

# SPECIAL WORD-UNIT WINDOWS IN RUNNING TEXT

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The idea of searching existing texts for accidental windows (contiguous blocks of text) having special properties has been explored often in Word Ways, but previous studies have usually considered letter-unit constraints such as the lipogram or pangram. In this article, inspired by similar explorations in the new edition of *Opperlands! Taal- & letterkunde* (Battus' seminal book on Dutch wordplay), we focus on textual windows having special word-unit properties.

Many of the restrictions considered here are well-known, such as the homoliteral rule (each pair of words is required to have one letter in common); others are less common. Avid Oulipian readers may wish to try constructing longer texts using some of the lesser-known rules. It is tempting to suggest that the number of words in the longest accidental window for each rule gives an indication of how hard it will be to write deliberately using that constraint. This may be roughly true, but other factors come into play. For instance, writing a text in which all words start with the same letter might be easier than some other Constraint B, even if statistics suggests otherwise, simply because alliteration might flow more naturally from the pen than text obeying Constraint B.

The windows reported below are the longest ones found from a computer search of a database containing most of the Project Gutenberg corpus, containing about 2,500 complete works of literature in English, having roughly 200,000,000 words. Some judgement was used to eliminate texts that seemed artificial (such as lists of synonyms from a thesaurus) with preference given to ordinary prose or poetry. In the list below, the immediate context surrounding each prize-winning window is shown, with the actual window displayed in bold face. Readers are, of course, invited to try to find longer examples.

**Homoliteral: each pair of words has at least one letter in common**

*Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais, translation by Sir Thomas Urquhart and Peter Antony Motteux, Book III, prologue (54 words)

Others did fortify and rampire their walls, set **up little fortresses, bastions, squared ravelins, digged trenches, cleansed countermines, fenced themselves with gabions, contrived platforms, emptied casemates, barricaded the false brays, erected the cavaliers, repaired the counterscarps, plastered the curtains, lengthened ravelins, stopped parapets, morticed barbicans, assured the portcullises, fastened the herses, sarasinesques, and cataracts, placed their sentries, and doubled their patrol.** Everyone did watch and ward, and not one was exempted from carrying the basket.

**Heteroliteral text: each pair of words has no letters in common**

*The Survivors of the Chancellor*, Jules Verne, Chapter 34 (23 words)

"Never mind that, Andre," I said; "enjoy a storm when it comes, if you like, but pray don't wish for it."

"And why not?" said he; "a storm will bring us wind, you know."



**Duoliteral:** each pair of words has at least two letters in common

*The Devil's Dictionary*, Ambrose Bierce. (23 words)

INFIDEL, n. In New York, one who does not believe in the Christian religion; in Constantinople, one who does. A kind of scoundrel imperfectly reverent of, and niggardly contributory to, divines, ecclesiastics, popes, parsons, ..., deans, subdeans, rural **deans**, **abdals**, **charm-sellers**, **archdeacons**, **hierarchs**, **class-leaders**, **incumbents**, **capitulars**, **sheiks**, **talapoins**, **postulants**, **scribes**, **gooroos**, **precentors**, **beadles**, **fakeers**, **sextons**, **reverences**, **revivalists**, **cenobites**, **perpetual curates**, **chaplains**, mudjoes, readers, novices, vicars, ...

This one has a slight flaw in that "charm-sellers" needs to be considered as a single word. The next best duoliteral window does not have this flaw, and oddly enough is also a list of religious terms:

*History of the Moravian Church*, J. E. Hutton, Chapter 14 (20 words)

For some years, in response to the generous offers of Thomas Penn, all sorts of persecuted refugees had fled to Pennsylvania; and now the land was infested by a motley group of **Episcopalians**, **Quakers**, **Baptists**, **Separatists**, **Sabbatarians**, **Unitarians**, **Lutherans**, **Calvinists**, **Mennonites**, **Presbyterians**, **Independents**, **Inspired Prophets**, **Hermits**, **Newborn Ones**, **Dunckers**, and **Protestant Monks** and Nuns.

In both of these examples meeting the constraint is facilitated by employing a list of plurals, providing one of the shared letters "for free".

### **Same Shared Letter**

This requires every word in the window to have a letter in common. We would expect the record window to have E as the shared letter, and indeed it does:

*History of the Conquest of Peru*, Prescott, Book 4, Chapter 5 (25 words)

...his [Pizarro's] hand won for her the richest of the Indian jewels that once sparkled in **her imperial diadem**. **When we contemplate the perils he braved, the sufferings he patiently endured, the incredible obstacles he overcame, the magnificent results he effected** with his single arm, as it were, unaided by the government...

Looking specifically for T, the second most common letter, yields

*Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Chapter 3.II: (20 words containing T)

Of corn in the blade you may make good green sauce of a light concoction and easy digestion, which recreates the brain and exhilarates the animal **spirits, rejoiceth the sight, openeth the appetite, delighteth the taste, comforteth the heart, tickleth the tongue, cheereth the countenance, striking** a fresh and lively colour...

### **Alphabet Acrostic:** initial letters are A, B, C, ...

*Ginx's Baby*, Edward Jenkins, Chapter 10 (6 letters)



He was at his wits' end – but having got there, he resolved on the simplest process, namely to carry it to the station. No provision was made by the regulations of the force to protect a **beat casually deserted even for a proper purpose.**

This was the longest such accidental sequence found; some other longer ones, such as a recitation of alphabetical titles in *Don Quixote*, are clearly intentional.

**Word chain:** First letter of each word is same as last letter of previous

*The High History of the Holy Graal*, tr. Sebastian Evans, Branch 26, Title 4 (7 words)

Lancelot smiteth him such a sweep amidst the breast, that he **thrusteth his spear right through his shoulder**, and pinneth him so strongly that the shaft is all to-brast, and the end thereof remaineth in his body.

### Same Number of Letters

*The Chimes*, Charles Dickens, Chapter 2 (17 words)

“Come and see us, come and see us, Drag him to us, drag him to us, Haunt and hunt him, haunt and hunt him, Break his slumbers, break his slumbers! **Toby Veck, Toby Veck, door open wide Toby, Toby Veck, Toby Veck, door open wide Toby** – “ then fiercely back to their impetuous strain again, and ringing in the very bricks and plaster on the walls.

A close second is this series of three-letter words by Kipling:

*Rewards and Fairies*, Rudyard Kipling, "Brother Square-Toes" (15 words)

"What?" says Toby, "I thought it was Gert Schwankfelder." He put down his fiddle and took a good look at me. "Himmel!" he says. "I have hit the wrong boy. It is **not the new boy. Why are you not the new boy? Why are you not Gert Schwankfelder?**"

Both of these are beaten by the question the White Queen asks Alice – “What’s **one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one and one**?” (19 words) – but note the high degree of repetition. Indeed, any long sequence of this type tends to be repetitious, since that’s one easy way of lengthening the window. So we also looked for the longest example in which none of the words are the same:

*Three Men in a Boat*, Jerome K. Jerome, Chapter 10 (10 words)

Harris and I began to think that Bell Weir lock must have been done away with after the same manner.

*Length changes by  $\pm 1$*

This rule requires each word of length  $n$  to be followed by a word of length  $n-1$  or  $n+1$ .

*Second Thoughts of an Idle Fellow*, Jerome K. Jerome,  
"On the Nobility of Ourselves" (17 words)



A ne'er-do-well was Harry – drank, knocked **his wife about**, they say. **Bury him**, we are well rid of him, **he was good for nothing**.

**Length changes by +1, -1, or 0**

Each pair of words in this kind of sequence can satisfy *either* of the previous two constraints. Since this is easier than obeying one of them alone it is naturally easier to find longer windows of this type.

*Letters of Richard Harding Davis*, poem in letter dated 20 Nov 1915:

See the cat!  
**Hope gave the cat to her Dad.**  
 Is the cat sad?  
 Yes.  
 Is the Dad sad?  
 Very!!  
**Why is [sic] the cat and the Dad sad?**  
**They want home and Hope.**  
 Do they love Hope?  
 Don't make them laugh!

Too bad about that "Do" – otherwise the whole poem might obey the constraint.

**Snowball: each word is one letter longer than the previous**

Stanza from "Song", from *Poems of George Meredith* (7 words)

So am **I in thy sole, sweet glance**  
**Pressed** with a weight of utterance;  
 Lovingly all my leaves unfold,  
 And gleam to the beams of thirsty gold.

We did not initially require that the sequence start with a one-letter word, but no longer sequences were found without that extra restriction.

**Reverse snowball: each word gets one letter shorter**

*Vanished Arizona*, Martha Summerhayes, Chapter 31 (7 words)

I pulled on a small **knotted string which hung out of a** little hole, and a queer old bell rang.

**Automynorcagram**

This constraint requires the initial letters of the words in the window to spell out the beginning of the text in the window. In this case the first letters spell "A man als...", as required.

*Kenilworth*, Sir Walter Scott, Note 5

...but his lordship is now cunning, especially adding also to these the counsell of his Doctor Bayly,  
**a man also not a little studied** (as he seemeth) in his art;



## *No Repeated Words*

Our final example is a constraint we find especially interesting: no word in the window is allowed to be used twice. The longest passage like this that we found is from the same Kipling story quoted above, "Brother Square-Toes", and is 66 words long.

"I'll have to bide ashore and grow cabbages for a while, after I've run this cargo; but I do wish" - Dad says, going over the **lugger's side with our New Year presents under his arm and young L'Estrange holding the lantern** - "I just do wish that those folk which make war so easy had **run one cargo a month all this winter. It 'ud show 'em what honest work means.**"

"Well, I've warned ye," says Uncle Aurette. "I'll be slipping off now before your Revenue cutter comes. Give my love to Sister and take care o' the kegs."

## **Say Hello to a Good Buy**

It is fitting that *Palindromania!*, John Agee's latest collection of some 160 palindromes should appear in the palindromic year of 2002. Published for \$15.51 by Farrar, Straus & Giroux (ISBN 0-374-35730-7), this book is enlivened by Agee's droll illustrations. Sets of related palindromes appear in three- or four-panel comic-strip format:

Deb sat in Anita's bed; Ned sat in Anita's den; But Anita sat in a tub  
Ed, is Nik inside? Ed, is Deb beside? Ed, is Nixon, an ox, inside? Ed is busy—outside!  
Eva, can I stab bats in a cave? No, Don. Eva, can I pose as Aesop in a cave? No, Don

This is a worthy successor to his earlier palindrome books *Sit On a Potato Pan Otis*, *Go Hang a Salami I'm a Lasagna Hog*, and *So Many Dynamos!*