

# SHIFTGRAMS: MY DEFT RUSE

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A simple letter-shift is the change of one word into another word by shifting each of its letters  $n$  steps along the alphabet. Thus, shifted three steps, the letters COLD appropriately make FROG. Similarly, but with the alphabet arranged in a circle (A following Z), it takes just nine steps to persuade the exhausted rabbit to SLEEP, BUNNY.

A variation on the straightforward alphabetical method of generating one word from another comes in the shape of the shiftgram, a concept introduced by Howard Bergerson in "Sea-Changed Words" (*Word Ways*, February 1969). The shiftgram combines the art of letter-shifting with that of transposing:

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R A N S A C K E D
S B O T B D L F E
T C P U C E M G F
U D Q V D F N H G
V E R W E G O I H = O V E R W E I G H
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The letters of a word (RANSACKED) are systematically shifted along the alphabet until a transposable letter combination is reached. In this case it occurs after four steps, when the letters can be rearranged to form the word OVERWEIGH. This is one of the shiftgram pairs to be found in Tom Pulliam's article "Shiftgrams" (*Word Ways*, February 1980). His article includes an eight-letter shiftgram for each step size (1 to 25) and also some nine-letter examples including BECOIFFED-HIGHFLIER. The record length for these pairs seems to stand at ten letters: in the May 1980 Colloquy, Dmitri Borgmann pointed to the four-step pair OVERLEANED-VIZIERSHIP. (The former word is inferred from OVERLEAN.)

However, in striving for ever-longer single-word shiftgrams, pairings in which the two words bear a meaningful relationship to each other tend to be overlooked. Such pairs include words suggesting strength (ROBUST-FANGED), religion (HYMN-ZION) and fabric (STIFF-SHEER). CRESTED-STUFFED is a pair of ornithological adjectives. SEATED-BUFFE suggests a luncheon meeting whilst REFUEL-SHERRY are self-explanatory! On the other hand, the two words may be such that the second runs on from the first to make a two-word phrase as in NECK-FOLD, GEOFF'S-FENDER, DAMN-BONE, STEP-RODS, JUST-STIR, HERS-FITS, MOUSY-MAGIC and POET-NODS, the last succinctly expressing "I'm aggrieved when sometimes even excellent Homer nods" (from Horace's *Ars Poetica*). The inevitable pun also creeps in: PLAY-RITE!

But why stop at single words? The only word-phrase shiftgrams to date appear to be a few in Howard Bergerson's 1969 article. They include AL-

GEBRA-NO ENTRY and WEIRD-MY HUT. Can we make meaningful ones? Yes, with a little perseverance:

SHIFTGRAMS-MY DEFT RUSE  
BIBLICAL-O, FEEL OLD  
WORDPLAY-GLAD PENS

HOSPITALS-THE B.M.A. ILL  
REPUBLICAN-O, NERVY CHAP  
JUJITSU-I THIRST

(B.M.A. is the abbreviation for British Medical Association.)

In others, as before, the two pairs run together, in this case to form a longer phrase:

LOVERS-BY FIRE  
M.D. SHARED-BENEFITS  
MOB PROVE-CHEERFUL  
THIS CAT-SLEEP'N'

MEN AREN'T-BUFFOONS  
SNOOZE-FAT POP  
WORDS-HIT ME  
GOODBYE-WE'RE OUT

At this juncture I digress in order to bring you a slightly embellished tale from the time of the Battle of Waterloo. It would seem that Napoleon was two-timing Josephine (sometimes called Jo for short but she, for some reason, preferred Joseph). Long silences prompted Jo to send her beloved a telegram which read DO RING-JOSEPH. But it was evident that Napoleon had already gone to pastures new, whether to fight or philander is not certain because, from one of his soldiers, back came the slightly puzzling and far from ENDEARING-'HE'S OFF JOB'. What a shame he wasn't present to witness Jo's reaction. Enraged, her passionate bosom heaved and nothing could RESTRAIN-JO'S 'F' BUST!

Onward to phrase-phrase and phrase-sentence shiftgrams:

THE PUPPIES-OR HOT D-DOGS?  
FIVE OF US-HUNT DEER

SEE, I FIX BUFFET-SHREDDED WHEAT  
JUMBO JET ON FIRE-IT LANDS IN MED. H.Q.

The need to create a meaningful sentence-sentence shiftgram is a daunting prospect and desperate situations call for desperate remedies. I realised that there is a four-word explanatory sentence which is meaningful to any word, phrase or sentence under the sun. The only question was, would it shift and transpose? Fortunately, yes--into a six word sentence (in 22 steps). What was my explanatory sentence?

Finally, an easier question. What do the words in these two phrases have in common? FIVERS BOUGHT LIVERY GARNET and FANS (ANNA, IVAN, GERT) PRANCE NEAR RAVINE. (FIVERS are what we Brits call our five-pound notes.) Answers to both can be found in Answers and Solutions.