

ROBIN'S GAZETTE-FREE LIPOGRAM

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Lipograms are defined by Webster's Third New International Dictionary as "a writing not having a certain letter" but this definition is not satisfactory. In short passages it is not uncommon for some of the less common letters of the alphabet, such as X or Z, not to appear. Also, by common convention the letter or letters that do not appear are supposed to be common letters for the passage to be considered a lipogram.

Lipograms represent one of the most ancient forms of wordplay. Joseph Addison related in *The Spectator* in 1711 that the fifth-century Greek poet Tryphiodorous "composed an *Odyssey* or epic poem of the adventures of Ulysses" consisting of 24 books. In each of the books, Tryphiodorous avoided the use of a different letter of the alphabet in order to prove, according to Addison, "that he could do his business without them."

This lipogrammatic tradition continued in Rome and Persia, and regained popularity in Europe in the 17th century, particularly in Spain. The 20th century has been graced with a 50,000-word novel by Ernest Vincent Wright written in 1939 without ever using the letter E, the most common letter. The Frenchman Georges Perec also avoided the use of an E in his 1969 novel *La Disparition* (translated as *A Void* by Gilbert Adair in 1994).

Ross Eckler has rendered Sara Josepha Hale's classic "Mary Had a Little Lamb" in five lipogrammatic variations, omitting its most common letters S, H, T, E and A in turn. Here are the E and S versions:

Mary had a little lamb,
 Its wool was pallid as snow,
 And any spot that Mary did walk
 This lamb would always go;
 This lamb did follow Mary to school,
 Although against a law;
 How girls and boys did laugh and play,
 That lamb in class all saw.

Mary had a little lamb,
 With fleece a pale white hue,
 And everywhere that Mary went
 The lamb kept her in view;
 To academe he went with her,
 Illegal, and quite rare:

It made the children laugh and play
To view a lamb in there.

Sceptical readers may be wondering how Eckler rendered Mary in his A elision: Mary became Polly and the lamb turned into a sheep.

Not to be outdone, Gyles Brandreth in *The Joy of Lex* rendered Hamlet's famed soliloquy without an I:

To be, or not to be; that's the query:
Whether you would be nobler to suffer mentally
The stones and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms, oppose a sea of troubles,
And through combat end them? To pass on, to sleep;
No more...

Imposing lipogrammatic constraints is probably good training for creative writing because it compels the writer to select words very carefully and to express ideas in an original manner. It can also serve as a literary medicine ball by showing that even though one is unable to employ many words, not only can the writing be sensible, it can remain strong.

In one version, Eckler reworked Hale's ovine classic using only 13 letters of the alphabet. In a language column I write in *The Gazette*, Montreal's English-language daily, I ran the following contest. I asked readers to answer the question "What do you like about the *Gazette* Books section?" avoiding the five different letters that appear in *Gazette*. Here are some of the replies:

* Much luck on your column on books which fill us full of joy in our souls.

* Books furnish wisdom; your columns vivify my mind. Books supply joy; your columns colour my world.

* My conclusion: Words of wisdom in profusion.

* I hold the column in high honour, for books imply wisdom; who picks up books on opinion of folk who do inquiry in how quills work is quick. Discussion of how forms of skill unfold is sound work to occupy kind souls who publish book columns. I find bliss when I coolly show off my supply of luscious words from your hands. I'm sorry, for I could only own such sunny words on Lord's morn; I wish you could occupy us commonly with your colourful opinions on books. Your job is symphonic! Push on proudly!

* Bookworms honour your uncommon mix of profound, humorous, judicious or simply colorful discussions upon works in ink, in pulp, comic or lyric form; plus, you publish columns chock full of juicy scoop, crisp

blurbs or bold opinions on books of such kind. I look for your odd supply of word fun.

My runner-up entry was the following which uses all twenty-one permissible letters:

I find words jolly fun, so your luxurious words on books rock my world! No surly lip, vicious rumours, or horrid puns; only rich wisdom, skillful humour, millions of quips for my curious mind. Kudos, folks! Bully for you!

My winning entry was the following 93-word opus:

Sir,

Your opinions subconsciously mold our bibliophilic whims. From voluminous submissions you pick words which will humour lowly bookworms. You winnow corn from husk, bullion from dross.

You snuff illusory visions in dull push-quills, or joyously vilify Hollywood film idols who publish blurby rubbish.

You fully inform us of our rich world of books, of works by Drummond, Nichol or Munro, or works now sunk in oblivion by Cockin, Wilkins or Yukon Bill.

In conclusion, from your columns I know which books I should buy. I wish you luck.

Yours humbly, Robin.