

HEADSHOTS AND FOOTPRINTS

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If you view the tops of capital sans serif letters, they can be divided into several categories, listed at the left below. The same thing can be done with letter bottoms, at the right.

one vertical point IJL
one wedge point A
two vertical points HU
two angled points VXY
one vertical point, one wedge N
two wedge points M
one vertical point, one angled K
two angled points, one wedge W
curve CGOQS
truncated curve BDPR
one line EFTZ

one vertical point FIPTY
one wedge point V
two vertical points H
two angled points AX
one vertical point, one wedge N
two wedge points W
one vertical point, one angled RK
two vertical points, one wedge M
curve CGJOSU
truncated curve BD
one line ELZ
one curve, one angled point Q

With just a peek at the tops of the letters in a word (or the bottoms of the letters) one can almost always identify the word. However, the footprints of words like FEAR-PEAR or REEL-KEEL or the headshots of PEST-REST are identical. Some word pairs such as BEAD-DEAD even have identical footprints and headshots!

Can one discover words having the same footprint that share no letters in the same position? This is clearly impossible unless one amalgamates categories, not distinguishing among wedges, verticals and angles. For headshots, use AIJL-HKMNUVXY-W-CGOQS-BDPR-EFTZ; for footprints, use FIPTVY-AHKNRWX-M-CGJOSU-BD-ELZ-Q. The ten-letter CARICATURE-ORATORICAL pair has the same footprint, followed by SALVATORE-UNETHICAL, INSISTENT-PHOTOPLAY and SEPARATOR-ULTRAHIGH. The longest word-pairs having the same headshot are only eight letters long, including examples like OUTPRAYS-SHEDDING, HAYSTACK-KINGFISH, GRAFFITO-SPITLESS, FASTBACK-TIGERISH, EMULSIVE-FUMIGANT, CUTBACKS-OVERLONG, CLOUDING-SICKBAYS, CHECKING-OUTSULK, CHATEAUS-QUIZZING, CALCULUS-SLASHING and BLINTZES-PALMETTO.

Using the amalgamated categories, one can form words that use one letter from each category. For headshots this is easy: ANSWER, MEADOW, CURLEW, WEAPON, WHARFS, WICKER, WICKED, WOMBAT, HOWLER, SAWYER. However, it appears impossible to discover a corresponding footprint word; almost no seven-letter heterograms contain Q, M, plus B or D.

Editor's note: On page cl of Opperlans! Taal-& letterkunde (Querido, 2003), Hugo Corstius classifies letters according to their footprint stability. The letters AHMNWXZ are very stable, but the letters BDEKLR are less so because the center of gravity is no longer over the middle of the footprint. The letters CGJOSU are unstable because they can be rocked either way (Q, can be rocked in one direction only). The letters ITVY are unstable because they are balanced on a point. The letters FP, with center of gravity not over the footprint, tip over at once.