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 Henry vs. the steam hammer" (although I do not expect him to take John Henry's side). Ross chose two phrases, and Harry and I spent the summer of 1994 puzzling over *reductio ad absurdo* 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 matches 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—
(1) RONAI
(it turns out to be)
(2) AMY
(Moreland)

Reductio

Webster's

reductio ad
an absurdo
'so-
ter-gener-
sion' (so-
thing)

The phrase
and. I
but does
leads
to a
rum, and

As I
c a number
though I
tried Cuba
But
A couple
Bureau:

A few comments:
Add tourism
Cuba tours

Before we let you all
Autos did
Cuba add
Cuba dreadful
Cuba rioters
Cuba runs, an
Cuba satirical

Perhaps if we find
incoherent
Dissam or do it
Aim, cut-
Subdue arcc

We also
itself ca
in some un
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anagram</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Armed Cuba</td>
<td>Cuba matured, or U.S. did</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>But comrades</td>
<td>Cuba, U.S. did, dim ardor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba dread</td>
<td>Detour: U.S. did am Cuba</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A couple refer not to Cuba but its leader. The first may allude to some FBI obsession with him.

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<tr>
<td>Bureau: &quot;Castro? Dim dud&quot;</td>
<td>Um, buried Castro, a dud</td>
</tr>
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A few concern the state of the Cuban tourist industry.

<table>
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<td>Add tourism: A curb due</td>
<td>Cuba, add rude tourism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba tourism? Read &quot;dud&quot;</td>
<td>Dear Cuba, dud tourism</td>
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</tbody>
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Before we leave the Caribbean, here are some more to which I'll let you assign a meaning.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Autos did murder Cuba</td>
<td>Cuba: &quot;Oust armed dud&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cuba admired our dust</td>
<td>Cuba: it's our armed dust</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Perhaps equally relevant to the cutting edge of current events, we find the following series of anagrams which I think somewhat incoherently describe the saga of the Bobbitts.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Disarm or cut dud beau</td>
<td>I'm cut; a subdued ardor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aim, cut—subdued ardor</td>
<td>Dumb cut, adieu ardors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We also hear a lot about drugs in the news today. While drugs itself can't crop up in the anagrams, the subject rears its head in some unusual ways.
Acid dream: drab 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 dud  Music duet: add a burro
Add curious drumbeat  A dour bard: music duet  Order tuba music, a dud
Dread dour 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, arana
A tedium: scrub our Dad  Crusade: "Out, rabid mud!!"  Out, bad air! Cursed 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, mad Dad  Sad: mud buried our cat
But, Dad, I caused rumor  Dad's a dumb couturier  Un, Dad bruised our cat
But, Dad, I'm our crusade  Dictum: Dad, use a burro  Um, Dad scurried about

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  Dub a druid costumer  Scarce out a dumb druid

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

Absurd odium, act rude  Discard dumb urea: "Out!!"  Odd crust imbued aura
Add curious, mute 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  Dub tedious cur drama  Rubb toad, rude mucus
Auditor cured bad sun  Dubious, crude Mr. Data  Radio scare but, un, dad
Autism cure? Or bad dad?  Dumb auto crusader, I'd...  Rub out dim dud, Caesar
But add curious dream  Dumb idea: dust our dad  Said "Deduct our umbra!"
Cure autism, do rub Dad  I cursed our dumb data  U.S. court dared aid bum?
Cured dubious Mr. Data  I doubt a mud crusader  U.S. erotica: add mud, rub
Curious debut: add RAM  I routed dumb dad, Caesar  U.S. abroad: rude dictum
Cursed a dumb auditor  I'd caused our dumb rat  Um, but do discard urea
Dumb dried mucus—o, art?  I'm a dud; cut used arbor  Um, curb a dumb asteroid
Did beat raucous drum  Mud bard, curious dud  Um, drab U.S. erotica—dud
Did crusade about rum  Mud cur subdued a riot  Um, erotica? Absurd dud
Did mute raucous bard  Mud buries a dud actor

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

A dictum: "Subdue arder!!"  Bard: "Rut 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 fi"
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

Elect North, no hand, etc.
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.

Don't elect anchor, then
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.

Chant, cheer, don't let on
Chant "Need the control!"
Chant "Old, hence rotten"
Chant "One-tenth colder"

Can't hold ten-cent hero
Can't hold ten-cent hero
Canton, then! Gold there!
Catch London three-ten
Cold, then hot entrance

Conan led the North, etc.
Don't cancel the throne
Drench once-hot talent
Enchant hot, enter cold
Need tenth color, match

Old thatch, recent neon
On to the ardent clefch!
Once the northland, etc.
Rotten; hence can't hold
Tenth concern; hot lead
Tenth old ocean trench

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

A hot clefch, not tender
Gal Tech trend; hot neon
Can't hold ten-cent hero
Canton, then! Gold there!
Catch London three-ten
Catch London three-ten
Catch some rodent, then
Catch some hotel trend
Clench tooth and enter
Cloth can't end—not here

Conan led the North, etc.
Don't cancel the throne
Drench once-hot talent
Enchant hot, enter cold
No, no—drench the cattle!

Need tenth color, match
Notch etched on antler
Noted the concern, halt

Old, hence rotten—match!
Old thatch, recent neon
On to the ardent clefch!
Once the northland, etc.
Rotten; hence can't hold
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Notch etched on antler
Noted the concern, halt

Old, hence rotten—match!
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.