THE LETTER CONUNDRUM

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Conundrums have been a popular form of word puzzle for well over a century. One form of conundrum appeals especially to the logologist: the one that asks why a specified letter of the alphabet has a certain characteristic. It comes in two varieties according to the form of the answer; in one, the answer depends on the existence of a certain letter in a word, and in the other, the answer depends on the deletion of a letter from a word, forming a new word. In general, the second is more difficult to construct than the first.

Letter conundrums have appeared in Word Ways only once, on page 49 in the February 1974 issue. Here is a collection taken from various books and newspaper puzzle-columns owned by the editor and by Will Shortz, dating from the 1850s to the 1920s:

What letter is most useful to a deaf woman? A - it makes her hear
Why is A like a honeysuckle? Because a B (bee) follows it
Why is A like noon? Because it is in the middle of day
What letter is always repeated in America? The letter A
Why is B like a hot fire? Because it makes oil boil
What makes a road broad? The letter B
Why is C the most noisy of letters? It begins all clamor
What turns a lover into clover? The letter C
Why is D like a great reformer? Because it makes men mend
Why is D like a squalling child? Because it makes Ma mad
Why is D like a hoop of gold? Because we cannot be wed without it
Why is the letter D like a sailor? Because it follows the C (sea)
Why is D, cut in two, like a corpse? Because it is D parted (departed)
Why is E the most unfortunate letter? Because it is never in cash, always in debt, and never out of danger
Why is E a gloomy and discontented letter? Though never out of health and pocket, it never appears in spirits
Why is E like death? Because it is at the end of life
Why is E like London? Because it is the capital of England
Why is F like death? Because it makes all fall
Why is F like death? Because without it, life is a lie
Why is F like a cow's tail? Because it comes at the end of beef
Why is G like a hot day? Because it is in the middle of August
Why is H like servants? Because it is the first in help.

Why is I the luckiest vowel? Because it is in the center of bliss, while E is in Hell and all other vowels in Purgatory.

What letter is invisible, yet never out of sight? The letter I.

Why is J like your nose? Because it is next to your I (eye).

Why is K like flour? You cannot make cake without it.

Why is K like a pig's tail? Because it is the end of pork.

Why is L like an unparalleled piece of generosity? Because it enables a lady to make over a lover.

What changes a pear into a pearl? The letter L.

What went before Queen Mary, and followed King William to the end? The letter M.

What comes once in a minute, twice in a moment, and not once in a thousand years? The letter M.

Why is N like a pig? Because it makes a sty nasty.

Why is N like a buck's tail? Because it is at the end of venison.

Why is N like a faithless lover? Because it is inconstant.

Why is O the only vowel we hear? Because the rest are inaudible.

Why is O the noisiest vowel? Because you cannot make a horrid noise without it, while the others are inaudible.

Why is O like a horse? Because G (gee) makes it go.

What turned a word into a sword? The letter S.

Why is S like thunder? It makes our cream sour cream.

What turns a word into a sword? The letter S.

Why is S like a sewing machine? Because it makes needles needless.

What letter is invisible, yet never out of sight? The letter S.

Why is S like smart repartee? Because it begins and ends in sauciness.

Why is S like dinner? Because it comes before T (tea).

Why is S like blotting paper? Because it makes ink sink.

Why is S like a furnace in a battery? Because it makes hot shot.

Why is it no offense to conspire in the evening? Because what is treasonable is reasonable after T (tea).

Why should children go to bed after T (tea)? Because when T (tea) is taken away, night is nigh.

What is the difference between here and there? The letter T.
Why is T like Easter? Because it comes at the end of Lent.
Why is T like an amphibious animal? Because it lives in both earth and water.
Why is T like an island? Because it is in the midst of water.
Why is U the gayest letter? Because it is always in fun.
Why is U the most unfortunate letter? Because it is always in trouble and difficulty.
Why cannot V be seen? Because it is invisible.
Why cannot V be divided? Because it is indivisible.
Why is W like Sunday? Because it is the first of the week.
Why is W like gossip (scandal, a busybody)? Because it makes ill will.
Why is X like a mystery? Because it is inexplicable.
What changes a lad into a lady? The letter Y.
Why is Y like a young spendthrift? Because it makes Pa pay.
Why is Z like the monkey cage? Because it is the leading feature of the zoo.

I am indebted to Will Shortz for providing conundrums for the rare letters J, Q, X and Z (from Sam Loyd’s Cyclopedia of Puzzles). It appears almost impossible to construct a word deletion conundrum on the letter Q, because few words are deleteable to other words by removing Q (ro-q-ue comes to mind). For the others, I suggest:

Why is X one of the seven deadly sins? It leads the laity into laxity.
Why is Z a soporific letter? It makes a doe doze.
Why is a lawyer like the letter J? He converts hot air (argon) into legalese (jargon).

Surely Word Ways readers can do better!

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Al Stanger, 6212 Winona, St. Louis MO 63109 has a badly-worn copy of Webster's Unabridged, Second Edition, that he will mail to anyone willing to pay the cost of shipping. The introductory and addenda pages are in the worst shape: wrinkled, folded over, torn, even missing. However, pages 1-2987 of the dictionary itself are all there, although some are torn, a few are loose, and a few have corners missing. Do not send money; he will respond only to the first interested person.