

UNABBREVIATION

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Editor's Note: The following article gives a variant of the license-plate game discussed briefly by Dave Morice in the August 1986 Kickshaws and Jeremy Morse in the November 1986 Colloquy.

Readers of this journal are probably formidable players of most of the commercially-available word games, and always on the lookout for something new. If so, they might be interested in a game, called Unabbreviation for lack of anything catchier, which a few of us have been playing on occasion for a few years. The game is for two or more players, and is suitable for home or travel.

To understand how Unabbreviation works, first let us consider the more usual term "abbreviation". The usual way to abbreviate a word is to omit some of its letters, but leave the remaining letters in the same order as in the original word. For example, EXCLUDE might be abbreviated to three letters in a number of different ways: EXC, EXD, XCL, XLU, LUD, etc. (How meaningful the various abbreviations might be depends on the circumstances, but meaning is of no concern here.)

Unabbreviation is, of course, the reverse process: adding one or more letters in order to form a word. In our game we'll be concerned with an original set of three letters called a triplet. A new letter or letters may be added to this triplet anywhere: before, after, or in between any of the original letters, as long as the order of the original triplet is unchanged, and a valid English word of four or more letters is the result. It should be obvious that many triples can be unabbreviated into a host of different words. EXC, for example, can be made not only into EXCLUDE, but into DETOXIFICATION and EXPEDIENCY and EXCEL, to name just a few. This ambiguity is fine, and in fact makes the game interesting.

Other triplets, however, contain letters in such an order that no valid unabbreviated word is possible, or at least apparent. (To avoid having some smart aleck respond with a 21-letter word from an obscure dictionary, no example will be given here.) Even these difficult triplets, however, can almost certainly be unabbreviated into a succession of two or more words. In fact, it can hardly be asking too much to insist that the words for at least part of a phrase in a meaningful, grammatically-correct sentence. To use the same example (EXC), we could find FEED MY OXEN WITH CORN, THE TAX COLLECTOR, NEXT CASE, etc. Sequences of words which could not be lifted from a reasonable sentence (HEX ACRE, for instance) are invalid. Similarly, sequences of words which would

be interrupted by punctuation in a proper sentence (e.g., "After feeding THE OX, CASH this check") are also out.

Those were the rules for unabbreviating a triplet. However, all unabbreviations are not equal. Since this is a game, i.e., a competitive activity, we must have rules for determining whose unabbreviation for a given triplet is better. Here they are:

1. An unabbreviation with fewer words is better.
2. If the number of words in two unabbreviations is the same, the one with fewer total letters is better.
3. If the number of words and letters in two unabbreviations is the same, the one which falls earlier in alphabetical order is better.

To illustrate how the rules apply, here are examples for the triplet EXC, listed from worst to best:

FEED MY OXEN WITH CORN (5 words--any intervening words which don't happen to have the letters we need, MY and WITH in this example, still figure in the word count, but any additional words before or after the sequence which might be needed to make a complete sentence do not count)

THE TAX COLLECTOR (3 words, 15 letters)

THE AX COLLECTORS (ditto, but earlier alphabetically)

THE AX COLLECTOR (3 words, 14 letters)

NEXT CASE (2 words)

if the 2 words are shorter)
DETOXIFICATION (1 word, 14 letters--better than 2 words even

EXPEDIENCY (10 letters)

EXCLUDE (7 letters)

EXCEL (5 letters)

EXACT (5 letters, earlier alphabetically)

It's probably clear by now that the object of the game is to find a better unabbreviation for a given triplet than your opponents do. The following are some suggestions for basic game procedures, with a few more rules to help avoid arguments.

The game Unabbreviation lends itself readily to play in automobiles, in states where three letters are common on license plates. (Pennsylvania and New Jersey, for instance, do nicely.) It's probably best to use only plates on cars traveling in the same direction as one's own, so the letters remain visible for an adequate length of time. Reject plates with fewer than three letters; use the first three letters for the triplet, if the plate has more than three. When an appropriate plate comes into view, a round begins. All players are free to voice unabbreviations, and to improve upon previous tries. Naturally, a player cannot use an unabbreviation which someone else has already called out. The round ends when the triplet is no longer visible, or by mutual agreement. The winner of the round is, of course, the one who came up with the best unabbreviation. Players keep track of the number of rounds they have won, and play continues until a set limit (perhaps five wins) is reached, or until the players tire.

For home play, the triples are randomly selected from the tiles,

letter cubes, etc. of a commercial word game. It doesn't really matter whether letter frequencies are equal or are proportional to their use in English. An informal game might proceed much the same as in the car version above.

A quieter and more formal home version, which does not place a premium on quick thinking but which certainly requires intense concentration, might take place as follows. A few (say, five) different triplets should be selected and visible at one time so that players may allocate their effort according to which triplets are giving them the most trouble. The players should agree in advance about the length of a round and use a kitchen timer or miniature hourglass to signal the end of the round. During the search for unabbreviations, players keep their own responses hidden from other players, and report their best solution for each triplet when time is up.

Scoring for the home version can be elaborate or simple. If the players are all very sharp and competitive, the scoring system might be based on how good each player's solution for a triplet is, compared to all the others.

The following scheme, however, will probably suit most players better. It lets even weak players score points, encouraging them to keep playing, while still rewarding the players with the best words most often. The player selecting the letters for the triplets is called the dealer; the dealer in each new round is the player to the left of the previous dealer. If one player (only) has the best unabbreviation for a given triplet, he gets one point; the others get zero. If two or more players arrive at the same best unabbreviation, the dealer gets one point for his unabbreviation, even if it's not the best, and the others get zero. However, nobody (including the dealer) may score points for invalid unabbreviations, for example no solution, misspellings, "solutions" which don't contain the triplet, word sequences which couldn't come from an intelligible sentence, etc. If, for example, Andy's unabbreviation for the first triplet is better than Bud's, Clyde's, Dudley's, and Elmer's, Andy gets 1, the others 0. For the next triplet, suppose Andy and Elmer have the same word, which is better than Bud's and Clyde's efforts, while Dudley didn't have a valid solution; in that case whichever player is the dealer for that round gets the point, unless the dealer is Dudley, in which case nobody scores for that triplet. Of course the game should stop only when all players have been dealers an equal number of times.

Players should decide on a standard dictionary prior to play to resolve disputes. Proper names will normally be excluded and hyphenated words allowed only if listed in full in the dictionary. Naturally, no player may refer to the dictionary during play in an attempt to find unabbreviations. In a car game, one of the players will have to serve as the authority unless the glove box contains a dictionary—a possibility which, considering the readers of this journal, should not necessarily be dismissed. The submitter of a multiple-word unabbreviation must use it in a sentence if so

requested; the remaining players may then vote whether to allow or disallow his solution.

There are 17,576 possible triplets. Those who systematically try to discover and memorize the best unabbreviations of all of them are likely to find themselves without playing companions, so the trouble is probably not worthwhile. But the game also easily extends to quads (sets of four letters) instead of triplets if you need more variety!

Rather than send you off with just a dry set of rules, suppose we provide a baker's dozen of randomly-selected triplets for practice. Take as long as you like. Some unabbreviations will probably come to you immediately, while others may initially stump you; but you may well find that some of your solutions are better than the answers listed at the end of this issue. Best of luck!

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|--------|--------|---------|---------|
| 1. LZM | 5. PRD | 8. lTM | 11. NSL |
| 2. GGM | 6. LTK | 9. NYY | 12. OEC |
| 3. UWX | 7. MAM | 10. ZSP | 13. lJl |
| 4. OYT | | | |

A SLANG THESAURUS

Slang dictionaries are great to browse through, but the writer who is searching for a colorful synonym for a specific concept is at a loss: he needs a thesaurus instead. Esther and Albert Lewin admirably fill this lexicographic niche with their new (1988) \$40 Facts on File book The Thesaurus of Slang, containing 150,000 words arranged under 12,500 standard English words. Examples:

MACARONI makko, worms, dago

PERVERT freak, geek, pervo, prevert, queer, panty thief

BLEMISH zit, blem, second, beauty spot, bloom, doohickey, dohinky, hickey, sight, dump, blot on the landscape, bug

TALL AND THIN long drink of water, Long John, skeleton, stringbean, beanpole, beanstalk, broomstick, clothes pole, hat rack, stilt, stick, twiggy

There are over 400 terms for DRUNK, not enough to give Paul Dickson pause; in his book Words (Delacorte, 1982), he listed 2231 synonyms for this concept.