

EXTREME SYLLABIFICATION

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Hugo Brandt Corstius has proposed the name **oligosyllabic** for a word in which the number of letters is more than four times the number of syllables, and **hypersyllabic** for a word in which the number of letters is less than twice the number of syllables. Oligosyllabic and hypersyllabic words exist for most word lengths, but they are increasingly rare with increasing word length—in fact, no Merriam-Webster hypersyllabic words of more than 21 letters or oligosyllabic words of more than 19 letters are known to exist. This is in contrast with the Dutch experience reported by Corstius in the August Word Ways in which words exist up to 24 and 29 letters, respectively.

The purpose of this note is to exhibit the presently-known syllable records of unhyphenated English words in the second or third editions of the Merriam-Webster unabridged dictionary. The coined P-45 is ignored.

Syl	Shortest Word	Longest Word
1	a (1)	scaunched (10)
2	i/o (2)	scratch/brushed (14)
3	I/o/a (3)	straight/for/wards (16)
4	a/cu/i/ty (6)	straight/for/ward/ness (19)
5	ox/y/o/pi/a (7)	coun/ter/an/nounce/ment (19)
6	o/pi/o/ma/ni/a (9)	phe/nol/sul/phone/phthal/ein (23)
7	E/o/pa/le/o/zo/ic (11)	tet/ra/hy/dro/naph/tha/lene (21)
8	ep/i/zo/ot/i/ol/o/gy (13)	phe/nol/tet/ra/chlo/ro/phthal/ein (26)
9	u/ro/bi/lin/o/ge/nu/ri/a (16)	
10	ep/i/zo/ot/i/o/log/i/cal/ly (18)	
11	hu/mu/hu/mu/nu/ku/nu/ku/a/pu/aa (21)	
13	hon/or/if/i/ca/bil/i/tu/di/ni/tat/i/bus (27)	

It is interesting that all the shortest words but the final two begin with vowels.

On page 11 of Battus's *Opperlans! Taal- & letterkunde* (Querido, 2003), he presents a plot of syllable count versus word length for a large collection of Dutch words. For every syllable count except four, English provides shorter words than Dutch (beiaë beats acuity). However, Dutch consistently exceeds English when it comes to long words: there exist 2-syllable Dutch words with 16 letters, 3-syllable and 4-syllable ones with 21, 5-syllable with 24, 6-syllable with 28, and so on. This is a consequence of the Dutch tendency to string together long chains of simple words to describe complex situations, much like German. It is amusingly illustrated by the article on Dutch palindromes in the November 1979 Word Ways, and the one on Dutch isograms in February 1996.