THE WORLD’S SHORTEST PERSONAL NAMES

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People have long been fascinated with unusually long words, and unusually long names in particular. Most have at least heard of the Welsh village Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch, even if they can’t ever hope to spell it. And among personal names, both Dmitri Borgmann and the Guinness Book of World Records recognized a Mr. H. B. Wolfeschlegelsteinhäusenberghof of Philadelphia as having the longest. (His full surname, truncated here, actually contains 590 letters.) Comparatively less attention has been paid to the world’s shortest names. In this article, I briefly review previous surveys of short personal names, and expand on these with further legitimate examples drawn from journalistic and scholarly sources. I also debunk some urban legends and misconceptions about particular single-letter names.

Perhaps the earliest collection of unusually short names is in the first Ripley’s Believe It or Not! book from 1929 [29]; it lists a few one-letter place names, but alas no names of people. In 1982 A. Ross Eckler conducted an exhaustive search of US telephone directories for single-letter surnames, coming up with several examples (most of them probably spurious) for every letter except Q [12]. Eckler’s study was later cited by the Guinness Book of World Records, which noted that of the 47 million names in the Social Security index, only six had a one-letter surname [25]. This and earlier editions of Guinness note some uncommonly short Asian surnames such as O.

Gleaned as they were from indiscriminate databases, very few of the individuals cited by Eckler and Guinness are noteworthy for anything other than the brevity of their names. And as Eckler admits, the overwhelming majority of his examples are probably typographical errors, or cases where a surname and first initial were mistakenly swapped. Many of the remainder may be fictitious or assumed names rather than ones assigned at birth. In this survey, therefore, I aim for single-letter names whose owners have attracted significant coverage in the media and in reference works—people who are, in a word, famous, at least in some field. Sticking to this criterion should remove any doubts about the authenticity of the names and the existence of their owners.

The names below are categorized into three sections. First are names which were assigned to the recipient at or shortly after birth. Next come names which the owner adopted later in life; as these are extremely numerous, I report only a few particularly famous or interesting examples. Finally, there is a section for commonly cited single-letter names which I have been unable to verify, or which I show to be spurious. Note that unlike Eckler, I do not restrict myself to surnames; my survey also covers unusually short first and middle names.

Birth names

A Frank A. Camaratta, Jr. is a chess master and former executive member of the United States Chess Federation. According to his USCF biography, “the ‘A’ doesn’t stand for anything” [1].
I assume this is his birth name rather than an adopted one, as his father’s name is also given as Frank A. Camaratta.

A (pronounced “Albin”) was what a Swedish couple proposed to name their son after their first choice, Brfxxccxsmnpcccclllmmprrxvclmncskssqclb11116 (also pronounced “Albin”), was rejected by a district court in 1996. The court refused to approve the shorter name too, ruling that one-letter names are prohibited in Sweden [2].

Olympic champion hurdler William D. “Willie” Davenport’s “D” doesn’t stand for anything, though he liked to tell the ladies that it was short for “dangerous” [40].

E “E” or “È” (_=) is a common Chinese surname, and one found in the classic book The Hundred Family Surnames from the early Song Dynasty. A notable modern-day E is the mathematician E Weinan [42]. “E” is also the transliteration of some other Chinese names written with different characters. These include the historical Tang dynasty general Xue E, Ming dynasty poet Huang E, Qing dynasty scholar Gao E, and 20th-century revolutionary Cai E, as well as the modern-day Olympic sports shooter Gao E [42].

Than E was a Burmese singer and long-time United Nations civil servant [42].

According to financier and former Citigroup CEO Sanford I. “Sandy” Weill, “My mother wanted to name me after somebody whose name started with an ‘I’, but she couldn’t think of a name she liked. So she gave me the initial with the idea that after I was 21 I could choose whatever middle name I wanted.” [38]

Glen J. Coben is the founder of Glen & Company, a New York—based architectural firm. In a recent New York Times interview he stated, “The birth certificate has ‘J’ and a period. But the ‘J’ doesn’t stand for anything, it’s just a letter. I think it was one of my parents’ rebellious things.” [24]

See also the entry for Johnny Cash under R.

“O” (是韩国) is the Korean form of the Chinese surname Wu (吳), though it is more commonly transcribed into the Latin alphabet as “Oh”. There are dozens of famous Korean Os, including mountaineer O Eun-Seon; singers O Hye-Rin, O Ha-Yeong, and O Yeon-Seo; painters O Yun and O Jeong-Geun; actors O Man-Seok, O Yun-A, O Yeon-Su, O Ji-Ho, O Dal-Su, O Ji-Eun, O Jeong-Se, O Hyeon-Gyeong, and O Sun-Taek; general O Kuk-Ryol; writers O Sang-Won, O Yeong-Su, O Su-Yeon, O Seon-Hwa, O Tae-Seok, O Gyuwon, and O Tak-Ppeon; politicians O Yun-Gyeom, O Se-Hun, and O Jin-U; economist O Kil-Nam; TV host O Sang-Mi; and athletes O Ha-Na, O Jae-Yeong, O Seong-Ok, O Yeong-Ran, O Se-Rim, O Ju-Hyeon, O Beom-Seok, O Kyo-Mun, O Jang-Eun, and O Bong-Jin [42].

“Ô” (ญ) is the Japanese form of the Chinese surname Wang. As with the Korean O, it can also be romanized as “Oh” or “O”. Japanese Ôs of note include professional Go player Ô Rissei and retired baseball player Ô Sadaharu [42].

Country music legend John R. “Johnny” Cash was born simply “J. R. Cash”, but when he tried to enlist in the Air Force they insisted on a longer name. He adopted the first name “John”, leaving the “R” unexpanded [39].
American football player Cornelius R. “C. R.” Roberts usually goes by his initials, the second of which doesn’t stand for anything [18].

S Interestingly, two separate US presidents have borne one-letter names, though only one carried that name from birth. This was Harry S. Truman, whose unigraphic middle name was meant to honour both his grandfathers, Solomon Young and Anderson Shippe Truman [19, 41].

T Crime novelist T. Jefferson Parker has a single-letter first name. In one interview the author said, “My mother told me once she thought it would look good on the presidential letterhead.” [43]

U U Nagaharu was the Korean-Japanese botanist who lent his name to the triangle of U, a theory concerning the evolution of certain mustard plants [42].

U was a king of the Goryeo dynasty who ruled Korea from 1374 to 1388 [42]. As I have been unable to uncover any other given or family names for this king, this single-letter name is perhaps the shortest overall for any famous personage, at least when rendered into English.

In Burmese U (or Ū) is how the given name ဗ ဗ is romanized in most standard transliteration systems, though it is often also transcribed as “Oo”. Examples of famous Burmese people bearing this name include painter Paw U Thet, actor Win U, historian Thant Myint U, and politicians Ba U and Tin Aung Myint U.

Adopted names

The adoption of a fictitious first or middle initial is common in the creative and performing arts, where many professional guilds and associations require that no two members have identical working names. Examples of actors, writers, and producers who added a solitary middle initial to avoid name clashes include Richard E. Grant [31], Michael J. Fox [23], X. J. Kennedy [15], David O. Selznick [4], and Harrison J. Ford (as the future Indiana Jones actor was billed until 1970) [11]. Other creative professionals freely choose to add a dummy initial to give themselves a less ordinary-sounding name: F. Murray Abraham [10, 30], Tom T. Hall [17], and Robert Q. Lewis [8], for instance.

Some single-letter stage names and pseudonyms replace rather than augment a birth name. Notable examples include actress K Callan (née Katherine Borman), TV presenter Andrew G (born Andrew Günsberg), and writer O. Henry (pen name of William Sydney Porter). A particularly dedicated minority take this to the extreme, such as musicians -M- (Matthieu Chedid), K (Krishna Kumar), K (Kang Yoon-Sung), and V (Vlad Radovanov), and writer Q (Arthur Quiller-Couch).

The entries below are not meant to be an exhaustive list of short adopted names, but rather a selection of some particularly famous or interesting cases, many of which don’t quite fit into the categories described above.

A Comics publisher Harry “A” Chesler, Jr. adopted a fictitious middle initial while working at the Philadelphia Public Ledger [13]. He styled it in quotation marks, and sometimes joked that it stood for “anything” [5]. By some accounts the “Jr.” is also bogus.
L.A. Law and soap opera star A Martinez was born Adolfo Larrue Martinez III, but from an early age his family referred to him as simply “A” to distinguish him from his father and grandfather [7].

B Mathematician Benoît B. Mandelbrot, famous for his work in fractal geometry, adopted the middle initial “B”, which he claimed didn’t represent any particular name [16, 22]. His admirers, however, prefer to think that it stands for “Benoît B. Mandelbrot”, lending his name the same infinitely recursive quality as the fractal set he discovered [33].

J Japanese writer Chiaki J. Konaka’s name is unusual as middle names are never used in Japan. Konaka uses the intrusive “J” only when writing the romanized form of his name; it appears to be an affectation [42].

R Disgraced Illinois governor Rod R. Blagojevich doesn’t have a full middle name [14]; according to some blogs he adopted the initial “R” in memory of his late father.

S Ulysses S. Grant, 18th president of the United States, was actually born Hiram Ulysses Grant. The “S” was a clerical error made during his application to West Point, and remained unfixed despite his protests. He eventually gave in and adopted the initial as his middle name, claiming it did not actually stand for anything [37].

T Tough guy Mr. T, born Laurence Tureaud, says he changed his name “because I got tired of people calling me ‘boy.’ Now the first word out of anybody’s mouth has to be mister.” [20] In an episode of the sitcom Silver Spoons he explained his name as follows: “First name: Mister. Middle name: period. Last name: T.” [35]

Doctor Who writer Russell T Davies reluctantly added a spurious “T” (sans period) to his name to distinguish himself from a BBC presenter of the same name. According to Davies, “I always make stories up about what the T stands for. Like ‘The’ or ‘Tussle’. That’s my favourite one: Russell Tussle Davies. Though I actually hate the T. It always looks strange to me.” [28]

X Futurama writer David X. Cohen, born David Samuel Cohen, explained his middle initial in a Reddit post: “‘X’ is a phony middle initial I made up because my real middle initial, ‘S’, was already taken by another member of the Writers Guild... I decided that once I was going phony, I would take the phoniest letter of all. It turned out to be a good move because it’s easy to remember and debatably ‘cool’.” [6] Cohen always follows the initial with a period “so people don’t think it’s some mathematical formula: ‘David times Cohen’ or something” [34].

Activist Malcolm Little changed his name to Malcolm X in 1950. As he wrote in his autobiography, “For me, my ‘X’ replaced the white slavemaster name of ‘Little’ which some blue-eyed devil named Little had imposed upon my paternal forebears.” [45]

8 Journalist Jennifer 8. Lee adopted the unusual middle name “8” to distinguish herself from the ten thousand other Jennifer Lees in the United States. In 1996 Lee penned an article in The Boston Globe explaining in detail the history and numerology of her numerical moniker [21].
Spurious or unsubstantiated claims

J Former University of California quarterback J Torchio was commonly believed to have a single-letter first name, as he insisted it was properly spelled without a period [9]. However, in high school he was known as “Jay Torchio”, and during his time with the San Antonio Gun-slingers he was billed as “J. L. Torchio” (with periods after the initials) [3, 27]. Today his Facebook and LinkedIn profiles list his first name as “Jay”.

K It’s sometimes reported that Harry Potter author Joanne Rowling, better known by her pen name J. K. Rowling, has a dummy initial, though this assumption seems to be unfounded. Rowling was not given a middle name at birth; her books are credited to “J. K.” rather than “Joanne” to make them more appealing to boys who would otherwise avoid works by female authors [32]. However, Rowling later clarified that she had adopted the middle name “Kathleen”, and has since used the full form “Joanne Kathleen Rowling” in official contexts [44].

L Comedian George L. Gobel often joked that his “L” didn’t stand for anything: “It’s just so that I can have G.L.G. embroidered on my shirts so that at the laundry my stuff doesn’t get mixed up with Greta Garbo’s stuff.” [36] However, most reference works list his middle name as “Leslie”.

T It is a widely repeated claim that that Booker T. & the M.G.’s frontman Booker T. Jones, unlike his namesake Booker T. Washington, has no full middle name. However, I have been unable to substantiate this.

U It is a common misconception that the initial “U” in Burmese names such as UN Secretary General’s U Thant and Burmese Prime Minister’s U Nu is a surname. In fact, the Burmese people do not customarily use surnames; in such contexts the “U” is simply a male honorific akin to the English “Mr.” [26]. (There are a few Burmese given names transliterated as “U”, some of which were covered elsewhere in this article.) However, when one drops the honorific, Prime Minister Nu’s name may well be the shortest full birth name (when rendered into English) of any famous personage in the modern era. His contemporary, the aforementioned President Ba U, had the second-shortest. Thus, between 13 March 1952 and 12 June 1956, Burma had the singular distinction of having a head of state and head of government whose names could be spelled in English with a combined total of just five letters.

References

[18] Chris Jenkins. C. R. Roberts: West Point’s loss was USC’s big gain. The San Diego Union-Tribune, 11 February 2012.
[27] Morning Briefing: In the old days, baseball players just drank. Eugene Register-Guard, 19 March 2008.