About the letter E I am enthusiastic, enchanted, ecstatic, exhilarated, exuberant, ebullient, and effervescent. Ah, those wonderful words that begin with E: In their early lives, enthusiastic meant “possessed by a god,” enchanted “singing a magic song,” ecstatic “in a trance,” exhilarated “made thoroughly cheerful,” exuberant, and ebullient and effervescent “overflowing, boiling over, spouting out.” E is truly a godlike letter that magically entrances, cheers our spirits, and bubbles over.

That’s the art, craft, and science of etymology. The etymology of etymology is the Greek etymon, “true,” hence, the true sense of a word based on its origins. An etymologist is one who knows the difference between etymology and entomology.

I think that I shall never see
A letter lovelier than E.

Of letters it’s the most ubiquitous
The elegant E is the first pick wit’ us.

No letter could be more essential,
Consequential, providential.

A capital letter, ramrod made
Of four straight lines, each on parade,

Yet also frolicsome and playful.
The games it yields will keep your day full.

Poems are made by hacks like me,
But only God can make an E.

E is indeed the ubiquitous first pick wit’ us. E is the most omnipresent letter in English. In fact, one out of eight printed letters is an E. We sprinkle E throughout our
writing—here, there, and everywhere. Consider the pronouns for us—*he, she, me, we,*
*they, them, themselves, her, herself, himself, their, myself, thee, thine, and ye.* That’s why
I call *E* an effervescent letter. Effervescent for *E,* we wouldn’t be able to write.

Frequency lists vary for the first thirteen letters of the alphabet that are most
widespread in writing, but every version begins with *E.* The most famous arrangement of
letters in order of their occurrence is **ETAOINSHRDLU,** with the major vowels occupying
the first, third, fourth, fifth, and thirteenth positions. (Turns out that the first seven letters
of this list are an anagram of **Estonia**).

*E* is our “soundest” letter. The sound of the long *E* is embedded in and rhymes with the
pronunciation of nine letters—*B, C, D, E, G, P, T, V,* and *Z.* The short *E*—*eh*—kicks off six
other letters—*F, L, M, N, S,* and *X.* So more than half our alphabet is at *E*’s.

*E* is the sound of what linguists call the pet suffix—*nightie, kitty, granny, sweetie, cutie,*
and *Billy.* *E* is the sound of what we might call the awards suffix—*Tony, Emmy, Grammy,* and
*Espy.* *E* is the sound of one of our most popular noun-agency suffixes—*employee, refugee,*
*absentee, deportee, attendee, conferee.* *E* is the most pervasive element of our wired,
interconnected age—*e-mail, e-business, e-message,* *e-zine,* *eBay, eHarmony,* and — a word I
highly recommend—*e-dress.*

Let us also extol (borrowed from Latin **extolere:** *ex-*—“up,” and **tollere,** “to raise,”
hence, “to raise up”) the letter *E* as the first letter and sound in the name of our marvelous
language.

There are more ways to spell the long *E* in words and names than for any other sound in
our language, except the schwa. Here, in alphabetical order, are fifty-two, one spelling for each
week in the year:

While E exhibits (“Latin ex + habere, “to hold out, display”) infinite variety in the orthographic representations of its sound, it can be a most deferential letter. When it is paired with the four other major vowels (going first or second) as well as itself, it can preserve the sound of its partner vowel or its own sound: sundae break, bee, feisty, lie, yeoman, hoe, eulogy, due.

The longest common univocalic English word is strengthlessness – 16 letters and three E’s. Next come the 15-letter defenselessness, in which the single vowel E occurs five times, and the 13-letter senselessness, with four E’s. Beekeeper packs five E’s into the brief compass of nine letters.

Or take the concept of grammagrams, words that, when they are pronounced, consist entirely of letter sounds. Almost all of them include the letter E itself or the sound ee:

| any (NE) | decay (DK) | essay (SA) | ivy (IV) |
| beady (BD) | easy (EZ) | excel (XL) | Kewpie (QP) |
| cagey (KG) | empty (MT) | excess (XS) | seedy (CD) |
cutey (QT)   envy (NV)   icy (IC)   tepee (TP)

E as a sound or a letter cavorts through every grammagram of three syllables:

devious (DVS) enemy (NME) escapee (SKP) opium (OPM)
effendi (FND) envious (NVS) odious (ODS) tedious (TDS)

And four-syllables:
anemone (NMNE)   arcadian (RKDN)   excellency (XLNC)

And -- ta da! -- the pentasyllabic expediency (XPDNC) and obedience (OBDNC).

Six-letter three-level pyramid words abound – banana, mammal, tattoo – but ten-letter, four-level pyramids are wondrous monuments. Packed in sleeveless are one V, two L’s, three S’s, and four E’s. The strata in Tennessee’s are one T, two N’s, three S’s, and – guess what? – four E’s. And peppertree grows one T, two R’s, three P’s, and – ta da! – four E’s:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SLEEVELESS</th>
<th>TENNESSEE’S</th>
<th>PEPPERTREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>T</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LL</td>
<td>NN</td>
<td>RR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SSS</td>
<td>SSS</td>
<td>PPP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EEEEE</td>
<td>EEEE</td>
<td>EEEE</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So I say again:

E is indeed frolicsome and playful.
The games it yields will keep your day full.

E is an elixir for any lover of language. Eastern alchemists continually tried to transmute base metals into gold. The imaginary substance they hoped would do the trick they called al-iksir, literally “the dry powder,” which entered Medieval Latin as elixir.
Now that you have explored the essential \( e \) (borrowed from the Latin \textit{essentia}, itself from \textit{esse} “to be”) you may well exult (Latin “to leap up”), “Eureka \( E! \)” “I have found the essence of the English alphabet!”

**WORD WAYS MAGIC**

MARTIN GARDNER
Norman, Oklahoma

This trick is based on a paper-fold idea by Max Maven that I included in my Sterling book \textit{Mental Magic}. It occurred to me that “Word Ways” applied nicely to the trick. (The answer result word is in \textit{Answers and Solutions}.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>W</th>
<th>O</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>S</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fold the sheet into a packet eight leaves deep by folding it any way you like along the creases. After you do this, some cells in the packet will face one way, other cells will face the opposite way. Because you made the folds at random, there seems to be no way to know which cells face which way.

Trim the four sides of the packet with scissors, so that no cell is attached to another cell.

Spread the pieces on the table. Can you arrange the face-up pieces to spell a common English word? If you can, stop. If you can’t, turn over all the pieces.

Try again to spell a word with the face-up pieces. You are sure to succeed. What word do you spell?