

HOW I FIND AN ANAGRAM

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Every good anagram is, in some sense, apposite to the subject being anagrammed. This being so, the most important task I set myself in finding an anagram is the creation of an associative word list. That is, I first establish a number of descriptors which fit the subject being anagrammed in some recognizable way, and then look for words that can be formed out of the letter stock which match those descriptors.

Although the use of Scrabble (or anagram) tiles might appear to be a convenient way of keeping track of the available letters, I avoid them, preferring to use pencil and paper instead. It is too easy to shuffle unused tiles aimlessly, and, even more important, it is too easy to lose track of words which may later prove useful. The use of a paper pad in preference to a set of tiles has the advantage of fixing the word a little more firmly in my mind, prompting me to concentrate harder than I otherwise might.

There is no single word source upon which I rely. I prefer to use my memory as the primary source, bolstered by an occasional glance at assorted word books: dictionaries, thesauruses, anagram lists (especially the Longman Anagram Dictionary, and sometimes Chambers Anagrams). If appropriate, I will draw upon acronyms, abbreviations, proper names (particularly place names), and foreign phrases.

The creation of the associative word list is, however, tempered by the letters actually available for use. When starting a word search, I first size up the letter stock: arrange the letters alphabetically and count them, taking due note of repeated letters, the ratio of consonants to vowels, and the occurrence of uncommon consonants such as Z, X, J, Q, V, K and F. I usually try to place troublesome letters very early, if possible, in words containing few vowels. However, it is frequently more important to find one or more words fitting the descriptors and rely on short words like vex, jazz, quiz, off, kink and the like from the Scrabble player's arsenal to round out the nascent phrase.

Invariably, my descriptors reflect an attitudinal bias at first, but eventually I come to adopt a broader perspective. To illustrate, my first Reaganagrams were keyed on such concepts as senescence, ultraconservatism, bellicosity, acting, fashion, and uxoriousness. These characteristics comprised my initial set of descriptors. To them were added personal associations (Nancy, Regan, etc.) and current events (Grenada, Iran). Regrettably, letter limitations excluded such otherwise fine names as Meese, Watt, Nicaragua, Con-

tras, USSR, or Kadafy (in any spelling).

Here is the evolution of a specific Reaganagram. After doing a number of Reaganagrams about the President himself, I decided to look for one involving the First Lady. If I referred to her by name, it would have to be Nan, not Nancy. This was fine, as it saved two of the eighteen precious letters for better purposes. At first, I hoped to build upon some jeu de mots, such as converting "redress of grievances" to "grievance of red dresses". The resources were too sparse, of course -- no C, F, or V, not enough Ds or Ss. Disappointed but far from discouraged, I considered saying something about a "red gown". "Too ordinary," I decided; "we're talking high fashion here." I needed to pull a designer name from the eight remaining letters. Finding none, I reluctantly omitted the color word and quickly extracted "Dior". French, eh? I immediately tried "Nan's gown, a la Dior", leaving only the letters E, L and R. How I wished that L were a D right then! With a sigh, I put these words aside for a while. When I revisited them in a day or two, the good part was still there: NAN and DIOR GOWN. But why just one? Let her have an unlimited number. With NAN and DIOR GOWNS now given, I had just A, A, E, L, L and R to work with, but that was enough. What wonders can be done in the final stage with two- and three-letter words! With them, and admittedly some good luck, I quickly extracted the following result, non-partisan and much better than I had anticipated: NAN, ALL ARE DIOR GOWNS.

Similarly, the anagram ARENA DIN -- WAGONS ROLL began with nostalgic thoughts of Death Valley Days. I started out, as I often do, sifting through words with a W. First came WAGON ROLLS, soon replaced by WAGONS ROLL, whereupon chariot races came to mind. Well, RODEO was out, but ARENA was there, as well as DIN, all spelled out, lest it be overlooked.

Occasionally, a feasible anagram must be put on hold until its time has come. Consider IRAN, AN OLD SLOW ANGER. It literally took me years to see this one. Not that the ingredients weren't all there from the beginning: ANGER, OLD, SLOW, even IRAN. But the hostage release, coming immediately after the inauguration as a final insult to Carter, made it seem inapplicable to Reagan. It was only well into the second term, with more facts about Contra-gate surfacing daily, that it made sense to me and I finally wrote it down.

The anagrams on The Meaning of Life were a lot of fun to do. The mix was good, there were enough letters to offer hope of finding relevant words of some sort, and the subject opened doors to many possibilities. At first, I kept starting with IF, as though a conditional pronouncement would be more philosophical (i.e., speculative) than some other syntax. Only my last anagram actually worked that way, and even then only because I ended up with I, I, F and S. The first attempt sprang from a desire to assert humanity's freedom from the dominance of destiny. After NO FATE SUPREME, a portentous thirteen-letter start, I had eighteen letters left, the usual budget for a Reaganagram. With virtually no effort,

I was able to append the predicate, IS A HOPE WORTH FILING. Do these words form an optimal closure? I have no idea what that might mean, other than to say that after exhaustive search of all possible closures formed from these letters, that particular one might seem superior to the rest. Naturally I made no such search. The words turned up, said more or less what I wanted them to, and I left it at that. Since this anagram is a metaphysical pronouncement of sorts, there seemed no need to explain how or where one files one's hopes.

The others turned up in the order indicated and probably need no further discussion, except to say that I repeatedly found myself in the unfamiliar situation of having many more vowels in the end phrase than I could easily handle. My strategy quickly switched from avoidance of high vowel density to early unloading of some of those Es, Is and Os. WINNIE-THE-POOH was soon considered (on my master list), and, glancing over the residual letters, I thought, "and PIGLET, too!" What to say about them, metaphorically or otherwise, took some time to decide, resulting in two versions, WINNIE-THE-POOH, SUFFER PIGLET'S AROMA and PIGLET AROMA; WINNIE-THE-POOH SUFFERS. Obviously, only one could be used in the final article.

To summarize: I create a word list subject to the criteria of (1) semantic association, (2) initial preference for long words, subject to the conditions following, (3) deliberate early use of less frequent consonants, and (4) avoidance of high vowel density.

The computer-implemented anagram algorithms I have read about appear to have two main shortcomings: (1) insufficient use of problem-solving techniques, and (2) insufficient relevant vocabulary. To enlarge on the first point, the computer is used to extract many thousands of full sets of words from the letter stock; the user must first permute the words of each set, and then interpret these permutations for meaning, a tedious process which brings the fable of the Sorcerer's Apprentice to mind. Instead of this essentially batch mode, labor-intensive approach, it may be preferable to use the computer interactively. In this way, it can provide high leverage to a guided search, first for semantically appropriate words or phrases in the initial phase of anagram construction. There, longer words, containing the infrequently used letters or other given letters occurring in abnormally high density, are preferred. Then, at the user's discretion, this would be followed by retrieval of short supplemental words from the set of residual letters during the closure-building phase. If conducted at a computer terminal, initiated by a fill-in-the-blanks screen to collect keyword inputs which semantically guide an associative word list search, rapid real-time anagramming may become as natural and accepted as traditional word processing. Every art form needs a tool or two. Where would sculpture be without the chisel?