

A SOUP CAN CAN CAN-CAN; CAN YOU?

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In December 1995, puzzlemeister Will Shortz of Weekend Edition on National Public Radio issued the following challenge to listeners: write a grammatically-correct and readily-understandable statement that contains the same word four or more times in a row, as "That Texan can't drill a well well. Well, well drilling isn't easy." Over 800 replies were received, including such old chestnuts as "John, where James had had 'had', had had 'had had'. 'Had had' had had the teacher's approval" and "The owner of the Pig and Whistle pub cautioned the sign-painter to allow sufficient space between 'Pig' and 'and' and 'and' and 'Whistle'". This article presents the best of the results; the editor has reworded some submissions for greater clarity.

By far the greatest number of submissions used the word 'will', often playing With Will Shortz's name; can-can dancers also received a great deal of attention. An interesting set of submissions based on 'that' is covered in a separate article. The judges naturally rejected "cheater" solutions that repeated a word without change of meaning: this contest is very, very, very, very easy (or hard); here kitty, kitty, kitty, kitty; if one writes 'see' thrice on a page, one will see 'see, see, see'; 'tis the season to be jolly, fa la la la la, la la, la and the Hallelujah Chorus (both commemorating the Christmas holidays). One contributor listed 'the' 100 times in a constructed sentence!

Several contributors proposed strategies that lead to indefinitely-long sequences:

* Wes Hamilton offered the following quotation of the words of a large number of people with the middle-eastern surname Said: Said said "Said said "Said said...I'm tired of being just another face in the crowd!"

* Ken Chapin provided the following sequence: John is questioning everything. Sue is questioning "questioning". Bob is questioning questioning "questioning" ...

* Jack Seybold noted that in linguistics circles one can delete relative pronouns and nest relative clauses when diagramming sentences: the rabbit (the rabbit (the rabbit...bit)bit)bit, needed medical attention. (No doubt all the other rabbits needed medical attention as well!)

* Mark Payne submitted 'Can (a nickname for Candace) can can-can'. He continued "I don't know if proper names are allowed in this competition;

can 'Can can can-can' qualify? If so, can '...can 'Can can can-can' qualify' qualify". And so on...

* Subodh Bapat pointed out that one can indefinitely extend any word-set by writing sentences about sentences. Taking the 11-had story as an example:

Two authors, Jane and Jenny, who were writing books about business correspondence, both chose to include the 11-had example. But Jenny, where Jane had had "...had had 'had', had had 'had had'. 'Had had' had had..." had had "...had had 'had', had had 'had had'. 'Had had' had had..." "...had had 'had', had had 'had had'. 'Had had' had had..." had had the editor's approval.

This contains 38 hads; the next iteration has $2+38+2+37+38+2 = 119$ hads!

The judges awarded Barbara Zimmer the grand prize for "Rose worked for years to develop the most beautiful flower in the deepest shade of pink. And finally at the flower show when her name was announced for the most rose rose, Rose rose to accept the award." Each time a different meaning of 'rose' is used.

Can is a versatile word. As a noun it can be a food container, or a vulgar expression for one's fundament or a toilet. As a verb, it can refer to the process of canning food or placing a performance on film, or it can be slang for 'fire' or 'cancel'. All these meanings are found in five-can sentences:

A soup can can can-can; can you? (Sam Strzelec)

The dancer with the agile can can can-can, can she not? (Robert Reynolds)

If Dan sitting on the can can can-can, can he polka there too? (Bob Gallagher)

Hey, I can can "Can-Can"--can you? (Madonna Reubens)

The managers of the Folies-Bergère can can "Can-Can", can they not? (Arthur Harris)

More repetitions are possible if one allows the nickname Can for Candace:

Candace works at a cannery. Jan (Candace's boss) can can Can; can Can can Jan? Not likely (Sandra McClennen)

Can Can can-can? Can Can can peaches for me? (Don Rauzi)

Connie can can-can; can Can can-can, too? (Cara Cody)

The following four examples contain six to nine consecutive cans:

Anyone who can can-can can can can after can of peaches as well (Dick Dillon)

Once the show is in the can, "Can-Can" can can can-can dancers without prior notice (Toby Gottfried)

A lead dancer who can can-can can can can-can underlings whose performance is subpar (Keith Bradway)
 Given that she really can can-can, can "Can-Can" can can-can dancer?
 (Jane Lieman)

One can even obtain a string of ten cans by inserting the dancer's name, Can (for Candace), before the final can-can, and adding the word 'extraordinaire' at the end.

An exasperated boss in a sleeping-bag factory asked his helper "Why did you go to the attic and bring that old down down? Down down in the cellar is newer and better" (Richard McMahan)

A year ago the shoemaker elf was down on his luck, as well as low on the accoutrements of his trade, so he had to make his last last last last Christmas (Al Wiggins)

Grandma says "Did you lose it there? There, there. There is your toy under the table" (Robert Masson)

The new bride said to her husband "This casserole is just so-so. So, so much for my try at creative cooking" (Jane Mohr)

He's so so-so (so I'm told) that he should be in Guinness (Frederick Crane)

"I rate that present only so-so." "So? So-so is better than nothing!" (Judith Barrington)

Her commitment to studying for midterms will make the Ole Miss miss miss Miss America being crowned (Peter St. Martin)

Before we go shopping for another room fixture, let's check and see if the heavy dark lamp and the light light light light up the room adequately together (Daniel Rosenblum)

I have two flashlights of different weights. Press the button to make the light light light; light the heavy one using the slide switch (Robert Reynolds)

Ode to a Firefly: Weightless wanderer, far above, fly to me and be my love. Where, oh where, will your light light light? Light years away, or here tonight? (Dan Kleinman)

As Kennedy and I toured the White House family quarters back in the days of Camelot, I turned to the President as we passed the children's bathrooms and remarked "There is the John-John john, John" (Robert Kahn)

A so-called Valley guy overheard the following: "Bob and I were talking, like, about grammar and stuff. He said saying 'like' is, like, not all that great, but he does it anyway. And I, like, like 'like', like Bob" (John Fulton)

The Brooklynite who wanted Mr. Ma to look at his stringed toy said "Yo! Yo-yo! Yo' yo-yo." (Joseph Dyer)

An announcement in a New York prison's music bulletin reads "At this year's annual Sing Sing sing, sing 'Sing, Sing, Sing'" (Richard Hill)

Instead of loving a particular person, you should love love, Love--love conquers all (Robert Reynolds)

As they began the tennis game, he called across to his love "Love-love, Love!" (Sanford and Rima Segal)

John and Mary, owners of a telephone-answering service, sit inside two circles of telephones, one circle of which connects with clients of a drug cartel known as The Ring. As it is a slow day, Mary has been working a word-search puzzle which involves circling words in a list as they are identified in the grid. John saw Mary (just as he heard a telephone in his "Ring Ring" ring ring) ring "ring" in her puzzle with a pencil (Robert Reynolds)

I asked my classmate about the Bill of Rights question in the exam on constitutional law: "You got the question about whether the lawyer used the right right right right, right?" "Right" she answered (John Ebert)

There are three groups of bison in the Buffalo NY zoo. The first group, somewhat passive in nature, is pushed around by the more aggressive second group--but they quickly learn to be more assertive themselves, and practice their new skills on the third group. One can summarize this chain of events by saying that Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo, buffalo Buffalo buffalo (Helen Read, from Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct*)

Should the 'the' the The rock band begins its name with also be capitalized? (Richard Schlesinger)

If 'the' is followed by a vowel-starting word, one must rhyme with 'sea' the 'the'; the 'the', however, that precedes a consonant-starting word must be pronounced like 'thuh' (Quentin Decker)

Gertrude Stein once wrote of Oakland "There is no there there". There, there are now many developments which Ms. Stein would have been sure to acknowledge (Janet Stern)

He wished that his vision were as sharp as it was when he was twenty: twenty-twenty, twenty times as good has his forty-year-old eyesight (Richard Prouser)

Before 'was' was 'was', 'was' was 'is' (David Voltmer)

Do you have any idea where Don Was was? Was was in the recording studio (Rita Weiss)

To the author who had written exclusively about her past, the fact that everything she was was 'was' was troubling (Jane Schwartz)

Will the well overflow gracefully after a heavy rain--will the well well well? Well, I don't know... (Rita Weiss)

Bill, the vet, rebuilt the broken bill of Will's pet duck, but Bill's accountant, Phil, claimed Bill's fee for this procedure was too small and corrected it accordingly. Will Phil, as a result of his correction of the bill bill, bill Bill for his accounting work? (Dennis Clark)

Annie Oakley borrowed buckshot that had been formerly used by Wild Bill Cody for her shotgun: the woman who shot shot shot shot shot formerly by Wild Bill ("Laughing Water")

When aging track star Dick Short's attempt to recapture the broad-jump crown fell short: 'Short short', Short mused unhappily, envisioning next day's headline (Georgia Croft)

Instructions to an opera singer: "Don't do 'sol do'; do do 'do sol'" (David Cole)

While we let the cement pieces of the giant chess set set, set set people on the purple sofa and pliant ones on the orange divan (Ian McBee)

Otis reported the still still still still--moonshining activity on it had not yet resumed (Rick Olinger)

Having unsuccessfully labored to start the distilling machinery, the moonshiner glowered at his still still still; still, he reflected, it beat writing TV sitcoms (Don Timm)

Policy on going a-maying: in the month of May, May may may, as may June or Alice (Fred Griffith)

The statistician has a reputation for put-downs (each one presented in the form of an average value of a data-set), some of which are more wounding than others. It would be nice to calibrate the relative intensities of these various put-downs; just what does her mean mean mean mean? (Stephen Keen)

Order issued by the leader of a springtime Actor's Guild protest to a certain Hollywood actor up in front: "March, March--March march can't start if you don't get moving" (Will Taylor)

Secretarial instructions to prepare a preliminary copy of a money-order for liquid refreshment, from the director of the National Basketball Association player draft: "Draft draft--draft beer is preferred by the athletes" (Charles Jones)

After the magician mixed up the different kinds of leaves, I saw him, holding out his palm, palm palm Palm Sunday (Paul Tucker)

The management of the Plant Plant, a firm that manufactures artificial flowers and greenery, murdered and secretly buried the body of a

corporate spy who threatened to take production secrets to his employer. When his body was discovered, the headline read: Plant Plant plant plant found (Charles Sawyer)

Mr. Read, a dyslexic who interchanges the first and last letters of words, was temporarily cured but later had a relapse. The doctor's report: "Formerly, where I read 'read', Read read 'dear'. Later, when I read 'read', Read read 'read', too. But now Read reads 'dear' again" (Dennis Bradburn)

I can't sleep when the foghorns along Puget Sound sound; sound sound barriers of concrete would work much better than the present barrier of trees (Robert Reynolds)

While searching for a word to use, I looked at 'at' at at least three different libraries (Arthur Harris)

Said the policeman with a smile, "If you park there, you'll get a fine fine." "Fine, fine me if you want" I replied (Joy Kasson)

Tip for a weary worshipper: for a fast fast, fast fast (David Roodman)

Talking to a painting with the name "Art" done by my friend Arthur, I cried "Thou art Art art, 'Art'" (Kathy Posey)

The dancer's bump-and-grind routine was really with it: let's hear it for her hip hip--hip-hip hooray! (Lorna and Fred Hard)

Many of us wanted to hear a particular singer play Santa on his Christmas show, but one skeptic declined. "I should go hear Don Ho ho-ho-ho? Ho-hum" (Dan Lewis)

If the present tense of 'to be' is 'is', is 'is' the proper form I should use in the statement 'This is a winner'? (Jeff Saxe)

The sentry double-checked with the captain: "What the password is is 'is', is it not?" (Steven Kirshner)

After Bob yelled "echoed", the canyon he expected to have echoed 'echoed' echoed 'echoed...echoed' (Blaine Deal)

Vice-President Al Gore's oxen, back home in the Gore gore, gore gore encrusted hounds (Lorna and Fred Hard)

The chant that fans use during the newly-designated Olympic dual competition of go-go dancing and the game of Go: Go, Go-go Go, go! (Charles Brenner)

Conversation between two Arabs at Port Said: "Said said Said, his cousin, would meet us here" (Charles Soberman)

Script instructions for a TV drama on British politics, in the course of which the Conservative Mps have walked out of Parliament, leaving the floor to Labor: "Pan camera slowly across various notices on the bulletin board to reveal 'Right wing has left--Left left' [left side of bulletin board]..."

GROW YOUR VOCABULARY

Erstwhile Word Ways subscriber Robert Schleifer has prepared a word-building textbook based on a simple concept: since most English words (he claims 97 per cent!) are concatenations of roots, one can at least approximately infer the meaning of an unknown word, particularly a technical or scientific one, from a knowledge of root meanings alone. His book is carefully organized to help the reader accomplish this task, starting with a collection of 36 common roots (-agog, bibli-, cardi-, -cide to fact-, -fect, fac-fic-, -fy). Each is illustrated with several detailed examples analyzing actual words (for -agog: pedagogue, synagogue, hypnagogic, galactagogue); the reader is invited to try his skill on twenty or so further examples for which hints are later provided. For those who wish to learn more, he provides an extended essay on Latin and Greek phonology and grammar.

The book is put together like a Swiss watch, with each part supporting and complementing each other part. One must carefully read the introduction to appreciate the ways in which the book can be used. I would have rather seen the pages devoted to specialized words (phobias, terms of vengery, baseball words, etc.) used instead for a listing of a few thousand less-common roots together with their meanings. (Many are listed in the cross-reference dictionary, but without their meanings.)

The book is available in paperback from Random House for \$13.