WORDS THAT NEVER STRAY

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What do the following words have in common: bread, clams, dough, cabbage, lettuce, peanuts, and chicken feed? Each is a food that is metaphoric slang for “cash.”

What do these words have in common: galore, extraordinaire, akimbo, aplenty, aweigh, incarnate, fatale, royale, par excellence, immemorial, aforesaid, and manque? The answer is that the dozen are “deferential words.” While the vast majority of adjectives usually precede the nouns they modify, the words in this list always come after the noun they modify.

What characteristic do the following words share: any, beady, cagey, cutie, decay, easy, empty, envy, essay, excel, excess, icy, ivy, kewpie, seedy, and teepee? Turns out that each word is cobbled from the sounds of two letters—NE, RT, BD, KG, QT, DK, EZ, MT, NV, SA, XL, XS, IC, IV, QP, CD, and TP.

None of these clusters approaches the fascination of another group of words that I have been tracking for decades. Read on, O fellow verbivore, and I trust that the category will gradually come into focus.

Hoping to make some clean lucre to slake my hunger, I’m going to get a discussion in edgewise about a special category of words. Unless I give this topic long shrift, I’ll be in rotten fettle. Please don’t hurl aspersions at these words. I’d prefer that your dander and hackles be down and that you wait on tenterhooks with bated curiosity. Even after searching every cranny, don’t just sit there twiddling your toes.

The above paragraph was pretty weird, wasn’t it? In fact, it was anything but in kilter. That’s because lucre can never be clean, only filthy, thirst is the only need that can be slaked, and only a word can be gotten in edgewise. Although some people are given a lot of time to shrieve (confess), we can speak about shrift only as being short. Fettle must be fine, and aspersions can only be cast—never hurled, spoken, or written. Dander can be only gotten up and hackles raised. Nothing can ever be off tenterhooks, and bated can modify only breath. Crannies come only with nooks, and the only body part we can twiddle is our thumbs.

What’s so odd about words such as lucre, slake, edgewise, shrift, fettle, aspersions, dander, hackles, tenterhooks, bated, cranny, and twiddle? Their commonality is that they are always yoked to one—and only one—other word or phrase.

My verbivorous friend Al Gregory is a retired New York postman who lets neither snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor gloom of night stay him from delivering a clever idea in language. Al calls these “monogamous words” because they are always married to one specific word or phrase, and those marriages have withstood the ravages of time. Please bear in mind that a monogamous word is pledged to one—and only one—other word. Thus, an exhibit such as daylight doesn’t quite qualify because it has two mates: scare and beat, as in "scare the daylight out of" and "beat the daylight out of." Similarly, boggles seems to me to be twice married—to the mind and the imagination—one can wreak havoc or vengeance, one can be taken or caught unawares, and pickings can be both slim or easy.
I also exclude reduplications, such as razzle dazzle, super duper, namby pamby, and hurly burly, and specialized medical terms, such as sleep apnea, corrotted artery, ectopic pregnancy, macular degeneration, acid reflux, and varicose veins.

Linguist and lexicographer David Grambs labels these idiosyncratic words “special-team players, not all-round or all-game players.” Marshaling another analogy, Grambs writes, “Such words are today virtually one-idiom-only words, having almost no life in the English language beyond the discrete phrase they’ve become a part of, like fossilized insects preserved in amber.”

Many of these single-idiom words have fascinating origins. Shrift is the noun form of shrive, “to confess before a priest.” The compound short shrift originally referred to the brief time that a condemned prisoner had to make a confession and receive absolution. Tenterhooks are hooks that hold cloth on a tenter, a framework for stretching cloth. To be on tenterhooks is to be in a state of great tension or suspense. Bated is a shortened form of abated. That’s why waiting with bated breath means waiting with breath held back.

Let’s make a game of it. Here, alphabetically, are 130 additional examples of monogamous, special-team words. Fill in each blank with the one and only word or phrase that completes each idiom. Only after you’ve tried your very best may you turn to “Answers to Games and Quizzes.”

31. _______ dragout 32. _______ druthers 33. _______ dudgeon 34. _______ eke 35. _______ extenuating 36. _______ figment 37. _______ fine-tooth 38. _______ foregone 39. _______ forbid 40. _______ fritz
41. _______ gainful 42. _______ geezer 43. _______ gibbous 44. _______ gird 45. _______ grist
46. _______ gung 47. _______ gussied 48. _______ halcyon 49. _______ haywire 50. _______ heeler
51. _______ hunker 52. _______ immemorial 53. _______ inroads 54. _______ intentioned 55. _______ kibosh 56. _______ klatch 57. _______ lam 58. _______ lickety 59. _______ lieu 60. _______ loggerheads
61. madding 62. middling 63. misspent 64. muckamuck 65. neap 66. noised 67. nothings 68. nth
69. offing 70. opposable

71. petard 72. peter 73. pinking 74. Pyrrhic
75. rareing 76. riddance 77. roughshod 78. rumpus 79. runcible 80. sanctum

81. scot- 82. scruff 83. self-fulfilling 84. shebang 85. shored 86. sleight 87. suborn 88. suasion 89. tat 90. thataway

91. throes 92. toed 93. trice 94. Ctrove 95. turpitude 96. ulterior 97. umbrage 99. unsung 100. vale

101. vantage 102. wend 103. whiled 104. whippersnapper 105. wishful 106. won't 107. workaday 108. wroth 109. yore 110. zoot

Now try some pairs connected by and:

111. abet 112. alack 113. be-all 114. beck
115. betwixt 116. caboodle 117. dribs 118. fro 119. hale and 120. haw

121. intents 122. kith 123. null and 124. spick 125. hither and 126. scrimp 127. sundry 128. vim 129. whys wherefores 130. yon