

# SINGLE-LETTER WORDS

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Basic building blocks of the English language, the good old ABCs, are frequently used singly to convey an entire word or concept. More than just popular acronyms or initialisms, single-letter words help communicate simply and succinctly complex processes, well-known organizations, familiar brand names, legal designations, and physical objects from large to small. In some cases the words for which they served as replacements have been forgotten, or are no longer necessary to communicate the concept which they originally replaced (for example, to most people p.m. means afternoon or evening, not post meridiem). In other cases, did the letters ever represent another word? (For example, what was the Q in Q-tip or the G in G-string?) When positioned at the beginning or at the end of a compound word or phrase, single-letter words have extra interest. The following lists, with a few punful exceptions, give examples of single-letter words ranging from locomotives to molecules, from visual shapes to audio sounds, from movie titles to breakfast cereals, from rock stars to political figures.

Diversity in such lists is the name of the game. The editor informs us that a similar pair of lists by Darryl Francis in the May 1971 issue of *Word Ways* contains only two entries in common with the ones below (X-ray, middle C).

A train	grade A
B movie	spelling B
C note	middle C
D cup	3-D
E-mail	silent E
F Troop	4-F
G-string	golly G
H-bomb	Preparation H
I-beam	evil I
J.R.	blue J
K-Mart	Special K
LA Gear	ride on the L
M Butterfly	M & M
NYPD	to the power of N
p.m.	R.S.V.P.
Q-tip	Susy-Q
Rh negative	rated R
S-curve	S.O.S.
T square	meeting on the q.t.

U-boat	Harvard U
V-8 engine	deep V
W-2 form	P.O.W.
X-ray	Malcolm X
Y chromosome	swim at the Y
Z Z Top	Zuyder Z

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 Baron & Guin, The Wordbook (1988) paper \$7  
 Bellamy, A Century of Charades (Riverside 1894) \$5  
 Bellamy, More Charades (Riverside 1909) \$5  
 Bergerson, Palindromes & Anagrams (Dover, 1973) paper \$6  
 Espy, An Almanac of Words at Play (Clarkson Potter 1975) paper \$7  
 Frumkes, The Logophile's Orgy (Delacorte 1995) paper review \$5  
 Lederer, The Play of Words (Pocket Books 1990) \$9  
 Newby, Pears Word Games (Pelham 1990) \$11  
 Preston & Kipfer, The USA Today Crossword Puzzle Dictionary  
 (Hyperion 1996) paper review \$5  
 Scully, Bedside Manna (Simon & Schuster 1936) \$5 [first appearance in  
 print of the P-45 word]  
 Seadler, The Anagram Book (Simon & Schuster 1929) \$6  
 Sledd & Ebbitt, Dictionaries and That Dictionary (Scott, Foresman 1962)  
 paper \$5 [reviews of Webster's Third]  
 Wells, A Book of Charades (George Doran 1927) \$5  
 Willinsky, Empire of Words: the Reign of the OED (Princeton 1994) \$14