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HOW TO FIND A WORD

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Logology is a voracious monster, feeding on words. Its priests are forever combing dictionaries, looking for more sacrificial victims that can be offered up to their god.

So great are the needs of logology that no dictionary ever published, or all of them put together, include enough words to satisfy that need. One reason for this situation is that dictionaries generally show only the principal form of a word, leaving inflectional forms to the imagination of the person consulting them. The noun PEWTER appears in boldface type in every dictionary, but its plural PEWTERS, just as much a word, does not. The adjective BIZARRE is in all dictionaries, but its comparative and superlative forms, BIZARRER and BIZARREST, are in none. The same is true, of course, in relation to verbs, which have more inflectional forms than does any other part of speech.

In order to make do with existing dictionaries, inadequate as they are, the logologist trains himself to read between the lines, and to see the inflectional forms suppressed by the dictionaries. His proficiency in this exercise is a good measure of his success in his chosen field. So far as I know, a manual of instruction on the subject has never been published, or even written -- a most curious oversight, in view of the overriding importance of ferreting out inflectional forms. This article is a first step toward remedying the deficiency. I am going to pose a typical word problem, and then show you how to solve it by reading between the lines.

For the sake of argument, let us assume that we need an 8-letter word exhibiting the letter pattern AABBCDEF. A first search through the leading dictionaries produces no solution to the problem, and we begin to weigh the use of inflectional forms rather carefully.

The word OOLLY, both in Webster's Second Edition and in the Funk & Wagnalls unabridged, catches our attention. The superlative form of OOLLY must be OOLLIEST, solving our problem nicely. Otototoi (alas, a word in Webster's First Edition) ! OOLLY is a noun, not an adjective or an adverb: it designates a lump or loop of iron or steel, when taken as a pasty mass from the crucible. The best we can do with it is to form its plural OOLLIES, which falls one letter short of what we need. Our instant analogy with WOOLLY has failed us.

With some trepidation, we turn to the most massive English dic-
Trepidation is called for, since the reaches of this extraordinary lexicon are so vast that men have been known to enter its uncharted labyrinths in search of a word, never again to emerge into the light of day. Careful scrutiny of the first three volumes is a fruitless task, but in the middle of the fourth volume we arrive at the word FULL, given as a noun, as an adjective, as an adverb, and finally as a verb. Something tells us to explore the potential of the verb.

Actually, three separate verbs are given. The essential meaning of the first one is to baptize; of the second one, to become full; and of the third one, to cleanse and thicken cloth. A subsidiary meaning of the second verb is as a term in dressmaking, defined as to draw up, pucker, or bunch.

It is a fact of life that verbs have present participles. The present participle of the verb FULL is FULLING. It is another fact of life that present participles can be used as verbal nouns or gerunds, and that in such capacity they may be pluralized. The plural of the gerund FULLING is FULLINGS, of course. In connection with the subsidiary meaning of FULL mentioned in the paragraph next above, the OED specifically lists FULLING as a verbal substantive, defining it as the action of gathering or pleating, in dressmaking. Several such actions are FULLINGS. The word has significant possibilities in solving our problem, and we keep it in mind as we continue our methodical examination of the OED.

In the twelfth volume of the OED, we come upon the word VULL, defined as a southern Middle English and dialectal variant of FULL, adjective, etc. The tag "etc." must refer to FULL as a noun, adverb, and verb, if it is to make any sense, and we immediately turn back to FULL in the fourth volume to explore the ramifications of this discovery. Middle English is a term applied to our language in its form from about 1100 to about 1500. The earliest quotation given by the OED in support of the gerund FULLING is dated 1380., making it a Middle English word. If FULL could then be spelled VULL, the verbal noun FULLING could evidently be spelled VULLING, and its plural must have been VULLINGS.

We wanted a word with the letter pattern AABBCDEF. The word VULLINGS at which we have painstakingly arrived has the letter pattern GABBCDEF. To convert it into the desired letter pattern, we must respell it either UULLINGS or VVLLINGS. Is such a change possible?

Something passed on the first page of Volume XII pops to mind. In discussing the letter V, the OED states that, in southern Middle English texts (note the tie-in with the definition of VULL), all native English words beginning with F may appear with V (or its equivalent U), when the letter is the first letter of the word. Now, FULL is a native English word, going back to Old English, which took it from the parent Teutonic language. Ergo, it follows that VULL could also be spelled
UULL, and its gerundial plural UOLLINGS.

To confirm our interpretation, we check Webster's Second Edition, which contains the entry UU-, explaining that, for various words beginning UU-, we are to see the corresponding forms beginning UV- or VU-. The OED provides a startling verification in the words UULLA and VVULLA, both of them 16th-century spellings of UVULA. A word beginning UU- may seem strange to us, but it is rather staid compared with one beginning UUU-.

By examining the OED with sufficient care, by pursuing inflectional forms and variant spellings very diligently, by correlating information given in different volumes, we have solved our problem—we have found a word fitting the pattern AABBCDEF. That word is UOLLINGS, a southern Middle English spelling of FULLINGS, actions of gathering or pleating.

Subsequent study of this problem uncovers a second solution, simpler to understand: AAHHOTEP, "Peace of Aah, or the Moon", the name of an Egyptian queen of the XVIIIth dynasty, given in Cooper's Archaic Dictionary. However, that is a proper name, not a common noun, and it is merely icing on the cake, for we already have the word we wanted, UOLLINGS.

Editor's note: Readers may wonder why so much effort was expended on searching for an eight-letter word with the pattern AABBCDEF. The reason is simple: a word of this pattern was needed to complete the list of examples illustrating the 210 different ways that two pairs of letters can be distributed in an eight-letter word. An article on this is given in the November 1976 Word Ways, where AAHHOTEP appears at the head of the list.