

ANACROGRAMS: PROLEGOMENON TO ACROSTIC ANAGRAMS

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Take the initial letter of each word in a common phrase, saying or longer quote, rearrange them and form a word or phrase that summarises or relates to it. Such anagrams of acrostics I call ANACROGRAMS. Sounds passe? Maybe. Impossible? Usually: those I'll present later are a tiny fraction of all the candidates considered. But since the latter in turn form a *very* tiny fraction of possible sources, this new game opens virtually unlimited vistas for meaningful word play, perhaps as much as straight anagramming. An example: < **No man is an island. Main, I.** >

Success depends of course on an adequate supply of vowels. But it's also a lot harder to anagram first letters than whole words. Letter frequencies are quite different in the two. E N R are three of the seven most common letters in text but frustratingly uncommon as first letters. Conversely, T A and especially W are more common in acrostics than in text due to highly repeated words like the, to, a, at and and. W has more of these logological pests than any other letter: with/out, was/were, will-won't, would/n't, who/m/ever, whose, what, which (where/as why when/ce while we went, well, worse?)—not to mention world wars, wide webs and word ways!

As a hint at first letter frequencies I did manual counts on five pages of fiction (1766 words) from four different authors (Dickens, Melville, Twain, Ian Watson) In the table below I compare them to dictionary and overall frequencies. Of course a far larger and broader count is needed and should alter the positions of some letters. Does anyone know of such a study?

letter rank	T	A	S	W	I	H	O	M	F	P	C	D	B	L	E	G	R	N	U	V	J	K	Y	Q	Z	X
% of 1sts	14	13	9	8	8	6	4	3	2	2	4	4	2	4	12	2	7	8	3	1	0	1	2	0	0	0*
% o/all **	8	9	7	2	8	4	7	3	2	2	4	4	2	4	12	2	7	8	3	1	0	1	2	0	0	0*
% W3***	6	6	12	3	3	4	2	6	4	9	10	5	6	3	4	3	5	2	2	2	1	1	0	0	0	0*

or by rank rather than percent:

letter	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
1st letter rank	2	13	11	12	15	9	16	6	5	21	20	14	8	18	7	10	24	17	3	1	19	20	4	26	23	25
overall rank	2	18	12	11	1	15	17	10	4	24	22	9	13	5	6	16	26	7	8	3	14	21	20	23	19	25
Dictionary rank	4	6	2	8	12	10	14	11	15	22	21	13	7	18	17	3	23	9	1	5	19	20	16	26	24	25

* 0 = <0.5

** overall frequency of all letters in the Cambridge Encyclopedia (Crystal, cited below)

*** % of pp in Webster's 3rd NI Dict., ie, \approx % of words starting with that letter Note that many words but not so many frequent words start with C, P, B, R and D, while the opposite is true of I, O, H and of course W.

Loath as I am to being pragmatic, it's worth considering first letter counts as an aid in identifying authorship of disputed writings, as a supplement to and possible improvement on doing so with whole letter counts as illustrated by David Crystal in *Cambridge Encyc. English Language* (1995).

Many examples of anacograms will be revealed later. Meanwhile, try your head at it. It's fun. It's addictive.