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 metaphorical slang for “cash.”

What do these words have in common: galore, extraordinaire, akimbo, aplenty, aweigh, incarnate, fatale, royale, par excellence, immemorial, aforesight, 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 daylights 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. ______ forfend 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. _________ iam 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. raring 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. trive 95. trope 96. turpitude 97. ulterior 98. umbrage 99. unosung 100. vale


Now try some pairs connected by and:

111. abet 112. alack 113. be-all 114. beck 115. betwixt 116. caboodle 117. drabs 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. why's 130. yon