

THE MOST VERSATILE PALINDROME

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What palindromic word has the most different meanings? The answer to this intriguing question requires some research. There are many common palindromes with four or more letters--DEED, NOON, PEEP, SEES, TOOT, CIVIC, LEVEL, MADDAM, etc.--but their scope is somewhat limited. The solution must surely lie at the three-letter level where 'dromes abound.

There are literally hundreds of three-letter specimens, including common everyday words like MUM, PIP and TOT, as well as person names like ADA, EVE and NAN. *Palindromicon 2*, a revision of *The Palindromicon* (a dictionary of palindromes published in 1991), is scheduled for release in 2002; it will contain almost every palindromic three-letter combination with at least one vowel, from AAA (chief signet-bearer in the ancient land of the Kens in Nubia) and ABA (an altazimuth) through to ZUZ (an old Jewish silver coin) and ZYZ (the noun 'squint' in Polish).

Two prime contenders for the title of MVP (Most Versatile Palindrome) are GIG and POP, both of which have lots of different meanings. For example, did you know that a gig is a set of feathers that revolves rapidly in the wind to attract birds into a net (OED), and to pop is to surprise in an annoying way (EDD)?

What about that strangely pronounced little word, the centre of all human perception, the EYE? This is probably the most frequently used three-letter palindrome of all, and with six columns in the Oxford English Dictionary, it occupies more space than any other. Surely a front-runner for the MVP award, you would think! Maybe not. While EYE has many shades of meaning, they are mostly related in some way to the organ of sight. Variety is lacking.

So is there a more versatile palindrome than GIG, POP or EYE? Yes, we believe so! Our candidate for Supreme Champion 'drome is BOB, whose exceptional versatility is demonstrated by the following 161 different meanings drawn from a wide range of references. All unsourced examples appear in the second edition of the Oxford English Dictionary.

NOUN

- a bunch of leaves or fruit, e.g. grapes
- a small bouquet of flowers
- a seed vessel of flax or other plants

- a small quantity of grass, corn, etc., growing more luxuriantly (EDD)
 a knot or bunch of hair tied at the back
 a short bunch of tassel-like curls
 a wig with the bottom locks turned up into short curls
 a style of cutting women's or children's hair short and even all round (YD)
 hair cut in the bob style
 a horse's tail docked short
- any short knob-like tail
 a knob, knot or bunch of coloured yarn, ribbons or the like
 one of the knobs or wads on the tail of a kite (F&W)
 any small, round object swinging or playing loosely at the end of a long cord, line, chain, wire or rod (CD)
 a weight at the end of a pendulum
 the weight on a plumb-line
 the shifting weight on the graduated arm of a steelyard
 a beam or other oscillating part in a pumping engine
 the working-beam of a steam-engine (F&W)
 a pear-shaped piece of lead at the end of a mason's level (EDD)
- a small piece of wood used in warping chains, to protect the hand from friction (EDD)
 an ornamental pendant
 an earring
 a trifle or trinket, as in 'bits and bobs' (Web 3)
 a large ball-shaped bait of angleworms threaded on pieces of rag, used to catch eels, catfish, etc. (F&W)
 a set or gang of fish-hooks; a grapple (F&W)
 a knot of rags, bait, feathers, etc., with or without hooks, used in fishing (CD)
 in angling, a cork or float on a line (F&W)
 any fly on a cast other than a tail-fly (SND)
 any small insect, louse or beetle (CD)
- a grub, worm or larva used as bait for fish
 a lump of clay used by potters
 a small roundish or knob-like body generally
 a small buffing tool for polishing silver or other metal surfaces
 a mop greased with an abrasive powder for polishing (Web 2)
 a ball (DAP)
 a small insignificant clipping, as from an animal's ear (Web 3)
 altered form of 'God' used in oaths and exclamations
 a large white jug holding about a gallon (EDD)
 gin (SE)
- a shilling (older people in Australia, New Zealand and U.K. may also refer to the new similar-sized decimal coin as a bob)
 money-slang (DAS)
 a dollar, in U.S. slang (DAS)
 a counterfeit shilling (DU)

a till (DU)
 a storm
 a gust or blast of wind, a squall (DOST)
 a trick, deception, befoolment
 a sharp rebuke
 a taunt, bitter jest or jibe

a rap with the fist
 a light or elastic blow as with anything rebounding
 a light rebounding movement
 a surprise (EDD)
 an act of bobbing or suddenly jerking up and down
 a curtsy or bow (EDD)
 a nod of the head (EDD)
 a Scottish name applied to some dances
 a mark, something to throw at (SND)
 a catch (EDD)

a throw (EDD)
 a toss or turning over of hay (EDD)
 fifty strokes of the lash, in convicts' slang (DU)
 a dishonourable discharge from military service (RHHDAS)
 the refrain or chorus of a song (EDD)
 the words repeated at the end of a stanza in some old forms of
 versification (CD)
 a set of changes rung on bells (F&W)
 a short sleigh-runner, in particular one of the double-runnered sections
 of a bobsleigh or bobsled (DC)
 a bobsleigh or bobsled
 a bob skate, a skate with double runners (Web 2)

in logging, a single pair of sled runners on which the forward ends of
 logs are loaded (Web 2)
 a railroad track used to haul long logs (DARE)
 the hind pair of wheels of a timber carriage, with long pole or lever
 attached (EDD)
 a timber carriage generally (EDD)
 a castor or trimmer of coal on board ship (EDD)
 an infantry soldier (CD)
 the most sprightly and best-dressed lad or lass (EDD)
 a very young child (EDD)
 a shop-lifter (DAS)
 a shop-lifter's comrade or assistant (DU)

the receiver of a shop-lifter's goods (DU)
 a fat, well-built woman, in Canadian slang (DCS)
 a man, fellow (RD)
 the common partridge
 the robin redbreast (EDD)
 a bobolink bird (DARE)
 a bobwhite quail (Web 3)

- a very young calf before it can walk properly (EDD)
- a calf to be sold as veal (DARE)
- a bobtail cat, bobcat (DARE)

PROPER NAME

- a pet form of the masculine given name Robert
- a masculine give name carried by 3 babies in 10,000 born in the USA according to a 1950s survey (FNF)
- an occasional shortening of Bobbie, a pet form of the feminine given name Roberta (personal knowledge)
- a surname appearing over 400 times on PhoneDisc (June 1995)
- a familiar name given to a friend (EDD)
- a town in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma (CA)
- a town in Tennessee (CA)
- a town in Kentucky (RMIAW)
- a town in Louisiana (RMIAW)
- a lake in Ontario (ILM)

- a creek in Colorado (CA)
- a creek in Oregon (OGN)

ACRONYMIC NOUN

- a blood-ocular barrier (MedL)
- bilateral olfactory bulbectomy (MedL)
- a bright observable blob (MedL)

VERB

- to move up and down
- to move to and fro
- to dance, particularly a 'bob' (Web 2)
- to curtsy or bow low
- to come or go
- to try to seize something with the teeth, e.g., apples floating in water or hanging from a string
- to move the head and body up and down and from side to side as an evasive tactic (of a boxer)
- to move (a thing) up or down with a bob or slight jerk, e.g., to nod the head
- to emerge, arise, or appear suddenly or unexpectedly (Web 3)
- to move with any sudden quick movement, to jerk (Web 3)

- to move or go from place to place fitfully, like small birds in a yard (Web 3)
- to stoop down or duck the head (EDD)
- to balk or turn aside (EDD)
- to be subservient to authority (CDSUE)
- to be punctilious (and often a shade anxious) in observation of the regulations (CDSUE)

to dither (CDSUE)
 to make a fool of, deceive, cheat
 to take by deception, to filch
 to mock, deride, insult (CD)
 to play truant (EDD)

to surprise (EDD)
 to disappoint (DAP)
 to dilute or water (EDD)
 to throw for another to catch (EDD)
 to strike with the fist, to pummel, buffet
 to strike with anything rounded or knobbed
 to rap, tap or nudge with a slight (usually elastic) blow
 to cause (anything) to rap or bounce
 to poke or push through (EDD)
 to make hearth-rugs by slipping a piece of cord through small strips
 of cloth (EDD)

to cut a woman's or girl's hair short and even all round
 to dock a horse's, or dog's tail (Web 3)
 to cut shorter (Web 3)
 to polish metal with a bob, hence to polish generally
 to sing the bob or refrain of a song (DJE)
 to put a child into short clothes (EDD)
 to carry or transport on a bobsled, as logs (Web 2)
 to ride on a bobsled
 to crosscut logs using a single-handed saw (DNZE)
 to set in order

to form into a cluster or knob
 to grow in unequal manner, small quantities of the crop being more
 luxuriant than the rest (EDD)
 to fish for eels, etc., with a bob lure (EDD)
 to seek to capture, or obtain by artifice
 to have sex with, in American slang (DCS)
 to masturbate (SE)
 to discharge dishonourably from military service (RHHDAS)

ADJECTIVE

pertaining to a bobsled or bobsleigh
 cut short, as a horse's tail
 pertaining to a young calf, e.g. bob veal (MedL)
 lively
 pleasant, agreeable (DAP)
 safe to proceed with a crime (DU)

ADVERB

suddenly, or with a sudden jerking motion (Web 2)

INTERJECTION

God! (RHHDAS)
 stop, that's enough! (EDD)

Yes, it probably is.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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 CD The Century Dictionary, 1915
 CDSUE A Concise Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English,
 P. Beale, 1984
 DAP Dictionary of Archaisms and Provincialisms, J.O. Halliwell, 1872
 DARE Dictionary of American Regional English, F.G. Cassidy, 1975
 DC Dictionary of Canadianisms, 1967
 DCS Dictionary of Contemporary Slang, T. Thorpe, 1997
 DJE Dictionary of Jamaican English, Cassidy & LePage, 1980
 DNZE Dictionary of New Zealand English, editor H. Orsman, 1997
 DOST Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue, Craigie, 1937
 DU Dictionary of the Underworld, E. Partridge, 1971
 EDD English Dialect Dictionary, J. Wright, 1905
 FNF First Names First, Leslie Alan Dunkling, 1977
 F&W Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary, 1946
 ILM I Love Me, Vol. I, Mike Donner, 1996
 MD The Macquarie Dictionary, 1982
 MedL MedLine computer database
 OGN Oregon Geographic Names, Lewis McArthur, 1992
 RD Routledge Dictionary of Historical Slang, Eric Partridge, 1973
 RHHDAS Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang, J.E.
 Lighter, 1994
 RMIAW Rand McNally International Atlas of the World, 1926
 SE Slang & Euphemism, R.A. Spears, 1981
 SND Scottish National Dictionary, 1931-76
 Web 2 Webster's New International Dictionary, Second Edition, 1934
 Web 3 Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1976