

# IN WORDS OF ONE SYLLABLE

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There are those who claim that the best way to set free the work of one who would make art is to set curbs, that one must clip one's own wings to be free to fly. There are the twelve tone folks, and there are some who write whole books that have not one word at all with an e in it (see Word Ways of May of two years back, page four score less nine).

As for me, I'll write with hands not cuffed, thank you just the same. But I would be the first to grant that a kind of charm may be found in such cramped and caged art.

One way to put a leash on one's own words is to use none that have more than one speech pulse each. The yield, in our tongue at least, can please, as the fruit of a choice that holds back most words that are not part of our old word stock, that leaves no choice but to cut out some words that are limp, and do not have much punch.

Does the sole use of words that are short mean that deep thoughts can not be put into one's text? I tend to think that as long as one does not have to use the terms of some one field or job, does not mind the use of one word more times than one would use it if one could have had more choice, and does not mind the use, from time to time, of some choice of words that sounds just a bit strange, one can say just what one wants to say. The trick is to think in the terms that first come to mind, then find a set of short words that will say the same thing.

In the case of a shape formed of three straight lines joined at their ends, if one of the joints has a shape just the same as one of the four joints of a square, then the sum of the squares of the lengths of the two sides that form that joint will be just the same as the square of the length of the third side.

I'm sure that when one has done a lot of it, the flow of short words comes with ease, and one's art learns how to shape the flow in a way that will please the one who reads.

One sad thing of note, though: when I write, I like to stick in a bit of wit from time to time. But it seems that wit needs long words. I'll be damned if I know why, but that's how it is.

It's not hard to find, in one and all texts that you choose, a run of short words, at times a lot of them. If the Bard can do it, it must be all right. A lot of long rows of short words can be found in his plays. A good case in point is seen in *As You Like It*, Act III, Scene 5, with three score and two short words in a row:

Phebe [There be some women, Silvius, had they mark'd him  
 In parcels] as I did, would have gone near  
 To fall in love with him; but, for my part,  
 I love him not nor hate him not; and yet  
 I have more cause to hate him than to love him:  
 For what had he to do to chide at me?  
 He said mine eyes were black and my hair black:  
 And, now I am [remember'd, scorned at me.]

For David Morice's tour de force in which he puts Poe's "The Crow" in short words, see Word Ways of May of four years back, page four score and five. Note that most names can't be set down in such a way; all these are shown in bold type.

Of those who have made much use of short words, the champ must be Helen W. Pierson. She wrote six books with this kind of curb on the choice of words; all of these saw print in New York from 1883 to 1925, some put out quite a few times with the text brought up to date. These are, with the dates of the first time each saw print:

History of England in Words of One Syllable (1883)  
 History of the United States in Words of One Syllable (1883)  
 History of France in Words of One Syllable (1884)  
 History of Germany in Words of One Syllable (1884)  
 Lives of the Presidents of the United States in Words of One Syllable  
 (1885)  
 Life and Battles of Napoleon Bonaparte in Words of One Syllable (1887)

She is no hack. Her prose flows; she says what she wants to in clear terms. She does have one hill, so to speak, that she can't climb; she must tell a true tale, one that is full of real names and terms, some of which are long. With these words, she does what she must, and adds a dash that splits their parts.

The-o-dore Roose-velt was Vice-Pres-i-dent, which means he was next in rank to Pres-i-dent Mc-Kin-ley. So the death of Pres-i-dent Mc-Kin-ley made him the Pres-i-dent of the U-nit-ed States.

But--the world is full of flaws; pure things with no weak points are rare.

The part I like best in her works is found on the first page of the first book on the list:

In the old times these isles lay there as they do now, with the wild sea round them. The men who had their homes there knew naught of the rest of the world and none knew of them. The storms of years beat on the high white cliffs, and the wild beasts had their lairs in the woods, and the birds built in trees or reeds with no one to fright them. A large part of the land was in woods and swamps. There were no roads, no streets, not a bridge nor a house to be seen. The homes of these wild tribes were mere huts with roofs of straw. They hid them in thick woods, and made a ditch round them and a low wall of mud or the

trunks of trees. They ate the flesh of their flocks for food, for they did not know how to raise corn or wheat. They knew how to weave the reeds that grew in their swamps, and they could make a coarse kind of cloth, and a rude sort of ware out of the clay of the earth. From their rush work they made boats, and put the skins of beasts on them to make them tight and strong. They had swords made from tin and a red ore...

This is no less than the work of one with a great gift: the words, their sound, and the feel that dwells in them that takes the one who reads them back to the roots of our tongue, call forth the long past time of which they speak. And they are pure: from near the top of the first page to near the end of the third, there is not one long word that would need a dash.

As for the U.S. book, though, there are times when it fails to sing; it might have been her first try at this art.

When peace came, the men who had been in camp went to their own homes. They were all poor, and did not know what to do. There was no gold in the land, but a kind of cash which was so bad that it took more than you could count to buy a pair of shoes. Gen-er-al Wash-ing-ton found his task more hard to keep all in good cheer, now there were no fights on hand, than when they were at war. There had to be a tax on some things to keep all right, and they did not want to pay the tax, or their debts at this time. Wash-ing-ton felt that things were at loose ends, and he must make them more strong.

More than one dame wrote whole books in short words at that time. Some who had a lot of books in print were **Josephine Pollard** (first six books on the list), **Agnes Sadlier** (next two), and **Helen Ainslee Smith** (the last two):

The History of the United States, Told in One Syllable Words (1884)  
 Our Hero, General U.S. Grant: When, Where, and How He Fought, in  
 Words of One Syllable (1885)  
 History of the Old Testament in Words of One Syllable (1888)  
 History of the Battles of America in Words of One Syllable (1889)  
 The Life of George Washington, in Words of One Syllable (1893)  
 History of the New Testament in Words of One Syllable (1899)  
 History of Ireland in Words of One Syllable (1885)  
 Heroes of History in Words of One Syllable (1891)  
 History of Japan in Words of One Syllable (1887)  
 History of Russia in Words of One Syllable (1887)

All of these wrote as well books that were less pure, in short words for kids and the like, with some words of more than one speech pulse. At least three New York firms had large lines of such books: **A.L. Burt** (who put out all but a few of the books I have named), **McLoughlin Brothers**, and **G. Routledge and Sons**.