

THE LETTER CONUNDRUM

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Conundrums have been a popular form of word puzzle for well over a century. One form of conundrum appeals especially to the logologist: the one that asks why a specified letter of the alphabet has a certain characteristic. It comes in two varieties according to the form of the answer; in one, the answer depends on the existence of a certain letter in a word, and in the other, the answer depends on the deletion of a letter from a word, forming a new word. In general, the second is more difficult to construct than the first.

Letter conundrums have appeared in **Word Ways** only once, on page 49 in the February 1974 issue. Here is a collection taken from various books and newspaper puzzle-columns owned by the editor and by Will Shortz, dating from the 1850s to the 1920s:

What letter is most useful to a deaf woman? A - it makes her hear

Why is A like a honeysuckle? Because a B (bee) follows it

Why is A like noon? Because it is in the middle of day

What letter is always repeated in America? The letter A

Why is B like a hot fire? Because it makes oil boil

What makes a road broad? The letter B

Why is C the most noisy of letters? It begins all clamor

What turns a lover into clover? The letter C

Why is C like a schoolmaster? Because he forms lasses into classes

Why is D like a great reformer? Because it makes men mend

Why is D like a squalling child? Because it makes Ma mad

Why is D like a hoop of gold? Because we cannot be wed without it

Why is the letter D like a sailor? Because it follows the C (sea)

Why is D, cut in two, like a corpse? Because it is D parted (departed)

Why is E the most unfortunate letter? Because it is never in cash,
always in debt, and never out of danger

Why is E a gloomy and discontented letter? Though never out of health
and pocket, it never appears in spirits

Why is E like death? Because it is at the end of life

Why is E like London? Because it is the capital of England

Why is F like death? Because it makes all fall

Why is F like death? Because without it, life is a lie

Why is F like a cow's tail? Because it comes at the end of beef

Why is G like a hot day? Because it is in the middle of August

- Why is H like servants? Because it is the first in help
- Why is I the luckiest vowel? Because it is in the center of bliss, while E is in Hell and all other vowels in Purgatory
- What letter is invisible, yet never out of sight? The letter I
- Why is J like your nose? Because it is next to your I (eye)
- Why is K like flour? You cannot make cake without it
- Why is K like a pig's tail? Because it is the end of pork
- Why is L like an unparalleled piece of generosity? Because it enables a lady to make over a lover
- What changes a pear into a pearl? The letter L
- What went before Queen Mary, and followed King William to the end? The letter M
- What comes once in a minute, twice in a moment, and not once in a thousand years? The letter M
- Why is M in 'timid' like your nose? Because it is between two Is (eyes)
- Why is N like a pig? Because it makes a sty nasty
- Why is N like a buck's tail? Because it is at the end of venison
- Why is N like a faithless lover? Because it is inconstant
- Why is O the only vowel we hear? Because the rest are inaudible
- Why is O the noisiest vowel? Because you cannot make a horrid noise without it, while the others are inaudible
- Why is O like a horse? Because G (gee) makes it go
- Why is O like most heros and heroines in novels? Because they're in love
- What letter is found in wedlock as single, but in widowhood as double? The letter O
- What is the center of joy and the principal mover of sorrow? The letter O
- Why is P like a selfish friend? Because it is the first in pity and the last in help
- Why is P like a Roman emperor? Because it is near O (Nero)
- Why is P like uncle's fat wife going uphill? Because it makes ant (aunt) pant
- Why is Q like a guide? Because it goes ahead of U (you)
- Why is R a profitable letter? Because it makes rice out of ice
- Why is R always in confusion? Because it is in the middle of labyrinth
- Why is S like thunder? It makes our cream sour cream
- What turns a word into a sword? The letter S
- Why is S like a sewing machine? Because it makes needles needless
- What letter is invisible, yet never out of sight? The letter S
- Why is S like smart repartee? Because it begins and ends in sauciness
- Why is S like dinner? Because it comes before T (tea)
- Why is S like blotting paper? Because it makes ink sink
- Why is S like a furnace in a battery? Because it makes hot shot
- Why is it no offense to conspire in the evening? Because what is treasonable is reasonable after T (tea)
- Why should children go to bed after T (tea)? Because when T (tea) is taken away, night is nigh
- What is the difference between here and there? The letter T

Why is T like Easter? Because it comes at the end of Lent
 Why is T like an amphibious animal? Because it lives in both earth and water
 Why is T like an island? Because it is in the midst of water
 Why is U the gayest letter? Because it is always in fun
 Why is U the most unfortunate letter? Because it is always in trouble and difficulty
 Why cannot V be seen? Because it is invisible
 Why cannot V be divided? Because it is indivisible
 Why is W like Sunday? Because it is the first of the week
 Why is W like gossip (scandal, a busybody)? Because it makes ill will
 Why is X like a mystery? Because it is inexplicable
 What changes a lad into a lady? The letter Y
 Why is Y like a young spendthrift? Because it makes Pa pay
 Why is Z like the monkey cage? Because it is the leading feature of the zoo

I am indebted to Will Shortz for providing conundrums for the rare letters J, Q, X and Z (from Sam Loyd's Cyclopaedia of Puzzles). It appears almost impossible to construct a word deletion conundrum on the letter Q, because few words are deletable to other words by removing Q (ro-q-ue comes to mind). For the others, I suggest

Why is X one of the seven deadly sins? It leads the laity into laxity
 Why is Z a soporific letter? It makes a doe doze
 Why is a lawyer like the letter J? He converts hot air (argon) into legalese (jargon)

Surely **Word Ways** readers can do better!

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Al Stanger, 6212 Winona, St. Louis MO 63109 has a badly-worn copy of Webster's Unabridged, Second Edition, that he will mail to anyone willing to pay the cost of shipping. The introductory and addenda pages are in the worst shape: wrinkled, folded over, torn, even missing. However, pages 1-2987 of the dictionary itself are all there, although some are torn, a few are loose, and a few have corners missing. Do not send money; he will respond only to the first interested person.