the short I vowel sound can be spelled in nine different ways, as shown by the sentence ENGLISH WOMEN HAS-BEENS IN TIENTSIN BUILD COUNTERFEIT PYRAMIDS BUSILY. We think, however, that the schwa vowel sound is even more remarkable. The most common sound in human speech deserves, we think, a letter of its own, or, more to the point, a place in the alphabet, since it is already represented by the inverted e. It is not likely to get this recognition, unfortunately, since expanding the alphabet to admit this fundamental vowel sound would open the door to much more significant changes in English orthography. Whatever benefits such changes might bring about, even the most Shavian advocate of spelling reform recognizes that a long and extremely painful transition period would be inevitable.

Nevertheless, there is plenty of unmined logological ore in the schwa sound. For one thing, the words SALAD MURDER AUDIT CANDOR REBUS MARTYR illustrate how schwa may be used for any of the single vowels AEIOUY. How many vowel combinations are used in English when a single schwa would do? We have no idea, but three examples are CALLOUS, MASSEUR and WINSOME in which the schwa sound is given by two letters, notwithstanding the task of composing the task of composing such puzzles being published; we could do with fewer if they were better. We would like to invite readers to compose a syllabic crossword puzzle, to their own design if they prefer or to the simple design given at the left in which 1, 3 and 5 are horizontal words of 2, 3 and 2 syllables respectively, and 1, 2 and 4 are vertical words with similar syllabic patterns. We sincerely hope they have better luck than we had, because we much prefer working crossword puzzles to creating them.

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given by two separated vowels. Who will be the first to make an exhaustive list of "schwa substitutes"? Much more ambitious would be the task of cataloging the various orders in which schwa-substitutes are used in a single multi-schwa word. For instance, the combination (e, i, i, io) is found in GELATINIZATION.

We suspect that if phonetic symbols were assigned to all the distinguishable vowel sounds in English, schwa would be way in front of the second-place sound. Opening a Bible at random (honor bright!), we look for a verse rich in schwas. St. Mark 7:22 with our underlining is:

Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness:

Thirteen of the 26 syllables contain the schwa, and the passage was culled from two pages randomly picked a moment ago from an 1100-page Bible (King James Version). How schwa-rich a passage are some of our dedicated acolytes likely to discover if only they seeketh?

More Shiftwords

Dmitri Borgmann adds two new eight-letter double shiftwords, all in Webster's Second Edition:

STRIKLE/TRICKLES/RICKLEST
STRINKLE/TRINKLES/RINKLEST

He then combines the Websterian prefix ALETHO- with the suffix -LOGIC to coin a word meaning "pertaining to a theory of truth" to reach the eleven-letter plateau:

ALETHOLOGIC/LETHOLOGICA/ETHOLOGICAL

Even if you don't accept Dmitri's coinage, the other two words stand as an untoppable record for worthy shiftwords.

Acrostic Quiz

Find the seven missing initials of the six-letter words given below, and they will spell out a proper noun. When you get it, try again. You may be able to find another of the same genus:

- U M B L E
- M P I R E
- A T T E R
- O N I C S
- R I N A L
- A S T E R
- A R E L Y