

RENAMING THE MONTHS

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Most people are familiar with the dictum that one should only eat oysters in months containing the letter R, even though refrigeration has made this caution unnecessary. The letter R is contained in eight consecutive months, September through April, but absent from the remainder, May through August. Similarly, the letter T appears in August through October only, the letter O in October and November, and the letter S in August and September, but no one seems to have exploited these logological curiosities. The five months February, March, April, August and November contain, respectively, the unique letters F, H, I, G and V.

If one allows rules of this nature to use more than one letter, A and R simultaneously appear in January through April, but in no other month.

Can one select names for the months so that logological rules of this nature can always be constructed? One simple way to do it is provided by a method originally discussed by Dmitri Borgmann in Beyond Language (Scribner's, 1967). In Problem 25 (The Magic Circle), he arranges eight different letters in a circle and proceeds to rearrange each set of adjacent four letters into a word. This technique can be readily extended to twelve letters if one is willing to use six-letter words found only in Webster's Second or Third unabridged dictionaries. For example, the ring SUTINRGOA-BED yields the twelve words *sturin*, *truing*, *trigon*, *oaring*, *barong*, *borage*, *bodega*, *abodes*, *abused*, *busted*, *suited* and *nudist*. Any single letter is contained in exactly six consecutive words, and not in the other six; any adjacent letter-pair in the ring (such as SU, UT, TI, etc.) is contained in exactly five consecutive words and not in the other seven; and so on. If these words are taken as the names of the months, it is evident that any pattern can be accommodated, either by a group of one or more letters or by their absence. For example, the oyster rule of R is transformed into the slightly more unwieldy rules "eat oysters only if the month does not contain the letter-triple ABO" or "eat oysters only if the month contains the letter T, U, or I". The simplest rules are those involving the use of exactly six months; as one moves away from this ideal, more letters must be added. Of course, such rules are least needed when very few or very many months are involved; then it is simpler merely to name the month or two that is excluded or included.

The names given in the above example are not particularly monthlike (imagine a month named *nudist*!). To enlarge the possi-

bilities, allow repetitions of letters in a word, as is done in the Letter Bank puzzle of the National Puzzlers' League; for example, **trigon** can be converted to **trotting**, and **busted** to **stubbed**. More generally, add one or more of the fourteen unused letters, as in **truing** to **hurting**.

The search for suitable names under these rules is best carried out with the aid of a computer. First select a set of twelve different common letters, arranging them in a circle with at least four vowels well-spaced; then program a computer to search for all words containing one or more instances of six adjacent letters but none of the remaining six. In most cases, the list of such words will be short enough to be displayed on a monitor; one simply selects the most plausible-sounding "name" and moves on to the next set of six adjacent letters. Good hunting!

A WHIMSICAL TOUR OF CONTEMPORARY HUMOR

WHIM (Western Humor and Irony Membership) recently issued *WHIMSY III*, the proceedings of a conference on contemporary humor held at Arizona State University in April 1984. This 287-page paperback is available for \$10 from Don L. F. Nilsen, Department of English, Arizona State University, Tempe AZ 85287. It consists of extended abstracts of more than 100 papers on a wide variety of humor-related topics; would you believe papers on humor in scientific articles or funeral eulogies? Deadly-dull scholarly analyses of the anatomy of humor are leavened by numerous jokes and anecdotes and satirical treatments of various academic sacred cows (such as research projects).

For *Word Ways* readers, the most relevant papers are, perhaps, those on riddles (including one paper in the Education section) and visual humor (a taxonomy of the pictorial rebus of the 1930s, such as the tombstone of Alexander Graham Bell for "a dead ringer" and an electrician working on an Indian privy for "wiring ahead for a reservation").

The Fifth National WHIM Conference will be held at Arizona State University on the topic of American humor, from March 29 to April 1, 1986; those interested in presenting a paper must submit an abstract to Don Nilsen by January 1, 1986.