ANAGRAMS BY COMPUTER

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Introduction

In a recent issue of Word Ways, Harry Stern closed an otherwise wonderful article by impugning the value of computers in finding anagrams. Since I have no talent for finding them by hand, and rely almost entirely on a program, I felt I should rise on behalf of the anagram-impaired—and to defend the honor of the anagram software.

Harry and I agreed on a modern version of "John the steam hammer" (although I do not expect him to taking John Henry's side). Ross chose two phrases, and Harry and I spent the summer of 1994 puzzling over reductio ad absurdum and the center cannot hold.

I used my program Ars Magna, which runs on the Macintosh. When you give it a name or phrase, it consults an on-line dictionary and then marches inexorably through all the anagrams it can find. The process can bore one beyond belief, and hours of poring over the output have forced me to think about a future program which would allow you to work more interactively.

But, having only a simple program, I read—or often skimmed—about 300,000 anagrams (the first phrase yielded 1,152,000, the second 193,000). My work consisted mostly of selecting the cream from this rather large crop. The program prints a given set of words only once, so I do rearrange the words within a given anagram. I also add punctuation and capitalization. On rare occasions I'll spot something by eye and re-run the program on a particular subset of letters after subtracting the word I like. But 90 per cent of the anagrams here come from the program untouched by human hands, not counting shuffling and punctuation.

Incidentally, I feel that Ross's choices of phrases worked well for computer solution. Anything longer would produce more output than one can peruse in reasonable time. Anything shorter would yield fewer anagrams.

Harry and I have not shared our results, but I'll speculate on how ours will differ. The computer will generate a lot of mediocre anagrams for any phrase of reasonable length. Because it works strictly off a dictionary, it won't use imaginative nearwords such as 'n' for and or foolin' for fooling. But because it searches so exhaustively (if a foolish human takes the time to slog through the output) the results may include wonderful anagrams which not only apply to the subject but use good grammar.
In my opinion, two examples of wonderful are:

(1) RONALD WILSON REAGAN | no, darlings, no ERA law
(it took a human reader to turn era into ERA)

(2) AMY BETH SOLOMON | oh, so blame Monty!
(Monty and Judy Solomon are the parents of this newborn)

Reductio ad absurdum

Webster's Ninth Collegiate (Digital Edition, of course) defines *reductio ad absurdum* as "disproof of a proposition by showing an absurdity to which it leads when carried to its logical conclusion" (some might argue that spending lots of time reading computer-generated anagrams serves as a fine example of reducing something to the point of absurdity).

The phrase presents considerable difficulties for a computer and, I suspect, for a human. It has no truly difficult letters, but does suffer from an abundance of Us (three of them). This leads to a lot of anagrams which discuss Cuba, bums, druids, rum, and so on.

As I write this, Cuba figures prominently in the news. Quite a number of anagrams seem to refer to Cuban-American relations, though I can't say that these results clarify things.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anagram</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armed Cuba did rout U.S.</td>
<td>Cuba matured, or U.S. did</td>
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<tr>
<td>But comrade, a U.S. druid</td>
<td>Detour: U.S., Cuba, Madrid</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuba dread; U.S. mud riot</td>
<td>Erratum: U.S. did do Cuba</td>
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<tr>
<td>A couple refer not to Cuba but its leader. The first may allude</td>
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<tr>
<td>to some FBI obsession with him.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bureau: &quot;Castro? Dim dud&quot;</td>
<td>Um, buried Castro, a dud</td>
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<tr>
<td>A few concern the state of the Cuban tourist industry.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Add tourism? A curb due</td>
<td>Red Cuba: tourism a dud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba tourism? Read &quot;dud&quot;</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Before we leave the Caribbean, here are some more to which I'll</td>
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<tr>
<td>let you assign a meaning.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Autos did murder Cuba</td>
<td>Cuba: &quot;Oust armed druid&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuba admired our dust</td>
<td>Cuba it's our armed dud</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuba dread? It's our mud</td>
<td>Cuba adds truer odium</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuba rioters, a mud-dud</td>
<td>Admit Cuba—ruse or dud?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cuba rum, a steroid dud</td>
<td>Storied Cuba run, a dud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba satire: dud or mud</td>
<td>Cuba: &quot;I used dud mortar!&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perhaps equally relevant to the cutting edge of current events, we</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>find the following series of anagrams which I think somewhat</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>incoherently describe the saga of the Bobbitts.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disarm or cut dud beau</td>
<td>I'm cut; a subdued arder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aim, cut—subdued arder</td>
<td>But docudrama is rude!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subdue arder amid cut</td>
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<tr>
<td>We also hear a lot about drugs in the news today. While drugs</td>
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<tr>
<td>itself can't crop up in the anagrams, the subject rears its head</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>in some unusual ways.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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Acid dream: drub out U.S.  
Our addict abused rum  
Subdue a rumor, addict

Of course, you can make music out of the phrase, leading to these musical notes.

A duet: drab, dour music  
Music abroad, true bud  
Music duet: add a burro

Add curious drumbeat  
A dour bard: music duet  
Order tuba music, a bud

Dread door tuba music  
Dead curious: drum, tuba

The preponderance of Us also helps us with daubing mud, mud scrubbing, and so on. For the neatness-obsessed, or neatness-impaired, the following turn up. The first anagram presumably refers to some new-age class in getting dirty.

A course: dub dirt, mud  
Buried duds cut aroma  
Subdue dirt, cud, aroma

A treadmill: scrub our Dad  
Crusade: "Out, rabid mud!"  
Out, bad air! Curled mud!

To rephrase Art Linkletter, kids say the absurdest things.

A curious debut, Mr. Dad  
Curb a sour tedium, Dad  
Ma, Dad: curb our duties

A dumb cruise-tour, Dad  
Curious brute: mad Dad  
Our idea: must curb Dad

Bruise, cut our mad Dad  
Curious, drab, mate Dad  
Sad: mad buried our cat

But, Dad, I caused rumor  
But, Dad, I'm our crusade  
Un, Dad bruised our cat

Dad's a dumb courtier

Dad's a dumb couturier

But, Dad, I'm our crusade

Dictum: Dad, use a burro

One last U-turn brings us to the word druid. Since the druids worked somewhat magically, I guess I shouldn't worry that the following make little sense.

A druid abuts decorum  
Bad druid! Cause tumor!  
Druid mused about car

Abduct druid, or a muse  
Curse a druid: Toad! Run!  
Educator: druid's a bum

Abduct or amuse druid  
Dumb a druid costume  
Scare out a dumb druid

Bringing up the rear, a random selection of phrases which sound promising but which don't categorize neatly:

Absurd odium, act rude  
Discard dumb urea: "Out!!"  
Odd crust imbued aura

Add curious, mate bard  
Drab odium? Cure: a stud  
Odd tedium: scrub aura

Addieu, umbra, odd crust  
Drab rut caused odium  
Odd...a rub cured autism

Aid our sad, dumb truce  
Doubious, crude Mr. Data  
Ruboid toad, rude mucus

Auditor cured bad sun  
Dumb auto crusader, I'd.  
Rub out dim duh, Caesar

Autism cure? Or bad bud?  
Dumb理想: I use our data  
Said "Deduct our umbra"

But add curious dream  
I cursed our dumb data  
U.S. court dared aid bun?

Core autism, do rub Dad  
I doubt a mud crusader  
U.S. erotica: add mud, rub

Cured dubious Mr. Data  
I rout dumb dad, Caesar  
U.S. abroad: rude dictum

Curious debut: add RAM  
I'd caused our dumb rat  
Um, but do discard urea

Curse a dumb auditor  
I'm a dad: cut used arbor  
Um, curb a dad asteroid

Dumb dry mucus—o, art?  
I'm a dad: cut used arbor  
Um, drab U.S. erotica—dud

Did beat raucous drum  
Mud bard, curious duit  
Um, erotica? Absurd dad

Did crusade about run  
Mud cur subdued a riot  

Did more raucous bard  
Mud buries a dumb actor

To finish up, I rank my top ten choices for absurdity:

A dictum: "Subdue ar dor!"  
Bard: "Rub caused odium"

I crusade: "Out, drab mud!!"  
Cur did dream about us

Caesar: "Out, dumb druid!"  
Dumb U.S. idea: Tudor car

Our dumb idea: custard  
Diadem, curds, our tuba

Rub a toad (dried mucus)  
Crude modus: I rub data

The center...

"Things apart, but we can find..."

Col. O! Of the thing to be elected, or the politician North (and) a hypothesis.

Connect the dots.

He told the people in.

I refrain...

Also in the people in.

Don't elect...

As I write which brings...

Control ached.

Politics I...Looking I...I especially think loudly:

Chant, chee, chant "Need...Chant 'Old...Chant 'One-

We can't offerings suggestions..."And:

The concert...

As usual...begging.

A hot client...Can't hold...

Cal Tech to:

Canton, the Catch London, Catch London, Catch London.

Catch comet...Clench cool...Cold, then
The center cannot hold

"Things fall apart | the center cannot hold." Things may fall apart, but if we put the letters back together in the right order, we can find some meaning beyond this pessimistic couplet.

Col. Oliver North's run for the U.S. Senate seems to have something to do with things falling apart (before or after he gets elected, depending on where you stand), and it also relates to the political center not holding. The following anagrams trace North (albeit somewhat erratically) from Iran-Contra days through a hypothetical win this fall.

Connect the North deal
He told Tehran, "Connect"
Netted North on cache

He can elect North—don't
Do enchant, elect North
Oh, elect North—can't end

I refrain from mentioning that Ollie North becomes O, rot in hell!

Also in the political arena, we see warnings against letting newspaper people into politics—and for electing Hawaiian entertainers.

As I write this, health care looks like a big issue for the fall, which brings us to the following anagrams.

Politics has a lot to do with chanting and rallies and the like. Looking at phrases involving chanting, we find the following. I especially like the first, which suggests the importance of chanting loudly when you don't quite know why you're chanting.

Can't hold ten-cent hero
Catch London three-ten
Catch neon hotel trend

Catch London ere tenth
Catch London three-ten
Catch lone rodent, then

Can't hold one-tenth colder
Catch lone rodent, then

We can't have rallies without music, and this leads us to these offerings. Does it stretch things too much to claim that the first suggests the Woodstock anniversary?

The concert on the land
Concert, and then hotel

The concert on the land
Concert, and then hotel

As usual, I find myself with a miscellany of stragglers, each begging to have me make some sense of it.

A hot cleft, not tender
Gal Tech trend: hot neon
Can't hold ten-cent hero

Cold, then hot entrance

Cold, then hot entrance

Conan led the North, etc.
Don't cancel the throne
Drench once-hot talent

Noted the concern, halt

Cold, then hot entrance

Old, hence rotten—match!

Old thatch, recent neon
On to the ardent cleft!
Once the northland, etc.

Rotten; hence can't hold
Tenth concern; hot lead
Tenth old ocean trench

Then conceal hot trend

Then control the dance

Then control the dance
I wrap up with some favorites. The first two seem rather optimistic. In fact, the former sounds like something Vince Lombardi might have said (hmm...what kind of center are we talking about here?).

Coach, then don't relent Hot chance—don't relent

The next three are otherworldly, with the last having a sort of "death be not proud" ring.

Connect the other land Enchant not, cold ether
Cool, then tender chant

Last, and in my opinion the best, are the following. Two optimistically contradict the original line; two maintain the original fatalism.

Concentrate, then hold No, the center can't hold
Oh, let that concern end He can't control the end

I'd rank this last as the best of the machine-produced anagrams for this phrase—relevant, concise, and complete.

AN AVALANCHE OF ANORAKS

This is the catchy title of a Crown paperback by Robert J. White, published for $12.50 in 1994. It contains brief histories (typically 50-200 words each) of approximately 1000 foreign borrowings from 31 languages or language-groups. Words are arranged alphabetically by language, and there is no index, so the book is designed more for browsing than reference. Most Word Ways readers are well aware of the book's basic premise—that English is a heavy borrower of other tongues—but some may not know the background stories.

If the selection is representative, one must conclude that French, at 256 words, is by far the lead contributor. Italian, with 77, is a distant second, followed by Dutch (60), Arabic (46), Spanish (42) and German (35). Czech and Finnish have one apiece (ROBOT, SAUNA), and Hungarian and Basque, only two.

Interestingly, these languages arrived in English at markedly different times. The median Arabic word arrived in 1566, followed by the median words for Dutch and Italian (both 1650), Spanish (1717), Indic (1741) and German (1830); typically, half the sample of words from a specified language arrived here within a century of the median date.