

THE COMMONEST 6-SQUARE

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Behold, now OCCURS a find long lost in the CLOSET, blurted out almost like COMEDY--no sweat! Our speedy, USEFUL tools that e marvelously REDUCE work alter logarithical STYLES and vision.

The first square below improves on Dmitri Borgmann's "commonest" 6x6 word square reported on p 197 of Making the Alphabet Dance. The frequencies of the six words are 27, 16, 39, 58, 62 and 20, respectively, out of the million words in Kucera and Francis's Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English (Brown University Press, 1967). For comparison, the frequencies of words in Borgmann's square are 51, 27, 12, 8, 5 and 3. The new winner fulfills the maximin prescription: draw a stock of words in decreasing order of frequency from Kucera and Francis until they yield a square. There are 998 words in the stock down to the level of 16-in-a-million, where the winner appears. This stock size is just what Chris Long's formula on p 196 of Making the Alphabet Dance predicts.

The runners-up listed below came in at stocks of 1456 and 1571 words, respectively. The middle one tells of antebellum romance: on the ESTATE, SLAVES with topiary TALENT had trimmed an AVENUE of box during the TENURE of the old master, of uncertain ESTEEM.

OCCURS 27	ESTATE 51	RECIPE 8
CLOSET 16	SLAVES 44	ERRORS 44
COMEDY 39	TALENT 40	CREDIT 64
USEFUL 58	AVENUE 46	IODINE 18
REDUCE 62	TENURE 12	PRINCE 33
STYLES 20	ESTEEM 9	ESTEEM 9

There are eight more squares that can be constructed from words that occur at least five times in Kucera and Francis, but four, with CARMER and PODGER, are statistical flukes. One of the other four, shown below, is a small variation on the commonest square.

OCCURS 27	DREAMS 30	PATROL 25	PATROL 25
CLOSET 16	RONNIE 5	ASHORE 6	ASHORE 6
COMEDY 39	ENTERS 13	THOMAS 106	THOMAS 106
USEFUL 58	ANEMIA 5	ROMANS 10	ROMANS 10
REDUCE 62	MIRIAM 30	ORANGE 24	ORANGE 24
STYLED 5	SESAME 7	LESSEN 5	LESSER 19

Unlike Borgmann, I had the benefit of a computer with the word lists and a word-square program ready at hand. I could measure just how impressive Borgmann's discovery was. When the stock is extended down to the 3-in-a-million level, where his square appears, it comprises 2127 words and makes 55 squares. Of these, all but 21 contain proper names. The 21 boil down to eight basic types plus minor variations; Borgmann found one of eight needles in a more than astronomically big haystack.

Every square made of words down to the 3-in-a-million level contains some inflected word. To get a square of uninflected uncapitalized words the stock must be augmented once more, with 2-in-a-million words. The resulting stock of 3749 words yields 231 squares, among which two qualify. The left one could well be called the simplest 6x6.

ARABLE 31	COSMOS 3
REFLEX 23	OXCART 2
AFLOAT 7	SCALAR 2
BLONDE 4	MALICE 2
LEADEN 3	ORACLE 2
EXTEND 2	STREET 244

Only two 7x7 squares can be found in Kucera and Francis. Shown below, both are full of proper names and foreign words. They appear only at the last moment, at the 1-in-a-million level, one growth step beyond the 2-in-a-million stock that Chris Long's formula predicts. The presence or absence of a word in Kucera and Francis at this level is a statistical accident; one cannot call either square the "commonest" one.

THE WRITE WAY

Given the plethora of guides to good writing, including classics by Fowler, Bernstein, Zinsser, and Strunk and White, does the world need another book on this subject? Aren't such books read mostly by the converted rather than by linguistic yahoos? And don't they provide so many admonitions and advisories that the reader trying to implement them all is likely to be in the predicament of the centipede who tries to analyze how he walks? Perhaps so--yet Word Ways readers (no yahoos here?) should enjoy and profit from Richard Lederer's and Richard Dowis's \$12 paperback *The Write Way*. Most people acquire an ear for the right word or the graceful sentence from their reading; a book like this serves to remind one of those reasons underlying one's instinctive preferences, and point out the (hopefully occasional) instances when one's ear is not in tune with the majority of careful writers. Two points in the authors' favor: they write with humor, and they are scarcely hidebound rule-observers ("it's me" is OK, as is "hopefully"; don't sweat the difference between "will" and "shall").