While teaching school in bygone years, I frequently constructed educational word games based on Dmitri Borgmann’s entertaining column, Word Row, appearing in Books Magazine (1966) and the Puzzle Lovers Newspaper (1968-71). One of his columns discussed Kangaroo Words: words concealed or contained in longer, synonymous words. For example, NURSED appears correctly spelled out in NoURiSHED, and FACE is a shorter version of FACadE; many more were exhibited in Language on Vacation (Scribner’s, 1965) and a long list was developed by Tom Pulliam in the May 1976 issue of Word Ways. (By the way, was the term Kangaroo Word originated by Joseph Shipley in his 1960 book, Playing With Words?)

When I finally retired from teaching, I cleaned out my briefcase and found a work paper belonging to a former student. In it, the pair of words inhabitant/habitant caused me to ponder upon other pairs that might lose only one letter and still retain the same (or a similar) meaning. In an hour of browsing through Tom Pulliam and Clare Grundman’s Crossword Puzzle Dictionary, I located the following examples:

- egotistical/egotistical
- crackling/cracking
- roust/oust
- subtle/subtle
- alone/lone/one
- brim/rim
- clue/cue
- ledge/edge
- avow/vow
- facet/face
- startling/starting
- acrid/acid
- anyways/anyway
- abate/bate
- sparse/spare
- rotund/round
- nought/ought
- loathly/loathy
- amass/mass
- prattle/rattle

There must be many more pairs (or trios) of words whose sense is unaffected by deletion. What is the longest pair of this type that can be found? To date, I can only find chartographical/cartographical, which appears in the four-volume Shorter Oxford.

The list can easily be enlarged by inflectional forms of some of the above words: for example, acridity/acidity, egotism/egoism, rousting/ousting, amassing/massing.