

VARIETIES OF PALINDROMIC PANGRAMS

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Depending upon which aspect of its dual nature one considers primary, a palindromic pangram may be defined as either a palindrome which is pangrammatic (i.e., which contains every letter of the alphabet) or as a pangram which is palindromic. The first one ever published was written by Howard Bergerson and appeared in Dmitri Borgmann's 1965 book, *Language on Vacation*. Subsequently James Rambo, in the November 1976 *Word Ways*, and Jeff Grant, in the May 1978 *Word Ways*, contributed additional examples to the canon. Several more of these interestingly constrained writings serve to illustrate the present article, in which various kinds of palindromic pangrams are discussed.

Palindromicity aside, palindromic pangrams (hereinafter called *pandromes*, for convenience) are governed by the same rules as ordinary pangrams, with the exception that pandromes may be composed of more than one sentence. Unattested words and names are barred, as are letters used as names for themselves (else "A,B,C,F...X,Y,Z, sides reversed, is Z,Y,X...F,C,B,A" would make a too-easy short pandrome). Initials, abbreviations, and unusual contractions are not forbidden, but purists prefer to avoid such expedients.

The object, generally, is to use the entire alphabet in as short a palindrome as possible. The theoretical minimum length for most kinds of pandrome is 51 letters, but in practice any letter count of 90 or less constitutes an excellent result, provided that no abbreviations and only more or less familiar words have been used. A relatively easy way to craft a short, single-sentence pandrome is to mimic the implied-predicate style of the famous "A man, a plan, a canal: Panama!" palindrome, as in this nonsensical 89-letter parody:

A buck, a yare Zagreb man, a waxer (dip Ava, flesh ajar), Mo, qat,
a Qom rajah's elf, a vapid Rex (a wan amber-gazer), a yak: Cuba!

Qat is a narcotic shrub of Africa; Qom or Qum is a holy city in Iran.

Pandromes which employ more conventional grammar tend to need more than one sentence to express themselves, as is the case with this 75-letter soliloquy:

"Sexy Roz' ilk cap a vast fight? I won Deb, a...a Jammu/Qum maja!
Abed? No, with gifts, Ava--pack Liz' oryxes!"

In other words: "Red-light Rosalyn's guild is ending its nationwide strike? So what! I've won the heart of Deb, a gaily-dressed Spanish belle of the lower classes [maja, OED & Web3] who now splits her time between India's Jammu province and Iran's Qum. I pulled this off by showering Deb with gifts of onyx oryxes, of which Liz gives me lots--so sock some in my suitcase, Ava!"

A length of 75 letters may approach the lower limit for reasonably intelligible pandromes which do not resort to abbreviations. Permit the free use of abbreviations, however, and it becomes a relatively simple matter to devise much shorter pandromes, even minimal 51-letter specimens such as this one:

Householder Desmond, annoyed at his mailman's late arrival and suspecting him of napping on the job, peevishly asks the tardy "letter carrier" if he's been carrying mostly "Z's" that day. With professional good humor, the weary postman replies...

"Zeds? My, no! 'RCA,' 'GU,' 'L.I.,' 'VFW,' 'JB,' 'PX,' 'Tk.,' 'HQ,' 'HK,' 'TX,' 'Pb,' 'J.W.,' 'f.v.'--I lug acronyms, Dez!"

He may have meant initialisms or abbreviations, but one can't say those words in a minimal pandrome. Zed is another name for the letter Z, in Britain. With the exception of L.S.M.F.T. ("Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco," a 1950s slogan), all of the abbreviations used in this and the next pandrome are listed in *The Barnhart Abbreviations Dictionary* (Wiley, 1995). Some of the less familiar ones include GU (Guam zip code), L.I. (Long Island), JB (Bachelor of Laws), Tk. (track), J.W. (Jehovah's Witnesses), f.v. (folio verso, on the back of the page), C.J. (Chief Justice), ux. (uxor, wife), I.X. (Jesus Christ), UV (ultraviolet), KJ (knee jerk, in medicine), C.Z. (Canal Zone), NQ (Notes and Queries) and DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration).

Can any pandrome have fewer than 51 letters? That may seem an absurd question to ask, but in fact there is a basis for arguing that such constructions can exist. A minimal 51-letter pandrome contains 25 redundant letters which are needed to satisfy the palindromicity requirement but which are pangrammatically superfluous. What happens if two of these extra letters are replaced by a ligature, one of those now-obsolescent fusions of two letters into a single character? The pandrome will remain a pangram, but will it still be a palindrome? Perhaps. Consider that we routinely alter the shapes of letters from one side of a palindrome to the other when we switch between upper and lower case. If the ligaturization of two adjacent letters on one side of a palindrome but not on the other may be viewed as being a similarly harmless permutation of shape--and after all, how else could, say, the ligature Æ on one side of a palindrome be reflected on the other side except as the bigram EA?--then would it not be reasonable to conclude that ligature-containing superminimal pandromes such as the following 50-letter, one-ligature exemplar are, indeed, palindromically correct?

Imagine that the noted Irish poet George William Russell (1867-1935), who used the pen name *Æ*, has been transported in time to the present day, where he contributes his poetry to select small magazines. Here is a brevity-obsessed editor telling Russell that he must shorten his latest opus, "A Meditation Upon Truncation," by at least one abbreviation:

"*Æ*, drop 'L.S.M.F.T.,' 'GHQ,' 'NZ,' 'C.J.,' 'KY,' 'WV,' 'ux.,' 'ib.,' 'I.X.,' 'UV,' 'WY,' 'KJ,' 'C.Z.,' 'NQ,' 'Hg,' 'T-F,' 'ms,' 'LP,' or 'DEA.'"

Since English orthography recognizes a number of different ligatures, it is no doubt possible to compose superminimal pandromes of even fewer than 50 characters by utilizing more than one ligature at a time.

The kinds of pandromes described thus far have been subject to the twin constraints of palindromicity and alphabetical completeness. If this seems insufficiently challenging, one might in addition consider requiring that all 26 letters appear in alphabetical order. An interesting feature of any such alphabetical-order pandrome is that it will necessarily contain two complete ordered alphabets, each one marching through the other in the opposite direction. Thus, all alphabetical-order pandromes are automatically reverse alphabetical-order pandromes as well. In the following example, the rather thin premise is that the various remarks are random entries in a travel writer's journal:

"A Zil, Bruce!" bayed Dex...A few Vogue "Idaho tips" (ha!) jar rat aquaplaner Damion...Milk limn? O, I'm adrenal!...Pau: Qatar rajahs-pit? ..."Oh, adieu, gov!" we faxed Dey Abe...Curb Liza!

One meaning of limn is "to portray in words"; adrenal, here, might be short for "adrenal-charged"; Pau is a city in southern France, Qatar is a Persian Gulf emirate, and a dey, once, was an Ottoman governor.

In view of their added logological burden, it is hardly surprising that alphabetical-order pandromes tend to be longer than other pandromes. The preceding example, for instance, extends for 125 letters; the next one, which uses (or perhaps abuses) the amenable "Panama" formula, totals a relatively frugal 113 letters:

A zoril, a Baku pyx, a Waco diva, lutes, fog, a hail, a raj, "Klimt" (a fan opus), a suq, us (as, up on a fat milk jar, Ali), a hag of Set, Ula, Vi, Doc, a waxy puka: Bali, Roza!

A pyx is a small box, Gustav Klimt was renowned for his art nouveau, a suq is an Arab marketplace, Ali is probably a cat, Set or Seth was an evil god of ancient Egypt, Ula is a Celtic given name, and a puka is a small white shell.

To summarize, at least half a dozen distinct varieties of pandromes may be identified. These include normal pandromes which employ ordin-

ary vocabulary and grammar, Panama-style pandromes in which a colon or dash substitutes for the predicate, very short pandromes which rely upon the intensive use of abbreviations for their brevity, superminimal pandromes which exploit both abbreviations and ligatures to achieve character counts of 50 or less, alphabetical-order pandromes, and Panama-style alphabetical-order pandromes.

THE SLANG OF SIN

This new 385-page hardcover (ISBN 0-87779-356-5) in the Merriam-Webster Lighter Side of Language Series, authored by Tom Dalzell, is a word aficionado's delight. He has arranged slang words by topics under such broad titles as alcohol, gambling, drugs, horse racing, sex, crime, and the seven deadly sins, but one can find quite specific sin-lingo of pool hustlers, porn movie producers, tattooists, heroin addicts (including slang for veins or vein conditions), and darts. Why darts? Dalzell comments "You don't have to be a beer drinker to play darts, but it helps...Add the third leg of a trinity--betting--and you have a neat little package of sin". (Dart players have many slang names for numbers: 1 is Annie's room, 11 is legs, 33 is feathers, 76 is trombones, etc.)

In addition to straight word lists, Dalzell supplies the reader with essays relating groups of slang terms, and word histories giving the dates of earliest usage in print. He theorizes that the abundance of the slang of sin results from the "pure joy of being a wordsmith...sin in all of its manifestations excites linguistic creativity...freed from the inhibitions and restraints of social norms, creativity blossoms." Even the hell of delirium tremens, heroin or crack cocaine, or life in a maximum-security prison yields slang that is "vibrant, witty, powerfully evocative." Indeed it does; read the book (\$20) to discover this for yourself.