ONE-LETTER WORDS

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How many one-letter words are there in the English language? If you answered 26, well done! If you answered anything else, take four weeks vacation in Siberia. Examination of any English dictionary will uncover the fact that all 26 letters of the alphabet are words in their own right. The usual dictionary definitions of most single-letter words are, however, somewhat mundane. For example, among the definitions of the word B in Webster's Third Edition, we find "an instance of this letter printe, written or otherwise represented" "something arbitrarily designated as b" and "something having the shape of the capital letter B". These definitions, along with all the others like them, are lackluster. They are all unable to get away from relating the word B to the letter B. There is no reason why the word B shouldn't have a meaning completely unrelated to the letter B. The meanings of the words BOX, BASKET and BRONTOSAURUS are not related to the constituent letters of the words. We can see no reason why this argument shouldn't apply to one-letter words also.

In fact, dictionaries do list some one-letter words where the meanings are unrelated to the constituent letter of the word. A, the indefinite article, and I, the personal pronoun, are two that should spring to everybody's mind. Most dictionaries list the word O as an exclamation of surprise. Webster's Second Edition tells us that E is an obsolete variant spelling of he and is a near-obsolete variant of eye. The same dictionary also lists Y as an obsolete variant of eye, I and in. The Addenda section of Webster's Third Edition gives U as an adjective meaning "characteristic of the upper classes".

We decided to do some research and chase up definitions of the 26 one-letter words which got away from stereotype definitions as far as possible. Accordingly, we are presenting below 26 such definitions. We want you, the reader, to tie up each definition with the one-letter word corresponding to it. Answers can be found in the Answers and Solutions at the end of the issue. Furthermore, just in case there are any doubting Thomases who would like to check the words against the original sources, we have listed all the sources used in this quiz at the end of the article.

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1. a cross strip of iron at the end of a chain
2. a five-dollar bill
3. a former community of Oscoda County, Michigan
4. a former community of Tippecanoe County, Indiana
5. a hundred dollars
6. a pseudonym of the English writer Eustace Budgell, 1686-1737
7. an obsolete spelling of cue
8. an obsolete word for always
9. a former county of Oklahoma, having an area of 1016 square miles
10. a former county of Oklahoma, corresponding to what is now Dewey County
11. an obsolete variant form of yew
12. a river in Inverness-shire, Scotland
13. an obsolete form of the adverb how
14. a size of shot
15. a thousand dollars
16. James Bond's chief in the Ian Fleming novels
17. an obsolete form of the pronoun I
18. the consort of Shamash, a Semitic sun god
19. the drug heroin
20. the middle name of President Truman
21. the narrator of Franz Kafka's The Castle
22. the New York elevated railway
23. the title of a novel by Vassilis Vassilikos
24. a short coat
25. used to indicate the months when oysters are in season
26. a unit of measure used in printing

References

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