

# WORDPLAY ON COMPUTER NETWORKS

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The Internet is a web of linked computer networks set up initially by the US government. Each computer network on the Internet shares certain data formats and commands, so that anyone on a member network can send electronic mail (email) to anyone else. To enter the Internet, one must first join (and establish an account on) one of the thousands of member networks worldwide. Those most likely available to **Word Ways** readers would be university networks (free to students and faculty), or a national commercial network such as Compuserve or America On Line. These charge monthly fees plus \$4-\$12 per hour. Prodigy does not yet offer Internet services, and America On Line has plans to add them.

Each computer network carries some or all of the worldwide Usenet newsgroups or discussions. At last count, there were over 4000 discussion groups ranging from soc.culture.ukranian (discussion of Ukrainian culture) and rec.sports.basketball.pro (discussion of professional basketball) to alt.barney.die.die.die (discussion of everyone's favorite purple dinosaur). Every reader can also write (or "post") entries, without being edited and without further charge. Naturally, this leads to a wide range of responses, including fatuous and repetitive ones. (The fact that most college students get free accounts does not help.) Peer group pressure and the specificity of the newsgroup's subject provide the editing.

Usenet groups are reached using a "newsreader" program, which varies with each network. Once in a newsgroup, you start by reading the FAQ (a list of answers to frequently-asked questions). I haven't found any newsgroups devoted entirely to wordplay yet, but there are literally thousands and I am an unskilled navigator.

Some related groups of interest include rec.puzzles, rec.puzzles.-crosswords, and bit.listserv.words-1. Rec.puzzles usually involves logic puzzles, but often including wordplay (the FAQ includes a long list of palindromes). I have posted puzzles where I gave a clue and punctuated blanks for each letter of an original palindrome; members had to figure out the full sentence.

Besides discussion groups, the Internet also provides access to public sources of data (obtained by a command named ftp). The difficulty is knowing where to find relevant information. There are several commands used to point to these data libraries. I used the gopher command to search for the word "palindromes" and found two extensive collections, plus four computer programs designed to write them. However, there is no evidence of any good palindromes having been created this way.

There exist many smaller (and cheaper) networks besides Internet which start as local systems and often go to regional or national nets. I use an excellent smaller service called The Well, which costs \$15 per month and \$2 per hour (phone 415-332-4335). A major attraction of networks like The Well is the (potentially) higher quality of participants and discussions. The Well's main claim to fame is its "salon" atmosphere, due in part to the large number of writers and journalists who are members, and its small size (8000 members, versus 750,000 on America On Line).

The Well has an excellent conference called Words, which is very much in the **Word Ways** mode, except that word squares and letter-by-letter dissection are not popular. Discussions include etymology, humorously-bad translations, regional and teenage slang, poor uses of "literally", and, of course, palindromes, of which I am the resident expert. There are also ongoing word games, including Fictionary. Also known as Balderdash, this is a game in which players make up definitions for an obscure word and vote for the most likely; the person whose word is most chosen picks the next word. The game of Opposites is similar, except that players submit the word that they think will most often be chosen as the antonym to the given word. In a new game, Proserly, readers make up an ending to a passage of mediocre literature, and vote for the most likely.

### **THE OED ADDITION SERIES**

*The first two volumes of additions to the Oxford English Dictionary Second Edition (1989) have now been published by Oxford University Press for \$35 apiece. Each contains about 3000 new words and modifications of already-defined words to exhibit separate subsenses of meaning which were previously treated as a single sense. A great deal of attention is given to regional variations of English (would you believe **grody to the max** has arrived?), and dialectical spellings are included as well (such as **eejit** for "idiot"). As one has come to expect of the OED, there are copious citations illustrating each new word or new usage. There are innumerable word-treasures awaiting the browser: **twinkie defence** (poor nutrition made me do it, Judge); **paws off**, Pompey (once used by a girl fending off her amorous swain); a friend of Dorothy (a homosexual); and the Eleventh Amendment (thou shalt not speak ill of other Republicans). There's even one word related to wordplay: **univocalic**, with citations from Bombaugh, Logophile, Espy, Augarde, and The Listener. **Maledicta** has a citation under **shitty** and **Verbatim** under **ralph**, but to my knowledge **Word Ways** has yet to make the pages of the OED.*