

The Essential *E*

RICHARD LEDERER
San Diego, California

About the letter *E* I am enthusiastic, enchanted, ecstatic, exhilarated, ecstatic, exuberant, ebullient, and effervescent. Ah, those wonderful words that begin with *E*: In their early lives, *enthusiastic* meant “possessed by a god,” *enchanted* “singing a magic song,” *ecstatic* “in a trance,” *exhilarated* “made thoroughly cheerful,” *exuberant*, and *ebullient* and *effervescent* “overflowing, boiling over, spouting out.” *E* is truly a godlike letter that magically entrances, cheers our spirits, and bubbles over.

That’s the art, craft, and science of etymology. The etymology of *etymology* is the Greek *etymon*, “true,” hence, the true sense of a word based on its origins. An etymologist is one who knows the difference between etymology and entomology.

I think that I shall never see
A letter lovelier than *E*.

Of letters it's the most ubiquitous
The elegant *E* is the first pick wit' us.

No letter could be more essential,
Consequential, providential.

A capital letter, ramrod made
Of four straight lines, each on parade,

Yet also frolicsome and playful.
The games it yields will keep your day full.

Poems are made by hacks like me,
But only God can make an *E*.

E is indeed the ubiquitous first pick wit' us. *E* is the most omnipresent letter in English. In fact, one out of eight printed letters is an *E*. We sprinkle *E* throughout our

writing – *here, there, and everywhere*. Consider the pronouns for us -- *he, she, me, we, they, them, themselves, her, herself;f, himself, their, myself, thee, thine, and ye*. That’s why I call *E* an effervescent letter. Effervescent for *E*, we wouldn’t be able to write.

Frequency lists vary for the first thirteen letters of the alphabet that are most widespread in writing, but every version begins with *E*. The most famous arrangement of letters in order of their occurrence is ETAOINSHRDLU, with the major vowels occupying the first, third, fourth, fifth, and thirteenth positions. (Turns out that the first seven letters of this list are an anagram of *Estonia*).

E is our “soundest” letter. The sound of the long *E* is embedded in and rhymes with the pronunciation of nine letters -- *B, C, D, E, G, P, T, V, and Z*. The short *E* – *eh* – kicks off six other letters – *F, L, M, N, S, and X*. So more than half our alphabet is at *E*’s.

E is the sound of what linguists call the pet suffix – *nightie, kitty, granny, sweetie, cutie, and Billy*. *E* is the sound of what we might call the awards suffix – *Tony, Emmy, Grammy, and Espy*. *E* is the sound of one of our most popular noun-agency suffixes – *employee, refugee, absentee, deportee, attendee, conferee*. *E* is the most pervasive element of our wired, interconnected age – *e-mail, e-business, e-message, e-zine, eBay, eHarmony*, and -- a word I highly recommend -- *e-dress*.

Let us also extol (borrowed from Latin *extolere: ex-*, “up,” and *tollere*, “to raise,” hence, “to raise up”) the letter *E* as the first letter and sound in the name of our marvelous language.

There are more ways to spell the long *E* in words and names than for any other sound in our language, except the schwa. Here, in alphabetical order, are fifty-two, one spelling for each week in the year:

A: karaoke, *AE*: aegis, *AGH*: shillelagh, *AH*: shillelah, *AOI*: Aoife (Ee-feh), *AY*: quay, *E*: edict, *EA*: eat, *EAGH*: Killyeagh, *EAU*: Beauchamp (Bee-cham), *EE*: see, *EH*: rehbok, *EI*: weird, *EIGH*: Raleigh, *EIP*: receipt, *EO*: people, *ES*: demesne, *EY*: key, *EYE*: keyed, *HE*: rheostat, *HEA*: wheat, *HEE*: wheel, *HEI*: Rheims, *HEY*: dinghey, *HIE*: dinghies, *HOE*: diarrhoea, *HY*: dinghy, *I*: machine, *IA*: Virginia (Vir-gin-ny), *IE*: grief, *IG*: mignon, *IGH*: Denbigh, *II*: Hawaii, *ILL*: tortilla, *IS*: debris, *IT*: esprit, *IX*: Grand Prix, *OE*: amoeba, *OEI*: onomatopoeia, *OI*: chamoix (sham-eez) *OIS*: chamois (sham-ee), *OISE*: chamoised, *OY*: buoy, *UE*: Portuguese, *UEE*: marquee, *UI*: quiche, *UILL*: guillotine, *UIS*: marquis (mar-kee), *UY*: guyot (ghee-oh), *Y*: happy, ‘: maitre d’, *NO NOTATION*: CD.

While *E* exhibits (“Latin *ex + habere*, “to hold out, display”) infinite variety in the orthographic representations of its sound, it can be a most deferential letter. When it is paired with the four other major vowels (going first or second) as well as itself, it can preserve the sound of its partner vowel or its own sound: *sundae break*, *bee*, *feisty*, *lie*, *yeoman*, *hoe*, *eulogy*, *due*.

The longest common univocalic English word is *strengthlessness* – 16 letters and three *E*’s. Next come the 15-letter *defenselessness*, in which the single vowel *E* occurs five times, and the 13-letter *senselessness*, with four *E*’s. *Beekeeper* packs five *E*’s into the brief compass of nine letters.

Or take the concept of grammagrams, words that, when they are pronounced, consist entirely of letter sounds. Almost all of them include the letter *E* itself or the sound *ee*:

any (NE)	decay (DK)	essay (SA)	ivy (IV)
beady (BD)	easy (EZ)	excel (XL)	Kewpie (QP)
cagey (KG)	empty (MT)	excess (XS)	seedy (CD)

cutey (QT) envy (NV) icy (IC) tepee (TP)

E as a sound or a letter cavorts through every grammagram of three syllables:

devious (DVS) enemy (NME) escapee (SKP) opium (OPM)

effendi (FND) envious (NVS) odious (ODS) tedious (TDS)

And four-syllables:

anemone (NMNE) arcadian (RKDN) excellency (XLNC)

And -- ta da! -- the pentasyllabic *expediency* (XPDNC) and *obediency* (OBDNC).

Six-letter three-level pyramid words abound – *banana*, *mammal*, *tattoo* – but ten-letter, four-level pyramids are wondrous monuments. Packed in *sleeveless* are one *V*, two *L*'s, three *S*'s, and four *E*'s. The strata in *Tennessee's* are one *T*, two *N*'s, three *S*'s, and – guess what? -- four *E*'s. And *peppertree* grows one *T*, two *R*'s, three *P*'s, and – ta da! – four *E*'s:

SLEEVELESS	TENNESSEE'S	PEPPERTREE
V	T	T
LL	NN	RR
SSS	SSS	PPP
EEEE	EEEE	EEEE

So I say again:

E is indeed frolicsome and playful.
The games it yields will keep your day full.

E is an elixir for any lover of language. Eastern alchemists continually tried to transmute base metals into gold. The imaginary substance they hoped would do the trick they called *al-iksir*, literally “the dry powder,” which entered Medieval Latin as *elixir*.

Now that you have explored the essential *e* (borrowed from the Latin *essentia*, itself from *esse* “to be”) you may well exult (Latin “to leap up”), “Eureka *E!*” – “I have found the essence of the English alphabet!”

WORD WAYS MAGIC

MARTIN GARDNER
Norman, Oklahoma

This trick is based on a paper-fold idea by Max Maven that I included in my Sterling book Mental Magic. It occurred to me that “Word Ways” applied nicely to the trick. (The answer result word is in Answers and Solutions.)

W	O	R	D
W	A	Y	S

Fold the sheet into a packet eight leaves deep by folding it any way you like along the creases. After you do this, some cells in the packet will face one way, other cells will face the opposite way. Because you made the folds at random, there seems to be no way to know which cells face which way.

Trim the four sides of the packet with scissors, so that no cell is attached to another cell.

Spread the pieces on the table. Can you arrange the face-up pieces to spell a common English word? If you can, stop. If you can't, turn over all the pieces.

Try again to spell a word with the face-up pieces.

You are sure to succeed. What word do you spell?