INTRODUCTION

Letters can be used to represent words. That is to say, the sounds of the letters can mimic the sounds of words. An example of everyday use of a letter word is the promissory note called an IOU, which stands for, and sounds like, “I owe you”. Letters used to represent words have been called “grammagrams” by Richard Lederer and “ABC language” by Willard R. Espy. Two books with collections of sentences composed with letters as words are CDB! (Aladdin Paperbacks, 1968) and CDC? (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1984), both by William Steig. The most well-known example of letter words is the conversation at the restaurant:

FUN E M? (Have you any ham)
S V F M. (Yes, we have ham)
FUN E X? (Have you any eggs)
S V F X (Yes, we have eggs)
O K L F M N X (OK, I’ll have ham and eggs)

Letter words can be used to create dialogue, short stores, and even limericks. For example:

NRE S N 10-SE (Henry is in Tennessee)
I C E S E-10 A B (I see he has eaten a bee)
E S UUN D BB (He is using the bees)
N N-6 S DD (And insects as these)
2 QR A B-9 LRG (To cure a benign allergy)

GENERAL GUIDELINES

In order to make it easier to read and write with letter words, the following guidelines are suggested.

General Pronunciation and Notation Rules

Single letters are pronounced as the name of the letter, for example B sounded as bee
Double letters are pronounced as the plural names of the letter, for example PP sounded as peas
Double letters are pronounced individually but indicated with a hyphen, for example NT-T sounded as entity
Specific number of letters is indicated with a numerical prefix, for example 10-S sounded as tennis
Numbers are pronounced as the name of the number, for example 4 sounded as for
Double numbers pronounced as the plural of the numbers, for example 4-4 sounded as force
   (Exception: 22 can be pronounced as twos or tutu depending on its use in the sentence)
Individual numbers are indicated with a hyphen, for example N-2-8-F sounded as intuitive
Pronouncing Vowels
Vowels are generally pronounced with a long sound, for example “a” as in bay, “e” as in eel. Although this is beneficial for maintaining consistency in reading letter words, there is an exception for the letter A when it is the last letter in the letter word. In this case if the letter A is pronounced with a short sound, for example “a” as in above, letter words can be expanded to include words such as IDA for idea, VNA for Vienna, CNA for Sienna, and IOA for Iowa.

Accent Pronunciations
Although speaking English with a regional or foreign accent allows for the creation of more letter words, it should be avoided as much as possible since not everyone is familiar with the wide variety of accents that exist. One accent which most people are familiar with, and is an exception to the rule, is dropping the pronunciation of the letter H, usually when it is the first letter in the word. This allows for letter words such as RD for hardy, LT for healthy, AAT for hasty, FV for heavy, 010 for Ohio.

Syllable Emphasis
Many words become almost unintelligible if they are pronounced with the accent on the wrong syllable (try pronouncing “syllable” with the accent on the second syllable). Other words change their meaning entirely (Are you content with the content? Did you present the present?). Some letter words have the same problem. For example, if all the letters in MRL are pronounced evenly it does not sound like a word. However, if the second letter is emphasized it sounds like immoral. If the first letter of NML is emphasized it sounds like animal, but if the second letter is emphasized it sounds like enamel. There may be no way to avoid this, and the only solution may be to try reading the letter words with the emphasis on different letters.

Writing Letter Words
Letter words should be written with capital letters. Each letter word should be separated from the following letter word by a blank space. Depending on the font used, sometimes using a double space between letter words makes them easier to read. To make it easier to recognize where one sentence ends and another begins, punctuation should be included. To make it easier to recognize numbers it is advisable to separate them from the letters with hyphens. This is especially useful to avoid confusing a “one” with a capital I, or a “zero” with a capital O.

Multiple Word Combinations
In order to keep things simple, each letter word should represent a single real word. This will also help reduce the number of letter words that can be interpreted as more than one real word. An exception is for multiple-word letter words where the first word in the combination is an article. This provides useful words such as LAD for a lady and LMN for a lemon. There is one other exception that is worth keeping, 10-Q for thank you (we wouldn’t want letter words to become a thankless exercise!) Many multiple word combinations can be represented in other ways. For example, instead of using EE for he is, use E S, or instead of using NMLZ for animals he, use NMLL E.

Multiple Words from the Same Letters
Since many letter words depend on stretching some of the sounds of the real words, some words will need to be “translated” based on the content of the sentence. For example, M can be am, ham, him or them, N can be Ann, an, and, in, end or hen, and X can be ask, axe or eggs.

Using Symbols for Letter Words
Although some symbols can provide interesting words, such as Dé for decent and NOcé for innocent, symbols should be avoided to keep things simple. Sometimes letter words contain
Greek letters. Although they can also provide interesting words, such as \(X\pi R\) for expire, Greek letters should also be avoided.

**Syllable Consistency**

The number of syllables in the letter words should as much as possible match the number of syllables in the words they represent. In most cases there is a perfect match. For example, NML and animal each have three syllables. There are a number of exceptions where the letter words have more syllables than the words they represent. In these cases only the letter words that are very close in pronunciation should be used. Some examples of good matches are BUT for beauty, CL for seal, 2-L for tool, UR for your and FRE-1 for everyone. Some examples of letter words that do not meet this criterion and should be avoided are TRNE for tyranny and MSE for messy.

**Use of Acronyms**

There are a number of acronyms that look somewhat like letter words. However, if you try to read them as such, they do not sound like real words. In the interest of keeping things simple and keeping the principle of pronouncing each letter, avoid using acronyms mixed in with letter words. This would include ones such as RSVP, ASAP, ASPCA, CIA, BBC, MBA, AMA, DVD, VCR, PTA, BMW, AAPR, etc. However, if acronyms are essential to what is being written, they should be made to stand out by using italics or boldface.

**SOURCES AND EXAMPLES**


Willard R. Espy, *An Almanac of Words at Play* (Clarkson N. Potter, 1975)
Willard R. Espy, *Another Almanac of Words at Play* (Clarkson N. Potter, 1980)
Willard R. Espy, *A Children’s Almanac of Words at Play* (Clarkson N. Potter, 1982)
Dictionary of Letter Words (4 NE-1 2 UU)

1 won 6-S success
2 to hates
2 too tenons
4 for tenancy
8 ate tenure
8 hate tenuous
1,000,000-ARR millionaire
1,000,000-ARR millionaires
10-10 tense
10-10 tents
10-L tunnel
10-LL tunnels
10-Q thank you
10-R tenor
10-RR tenors
10-S tennis
10-SE Tennessee
1-l once
1-1-D Wednesday
1-1-DD Wednesdays
1-R winner
1-R wonder
1-RN wondering
1-RR winners
1-RR wonders
2-2-D Tuesday
2-2-DD Tuesdays
2-D today
2-II twice
2-L twin
2-LL tools
2-N twins
2-NN tour
2-R touring
2-RN tours
2-RR Tours
2-RR Force
4-4 forces
4-4-S forays
4-A foresee
4-AA forsee
4-C foresee
4-CC foresee
4-CN foresee
4-FR forever
4-K fork
4-M forum
4-MM forums
4-N foreign
4-NR foreigners
4-NRR foreigners
4-S forest
6-S success
8-8 hates
10-N tenon
10-NN tenons
10-NC tenancy
10-UR tenure
10-US tenuous
10-Q a
10-R hay
10-RR haze
10-S aces
10-SE Hazel
10-SE Asian
10-SE hasty
10-SE Abby
10-SE Assisi
10-SE ascidian
10-SE age
10-SE ages
10-SE Aegean
10-SE accuse
10-SE accusing
10-SE accuses
10-SE air
10-SE Haiti
10-SE aviate
10-SE avian
10-SE aviary
10-SE aviaries
10-SE Hawaii
10-SE hazy
10-SE be
10-SE bee
10-SE beaten
10-SE before
10-SE benign
10-SE bees
10-SE baby
10-SE babies
10-SE business
10-SE businesses
10-SE beastial
10-SE beady
10-SE behalf
10-SE being
10-SE beauty
10-SE beauteous
10-SE beauties
10-SE busy
C sea
C-10 see
CC sitting
CC seas
CC sees
CC seize
CC cease
CC Sicily
CC season
CCN seasons
CCNN Caesar
CCRE cesarean
CCZM cesium
CD seedy
CD seek
CD seal
CD ceilings
CDH scene
CDI Sienna
CDL Cincinnati
CDN scenes
CCT city
CCT cities
CCT Dee
CD the
CD detour
tours
detois
detours
deity
deities
decase
desees
design
designs
desire
desiring
desires
desires
diesel
diesels
descend
defy
defies
defying
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decay
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Encase
encases
analyze
analyzing
analyses
annals
anomaly
analogies
analyses
analysis
enemy
enemies
anemone
anemones
animal
enamel
animals
ends
hands
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instance
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anyway
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Henry
energy
energies
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auntie
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Pisa
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pity
peavey
cue
queue
curious
queues
cure
curing
cures
cutie
cuties
are
alright
array
arrays
Arabian
hardy
hurry
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Arcadian
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