

An Introduction to Wordplay

by Dave Morice

Outside of a dog, a book is man's best friend. Inside a dog, it's too dark to read.—Groucho Marx

THE WORLD OF WORDPLAY MAY SURPRISE YOU. Writers, students, teachers, and anyone who has looked “beyond language” can discover its many myriad forms, some familiar—such as the anagram, the palindrome, and the pun—and quite a few not so familiar—the onalosi, the Tom Swiftie, rhopalic verse, the Herman, and the lipogrammatic novel. Wordplay writing can take place not only with the pen or computer, but with telephone dials, typewriter keys, Scrabble tiles, and Morse Code. Wordplay is language at its most marvelous and strange—words and sentences, lines of poetry, consonants and vowels, all behaving in a most unlanguage-like way.

Wordplay has been around for thousands of years. It is always just a word or two away from the words we speak, hear, read, and write. It is present in the home, the school, the office, the store, the streets. It's on television all the time (especially on ABC). It's in the movies (ultimately in the film titled *Z*). Sometimes it is intentional, and other times it is accidental. New York City's high-profile campaign to polish the image of the Big Apple was based on a rebus: I ♥ NY. Newspaper headline writers make mistakes (or are they mistakes?) founded on puns: MILK DRINKERS ARE TURNING INTO POWDER. On the other side of the word coin, poets use wordplay as a matter of course.

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In *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio, having just lost a swordfight in the worst way, has no recourse but to say pointedly, “. . . Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man.” Perhaps poetry *is* the highest form of wordplay.

The Golden Age of Wordplay

Wordplay has appeared most openly in books of puzzles, language games, and wordplay forms. In the nineteenth century, C. C. Bombaugh assembled hundreds of pages of wordplay in his book *Gleanings for the Curious from the Harvest Fields of Literature*. Bombaugh's work is a classic collection ranging from acrostics to zeugmas; as in many wordplay books, however, these are not organized in any real way. Then, a

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few decades ago, something amazing happened to the English language. In his book *Language on Vacation* (Scribners, 1965), Dmitri Borgmann presented wordplay—which he renamed “logology”—in an entirely new light. Wordplay, Borgmann argued, though often considered a pastime, is also a body of knowledge with its own concepts, principles, and terms. His book earned him the title “Father of Logology,” and it ushered in a Golden Age of Wordplay that continues to this day.

In 1968, Borgmann founded *Word Ways*, the first magazine to give writers a forum for articles, stories, poems, puzzles, and challenges involving any and all wordplay forms. The following year, Howard Bergerson took over its editorship. Bergerson later wrote and published a groundbreaking book on palindromes and anagrams, appropriately titled *Palindromes and Anagrams* (Dover, 1973). In 1970, Ross Eckler became the editor, publisher, and distributor of *Word Ways*. He has brought out the magazine on a quarterly basis ever since then. Within its pages (over 9,000), a cornucopia of new forms has evolved, giving English the richest body of published wordplay in the history of the world.

Since then, wordplay has continued to flourish. For the first time, small-press magazines—*Word Ways*, *Verbatim*, *Maledicta*, *The Palindromist*, *WordsWorth*, and others—have provided an accessible forum for wordplay writers, much as the “mimeograph revolution” of the 1950s gave poets a place to develop their voices and display their works. In fact, some of the new wordplay books, including specialized dictionaries and lexicons, were also published in alternative press format. The first palindromic novel, *Dr. Awkward in Oslo*, exists only in mimeograph form.

The massive amount of material generated in the past few decades has been collected in numerous books of wordplay. This proliferation suggested that chaos was once again in need of order. In 1998, Eckler published *Making the Alphabet Dance*, in which he defined “letterplay” as wordplay in which letters are manipulated like the pieces of a game or a puzzle. His book organized this complex field into a coherent whole made of many intricate parts. Eckler’s and Borgmann’s books serve as bookends on the shelf of modern wordplay.

Other developments, too, have expanded the audience for the other side of language. In 1988, Richard Lederer’s book *Anguished English* came out from a small publisher, Wyrick and Company. The book presented real-life language bloopers in a rapid-fire, entertaining way—so entertaining, in fact, that Jay Leno read from it for eight minutes on “The Tonight Show.” After that, sales of the already-popular book shot through the roof. *Anguished English* was reissued by Bantam Doubleday Dell in a mass-market paperback edition that helped launch the Intrepid Linguist language series. It became the first wordplay book to make the *New York Times* bestseller list and launched Lederer’s role as the great popularizer of wordplay. His subsequent wordplay books, including *Get Thee to a Punnery*, *Crazy English*, and *The Word Circus*, have also sold well, and continue to bring wordplay to a wider audience.

In recent years, more wordplay books of all kinds—by Willard Espy, Will Shortz, Martin Gardner, Peter Newby, and

others—have appeared. Some focus on a specific, well-known forms such as the palindrome, the anagram, or the pun. Others attempt to cover the entire field by dividing it into major categories and presenting each category in a separate chapter. Still others present wordplay in puzzle books, cartoon books, joke books, almanacs, and other formats.

Writing and Wordplay: Past and Present

Wordplay has been a natural part of “mainstream literature” all along. Rhyme and regular rhythm are elemental forms that some people believe to be essential to poetry, but many other forms are also a natural part of it—assonance, alliteration, onomatopoeia, and others. In fact, all poetic forms are based on wordplay forms—what else could they be based on? Some forms are less constrictive than others. A free-verse poem is one of the least constrictive, but it, too, involves manipulating the sounds, meanings, and placements of words. Certain forms common to both poetry and wordplay—e.g., the acrostic, the palindrome, the pun, and the shaped poem—have been in use for many centuries. The poet in English who used wordplay most extensively and skillfully in his work? Shakespeare, most probably—his plays and poems abound with coinages, puns, palindromes, pangrams, and other wordplay forms.

In the twentieth century, wordplay of different types became a significant, even major, part of works by writers such as James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and E. E. Cummings. In *Ulysses*, Joyce layered the narrative with multilingual puns in order to tell a complex story in a way that was appropriately complex. In *Three Lives*, Stein gave words new meanings by altering the grammatical environment in which they existed. In poetry, Cummings broke single words apart to yield new meanings through typography. One wonders to what extent form determined content in these writers’—and other early Modernists’—work.

In the 1940s, Concrete Poetry began to show up around the world. More than ever before, poets let words do things that amounted to “art for wordplay’s sake.” Their writings, linked by the movement’s catchy name, used different concepts to guide them. Some created works based on sound, some on shape, some on other linguistic elements. Works ranged from random letter poems such as those invented by the Lettrists to complex architectural/alphabetical structures such as John Furnival’s “The Fall of the Tower of Babel.” In the late 1960s, Something Else Press published *The Anthology of Concrete Poetry*, which became highly successful and influential in spreading the word about this avant-garde literary movement.

While free-verse poets and concrete poets have their own approaches, there is a special kind of writing endemic to wordplay: the writer chooses a specific wordplay form to use throughout a text. The choice of form almost always limits the choice of words. Word choice may focus on letters (palindromes, lipograms), sound (puns, rhymes), or meaning (slang terms, real names, made-up words).

In 1960, François Le Lionnais and Raymond Queneau founded Oulipo (an acronym of *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*), a group of writers who devised literary structures

based on wordplay. Many writers have consciously used wordplay, but few have used it so thoroughly and with such originality as Queneau, who wrote *100,000,000,000,000 Poems*, a sonnet sequence. It works like those children's books whose pages are cut into sections that combine to make different texts and pictures. In Queneau's sonnet sequence, ten pages with fourteen lines on each page are cut so that each line occupies a strip of paper. The strips can be turned like miniature pages to form different combinations of lines, and each combination makes a different sonnet. This, like many Oulipian strategies, extends the boundaries of convention. For the Oulipo writer, the question is: What forms can be used to create poetry or fiction in a new way? Oulipo writers have devised many ingenious ways to use palindromes, anagrams, acrostics, puns, lipograms, and other wordplay forms.

Wordplay writers have engaged in similar techniques for centuries, calling it "constrained verse." In constrained verse, the writer attempts to achieve a goal, such as making a poem in which each line is a palindrome. The challenge is: Can it be done grammatically, syntactically, and semantically?

In every language at every time in history, poetry and wordplay have co-existed and interacted. Poets use wordplay to enhance their poetry; wordplay writers use poetry to enhance their wordplay. The English language, whose words come from more than 100 other languages, from Latin to Pig Latin, especially invites such cross-pollination.

Creating the First Dictionary of Wordplay

A few years back, after having closely followed developments in the field for a long time, an idea came to me: Why not bring the myriad forms of wordplay together and organize them in the most basic of ways—alphabetic order? So I set to work. The project may have seemed simple at first, but it quickly became very tricky. For one thing, wordplay books generally assume that the reader has a basic knowledge of wordplay; otherwise, he or she wouldn't be reading them. Thus many concepts were previously undefined, and many were identified by more than one term. Another problem is authorship. It is often difficult to determine who did what. In some cases, one person came up with the concept, another the term, and a third the examples.

To put the dictionary together in the best way I could, I took the following approach. First, I made a list of sources that I believed must be included. Then, using some of the most basic on the list, I began choosing terms, definitions, and examples. After building a foundation of essential forms, I went through numerous sources and found still other forms to add to the list. Thus the dictionary would contain the basic forms and many more based on the basics. Soon the problem became limiting the entries. There are so many forms that, without limitations, the book might have grown to the size of the *Oxford Unabridged Dictionary*.

I used three principles to guide my writing of definitions: be clear, be concise, and use interesting material. Defining words can be tricky, especially since definitions are made up of words, too. I tried to avoid making the definitions too simple on the one hand, and too detailed on the other. (Of course, it sometimes became necessary to violate the principles in order to

include important entries.) Over a six-year period, I rewrote much of the dictionary two, three, or more times. There were many entries that didn't make the final cut.

Most entries in my dictionary define wordplay forms ranging from general to specific, from well-known to unknown, from acrostic to reverse bialphabetic word. Some entries define forms that are topical as well as linguistic: e.g., presidential anagrams, which are like other anagrams except that they use the names of presidents. Some entries define forms that are hybrids of other forms: e.g., combining a palindrome with a pangram results in a palindromic pangram (also called a pangrammatic palindrome). Still other entries define other things that hold a special place in the lore of wordplay—for instance, Yreka Bakery and the Zzyxjoanw Hoax.

15 Basic Wordplay Terms

Here are some of the major wordplay forms and terms, something of a primer to wordplay:

alphabetic value: the number signifying a letter's position in the alphabet. Examples: A = 1, B = 2, . . . Z = 26.

anagram: a word or words formed by rearranging the letters of another word or words related in meaning. Example: OCEAN = CANOE.

bigram: a pair of letters considered as a single unit. Examples: AP, GH, NN, TO.

charade: a word or words formed by redividing—but not rearranging—the letters of another word or words. Example: DOGMA—DOG MA.

circular alphabet: the alphabet arranged in a circle so that it has no beginning or end, and so that Z continues on to A.

ladder: a series of three or more words formed by making a specific change in each word to generate the next word. In this case, each word has one letter replaced with another to form the next word: DAWN—DARN—DARK—MARK—MURK—MUSK—DUSK.

lettershift: a word whose corresponding letters are the same number of steps down a circular alphabet. Example: ADDS—BEET (one step), SLEEP—BUNNY (nine steps).

number name: one of the words used to signify the counting numbers (often used in wordplay). Examples: ONE, TWO, NINE TRILLION.

palindrome: a word or words that read the same in both directions. Example: LEVEL.

pangram: a sentence or other text that contains all the letters of the alphabet one or more times. Example: THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG.

pun: a word or phrase that has two meanings, one of which makes the text humorous.

rebus: the representation of words by means of letters, numbers, or other symbols that are interpreted by their sound, placement on the page, et cetera. Examples: XPDNC = EXPEDIENCY; 10SNE1? = TENNIS ANYONE?

reversal: a word formed by spelling another word in reverse. Example: SLEEP—PEELS.

transposal: the same as an anagram, but the words in a transposal don't have to relate in meaning.

trigram: a set of three letters considered as a single unit. Examples: ABC, HKX, TOM, VVV.

word square: an arrangement of letters in a square format to spell words across and down. Example:

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I T S
T H E
S E A
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A Few More Forms

Now that you are acquainted with the basics, it's time to venture further into the wordplay universe. Below is a sampling from the entries you will find in my dictionary. Many are forms or techniques that can be used by poets, fiction writers, teachers, and students. Some tend to the esoteric, some to the humorous and zany. All, I think, show the surprising possibilities of language:

alphabet of silent hosts: the alphabet as a set of letters that are pronounced in words, but that don't appear in them. All 26 letters can be found in silent hosts. Here are six examples:

A: eight	X: decks
B: W-shaped	Y: wine
C: sea	Z: xylophone

beautiful English word: an English word that an individual considers beautiful. More than 50 years ago, American writers were polled for the words they considered to be the most beautiful in the language. Some responses and their respondents include:

LAUGHTER—Louis Untermeyer
LOVELY—George Balch Nevin
GOSSAMER—Dr. Wilfred Funk
PAVEMENT—Arnold Bennett
HOME—Lowell Thomas
NEVERMORE—Elias Lieberman

cyclic transposal: a word formed by moving the first letter of another word to the last position.

STOPPING—TOPPINGS	EMANATE—MANATEE
DEVALUATE—EVALUATED	GELATIN—ELATING

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Some cyclic transposals result in two words having no element of pronunciation in common:

EACH—ACHE ECHOIC—CHOICE SHOE—HOES

echo verse: poetry in which the last word or last few syllables of each line are repeated as an "echo." The echo makes an ironic comment on the line itself. This form seems to have been familiar to the Romans. In English, echo verse became popular in the sixteenth century due to Sir Philip Sidney and others, but by the nineteenth century it had fallen out of favor. One of the best examples of the form is George Herbert's "Heaven." Here are the beginning and ending lines:

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O who will sow me those delights on high?
                                Echo:                I.
Thou, echo, thou art mortal, all men know.
                                Echo:                No.
                                [. . .]
But are there cares and business with the pleasure?
                                Echo:                Leisure.
Light, joy, and leisure; but shall they persevere?
                                Echo:                Ever.
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First Lady anagram: an anagram of the name of an American president's wife.

ELEANOR ROOSEVELT = role: to serve alone
MAMIE DOWD EISENHOWER = We deem war mood; he is in
JACQUELINE KENNEDY ONASSIS = is as queenly on deck in
jeans

Goldwynism: a quote attributed to motion picture magnate Sam Goldwyn.

"Tell me, how did you love the picture?"
"No, thanks; coffee isn't my cup of tea."
"When I want your opinion, I'll give it to you."
"We're overpaying him, but he's worth it."

Herman: a sentence in which a quote concludes with a name that puns on the quote. The form, a spin-off of the Tom Swiftee, is named after the first example:

"She's my woman," said Herman.
"I'm drawn to you," said Art.
"Testing—testing," said Mike.
"I haven't a thing to wear," said Buff.
"Pass me the binoculars, please," said Seymour.

inflationary language story: a story written with an abundance of words translated into inflationary language. Here is the first paragraph of "Jack and the Twoderful Beans," with its deflated translation below:

Twice upon a time there lived a boy named Jack in the twoderful land of Califivenia. Two day Jack, a doubleminded lad, decided three go fifth three seek his fivetune.

Once upon a time there lived a boy named Jack in the wonderful land of California. One day Jack, a singleminded lad, decided to go forth to seek his fortune.

jabberwock (v.): to substitute nonsense words from Lewis Carroll's poem "The Jabberwock" for words in other texts. A Jabberwocked version of Hamlet's famous soliloquy begins with these four lines:

To be, or not to be, that is the gimble
 Whether 'tis uffish in the mind to suffer
 The Jabberwock of outrageous fortune
 Or to whiffle against a sea of jubjubs

kangaroo word: a word bearing a smaller word of its own kind inside it. The smaller word, called a "joey" (baby kangaroo), should be related in meaning to the larger; its letters should appear in correct order with at least one extraneous letter breaking them apart; and it should be etymologically unrelated to the kangaroo. The following are true kangaroos, with their joeys jumping up in capital form:

caLumnIES destRuctIoN insTrUcTOR

In some cases, two joeys work together in the same kangaroo. In these examples below, the first kangaroo has TIN + CAN, and the second has HOT + COCOA:

conTaNer cHOCOLAte
 ContAiNer ChOCOLAtE

lipogrammatic novel: a novel written entirely with words that omit a specified letter. So far, only two have been published, one in English and one in French. Both omit the letter E, the commonest letter in normal printed text in both languages. *Gadsby* (1939), by Earnest Vincent Wright, was a response to F. Scott Fitzgerald's "negative" novel, *The Great Gatsby*. Wright dedicated the novel to "Youth" and took a "stand against liquor." Unfortunately, its wooden characters overcome adversity in the manner of Horatio Alger heroes. To avoid accidentally using the letter E, Wright removed the E-key from his typewriter. *La Disparition* by Georges Perec (DeNoel, 1969) was so well written that several reviewers didn't notice the missing E. It was translated equally E-lessly into English under the title *A Void* (by Gilbert Adair; HarperCollins, 1995). In the spirit of the book, *Time* magazine reviewed it without E's.

metric prose: prose written with regular rhythm and rhyme. Here is the first paragraph of a letter in metric prose that the poet William Cowper wrote:

My very dear friend, I am going to send, what when you have read, you may scratch your head, and say I suppose, there's nobody knows, whether what I have got, be verse or not; by the tune and the time, it ought to be rhyme; but if it be, did ever you see, of late or of yore, such a ditty before?

n + seven: a word-substitution method of writing in which every noun in a text is replaced with the seventh noun following it in a dictionary. Oulipian.

new punctuation mark: a punctuation mark formed by combining elements of the punctuation marks currently in use: e.g., the interrobang is a combination of a question mark and an exclamation point. Recent new punctuation marks include the

questicomma, the hemiperiod, the rotomation point, the pre-quasiproquestiperiod, and others.

one-word poem: a single word, real or made-up, presented as a poem. In the 1960s, Aram Saroyan wrote the first one-word poems. His poem "light" won an \$800 prize. In the 1970s, Joyce Holland published *Matchbook*, a magazine of one-inch-square pages stapled inside fully functioning matchbooks. Here are a dozen one-word poems that appeared in various issues of the magazine:

anagramarama	monther	underwhere
cerealism	psychasm	whirrrred
electrizzzzz	sixamtoninepm	zombie
hairanoia	tictactile	
whhavyagotthasgudtareedare		

Panama parody: a take-off on Leigh Mercer's famous palindrome, "A man, a plan, a canal: Panama!" There are dozens of Panama parodies, making it the most parodied palindrome of all. Here are three that end in the word, *Panama*:

A man, a pallid dill, a Panama.
 A man, a petal, a parade, cedar, a palate—Panama.
 A man, a post, a fare, salad, a laser, a fatso—Panama.

pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis: the longest word (45 letters) in *Webster's Third Unabridged*, meaning "a miners' lung disease caused by the inhalation of silicate or quartz dust."

qwaint: a word spelled (or misspelled) in such a way that it refers to its meaning. The term is a Middle English spelling of *quaint*, but most people would see it as a quaint spelling of *quaint*, which makes *qwaint* a qwaint, too. The word *lithp* is a qwaint that first appeared in the 16th century. It has appeared in plural form, too, as *lithpth*. Some contemporary qwaints include:

Decembrrr neverendin exxxcess

restaurentese: the slang lexicon of waiters, waitresses, and cooks in diners and other roadside restaurants. The terms stand for orders of various foods and prepared dishes. In classic diner tradition, the restaurant workers shout the orders back and forth. The best-known is "Adam and Eve on a raft," meaning "poached eggs on toast."

Bossy in a bowl = beef stew
 Chocker hole and murk = donut and coffee
 Gimme a shimmy = Give me an order of Jell-O
 Whistleberries and hounds, a pair = beans with two franks

Sator square: the earliest known word square, which has been found in Pompeii as well as at sites in England and Mesopotamia. Some people think it was early graffiti; others think it was a secret Christian symbol. Its words can be read in all four directions—right, left, down, up. If the Latin words are written in a single row, their letters form a palindrome: SATOR AREPO TENET OPERA ROTAS. Dmitri Borgmann translated

it as “The sower, Arepo, guides the wheels with care.” The letters can also be arranged to form a cross that has the first two words of “The Lord’s Prayer” and the letters A and O in both directions. A and O stand for “Alpha” and “Omega,” the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet. They signify the Christian belief that God is the beginning and the ending of all things:

S	A	T	O	R	A
A	R	E	P	O	P
T	E	N	E	T	A
O	P	E	R	A	T
R	O	T	A	S	E
	A	P	A	T	E
	R	N	O	S	T
	O	S	T	E	R
	O				O

Shakespearean reversible sonnet: Sonnet 66, “Tir’d with all these, for restful death I cry,” which can be read when the words are reversed from last word to first. Here is how the last two lines of the original become the first two in reverse:

(Forward) Tir’d with all these, from these would I be gone,
Save that to die, I leave, my love, alone.

(Reverse) Alone, love, my leave, I die. To that, save
Gone be I, would these from these? All with tir’d

snowball sentence: a sentence that begins with a one-letter word and adds a letter to each word in succession. I AM THE WORD is a short snowball sentence. Here is a 20-word snowball sentence that ends in a 20-letter word:

I do not know where family doctors acquired illegibly perplexing handwriting; nevertheless, extraordinary pharmaceutical intellectuality, counterbalancing indecipherability, transcendentalizes intercommunications’s incomprehensibility.

tall writing: writing that uses imponderably erudite linguistic alternatives to the commonplace diurnal jargon in order to state that which, had it been expressed less ornately, could have achieved greater intercommunicative cognizance without the unnecessary blather. The following lines begin “The Domicile Erected by John,” a tall writing version of “This Is the House that Jack Built”:

Behold the Mansion reared by dædal Jack.

See the malt stored in many a plethoric sack,
In the proud cirque of Ivan’s bivouac.

Mark how the Rat’s felonious fangs invade
The golden stores in John’s pavilion laid.

Anon, with velvet foot and Tarquin strides,
Subtle Grimalkin to his quarry glides,—
Grimalkin grim, that slew the fierce rodent
Whose tooth insidious Johann’s sackcloth rent.

ugliest word: a word that someone considers to be extremely displeasing in its meaning and/or in its sound. Here are three candidates:

PHLEGM KAKKAK UGLIEST

vowel mates: a man and a woman whose names have all five vowels once each in the same order—a marriage made in alphabet heaven.

FRANÇOIS POULENC (composer) + ALISON UTTLEY
(children’s book writer) (AIOUE)

ARLO GUTHRIE (singer) + MARY OF GUISE (mother of Mary,
Queen of Scots) (AOUIE)

wind name: a term used to identify a specific wind in a specific locale.

HABOOB: of the Sudan, the black roller of the Upper Nile
GHOST OF GOUDA: local gust on a calm night, South Africa
CAT’S PAW: barely ripples mill ponds in America
SZ: first faint breeze of the Chinese autumn

xzwamfeujho: an undefined literary form whose name is unpronounceable.

Yreka Bakery: the most legendary business establishment in the world of palindromes. Located at 322 West Miner Street, Yreka, California, and founded over a century ago, the bakery’s name was an unintentional palindrome. After the bakery went out of business in 1990, there was a brief palindromic void. However, when the new occupants opened up an art space, they named it “Yrella Gallery.”

zzyxjoanw hoax: a wordplay hoax involving the last entry in Rupert Hughes’s *The Musical Guide* (later, *Music-Lovers Encyclopedia*), published in various editions between 1905 and 1956. The entry reads:

ZZYXJOANW (*shaw*) Maori 1. drum 2. fife 3. conclusion

No one questioned the word for more than 70 years until Philip Cohen pointed out some of the unusual properties of the entry, including the punctuation, the pronunciation (*shaw*), the three different meanings, and the fact that Hughes’s wife was named Joan. Until it was debunked, *zzyxjoanw* was considered to be the first legitimate dictionary word to have broken the two-Z barrier.

Dave Morice’s *Dictionary of Wordplay* has just been published by Teachers & Writers. The 320-page book is available in paperback for \$19.95; a clothbound edition is \$29.95. To order, call T&W’s Order Dept. toll-free at 1-888-BOOKS-TW or write to Order Dept., Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 5 Union Square West, New York, NY 10003-3306. Please add \$4.50 for shipping and handling.



Q & A: Teaching Poetry to ESL Students

by Rhonda Zangwill,
with Dave Johnson

RHONDA ZANGWILL: How do you handle classes with students who have not only differing levels of English language fluency, but also speak many different languages?

DAVE JOHNSON: First of all, I never assume that the students can't understand me or the world around them. They learn so much and so quickly from friends, from the street, from the train. I have had classrooms where as many as fifteen different languages are represented and often all the students' verbal proficiency in English is very good. Their writing fluency, though, may be another matter.

RZ: How do you incorporate the different languages of your students in your teaching?

DJ: Once I know some of the languages they speak, I always bring in poems in bilingual editions. The beauty of poetry is that it is both an oral and aural tradition. I have my students read poems out loud. With so many different nationalities in the classroom, each time out I can choose a different poet from a different language. Seeing and hearing the poems side by side in two different languages gets the whole class involved. Using bilingual editions also gives the various languages equal weight. I'll say, "I can't read your language, let's just hear a couple of lines. Who can speak Spanish? Who can speak Chinese?" It's interesting to see how the dynamics in the classroom change. Suddenly certain students who may have been outsiders due to the language barrier become special to the class because of their facility in a foreign language. They get an opportunity to show off.

RZ: Are there particular kinds of poems or themes that work especially well?

DJ: The trick is to find a poem that will give you a way in, that will give you accessibility. I look for poems in which the language is simple. I also try to find something that I think will interest them. I'll ask myself, "What would engage me?" One subject that is very successful—especially with male students, even though it's a little stereotypical—is sports. Also, when you are working with young writers, it doesn't matter where they come from, they all share the experience of childhood. So I use poems that deal with growing up.

DAVE JOHNSON is a poet who teaches in Teachers & Writers program, at Cooper Union, and at New School University. He is the author of *Marble Shoot* (poems) and the editor of *Movin': Teen Poets Take Voice*. RHONDA ZANGWILL is a freelance writer who teaches through T&W.

RZ: What are some examples?

DJ: Mary Oliver has a wonderful poem, very straightforward, called "The Fish." It's about a young girl going to catch her first fish, and then she has to deal with the death of this little fish. Another is "Halley's Comet" by Stanley Kunitz. This poem is about a little boy waiting to see the comet come and his relationship with his mother and his two sisters. A Chinese poet, Bei Dao, has a poem called "Midnight Singer" that is great to use when teaching repetition in poetry. Pablo Neruda is always a big favorite. His "Ode to My Socks" is wonderful. I bring a bilingual edition. We'll first read it in English, and then I'll get someone to read it in Spanish. We discuss things that we might take for granted and, like Neruda, write odes—to lemons, towels, toothbrushes—to small things.

With older kids, I've used Donna Masini's poem "Getting Out of Where We Came From." The opening line is "I was born in Brooklyn." This is a poem about movement. It's a great poem for ESL students, many of whom have moved more than once. They talk about the experience of moving from one place to another, comparing where they lived before to where they are living now.

RZ: ESL students are sometimes stymied by a double barrier—limited English language verbal fluency and difficulty and/or resistance to creative writing. Any additional strategies?

DJ: Guillaume Apollinaire's poems from *Calligrammes* work really well. These are shaped poems, with the text in the shape of an object. After we all look at a number of them, I have my students take poems they have written and draw shapes based on the poems. Then they combine the two. For students who might be put off by words and text, calligrams offer the chance to add visual sensibilities to the work. Their calligrams often literally translate into "beautiful writing."



William Zinsser, author of *On Writing Well* and *Writing to Learn*, has just published *Mitchell & Ruff: An American Profile in Jazz* (Paul Dry Books). In the book, Zinsser (himself an accomplished pianist) examines the lives and work of two talented African American musicians, focusing on their childhoods in the rural South, and the place of the church and the surprising role of the military in American music education. Highlights are Mitchell and Ruff's visit to China and their experiences as visiting musicians in the schools. *Mitchell & Ruff* is available from Independent Publishers Group (tel. 312-337-0747, fax 312-337-5985, Web www.ipgbook.com) for \$14.95.

Websites for Teaching Creative Writing

A Sampling

by Rhonda Zangwill

“CHECK THE WEB.” THESE THREE LITTLE WORDS have quickly become the strategy of first resort for every activity from shopping to schmoozing. Teaching creative writing is no exception—hundreds of sites (with thousands of links) are out there, trying to capture the attention of writers and teachers. In the face of this overwhelming range of choices, I use two strategies. First, I follow the links; they lead to something useful surprisingly often. Second, I bookmark everything that looks interesting—trying to find a site by reconstructing the search that got me there can drive one crazy.

The list that follows is hardly the last word on creative writing on the Web. Consider it an idiosyncratic sampling of websites writing teachers might find helpful, and sometimes inspiring.

National Council of Teachers of English

<http://www.ncte.org>

The NCTE’s well-organized website is easy to navigate and big enough to get lost in for some time. Clickable tabs (“elementary,” “middle,” and “secondary”) bring up a number of subtopics such as “meetings,” “resources,” and “books.” The search engine on these pages offers a drop-down list of about fifty topics, which mitigates the frustrations of wandering through the site. Clicking on “Issues/Positions” brought me to a page listing the NCTE’s guidelines for dealing with controversial situations. Once there, however, in big type at the top of the page was the message: “Not quite what you were looking for? Check out Standards Page/Education Advocacy Network.”

The NCTE sells books on its site. You can also become an NCTE member and subscribe to NCTE journals, which cover teaching English at every level from elementary school to college. The site also offers a number of e-mail discussion groups, including one for teachers to share their own poems and stories. The site’s “Help” section is a voicemail-like menu of 20 different people you can contact with your questions, from Ask a Librarian, to customer service, to a support line for teachers whose class materials are being censored.

There are a number of useful links on the NCTE site. One is to:

Education Planet

<http://www.educationplanet.com>

This site bills itself as an “all-in-one education Web guide,” and it is indeed vast. It is fairly easy to navigate—clickable tabs

(“teachers” and “students”) bring up age- and grade-level-appropriate resources. An online database of 16,000 lesson plans is indexed by subject, with “language arts” broken down into ESL, Poetry, Journalism, Writing Techniques, and Storytelling, among other categories.

In addition to the usual list of links, the search engine on the Education Planet site gives you lists of lesson plans, videos, maps, supplies, and books. Book lists generated by the site are usually well-annotated, and the listed titles are available through an online mall. The somewhat cumbersome Education Planet Store requires you to click to another linked site, social-studies.com, to find out prices.

If you follow the scholarly work in the field, you may want to visit:

ERIC Digests

<http://www.ericir.syr.edu/Eric/>

ERIC is the government-supported Educational Resources Information Center, which stores an immense database of education-related literature. This site demystifies the somewhat-daunting ERIC, offering step-by-step how-to’s and where-are’s. The site’s search engine led me on a completely surprising journey: typing “teaching writing” brought me (a few clicks later) to a writing exercise based on work by a wonderful, all-but-forgotten feminist playwright, Susan Glaspell, at a site called:

Scribbling Women

<http://www.scribblingwomen.org>

This site takes its name from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s complaint about the women writers of his time, whom he called a “damned mob of scribbling women,” and whose books sometimes sold in the hundreds of thousands, driving “more deserving” writers (such as Hawthorne) out of the literary marketplace. The writing exercise I found is based on Glaspell’s play, “A Jury of Her Peers.” The site offers a detailed lesson plan that not only offers concrete goals (“introduce students to the vocabulary of drama”), but also shows how the assignment meets a number of education standards. Among the other mostly late nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century women writers featured on the site are Louisa May Alcott, Willa Cather, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Harriet Jacobs.

The National Writing Project

<http://www.writingproject.org>

Based at the University of California at Berkeley, the National Writing Project works to improve the teaching of writing; among other things, it offers summer institutes for teachers.

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There are local NWP sites around the country, some of which publish lesson plans and exercises on their own websites.

The group on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in western South Dakota uses its website to suggest ways to inspire recalcitrant high school students. One teacher has students talk about the weather—especially the extremes of their climate, such as blizzards, snow, and cold. She uses several wintry texts, including “To Build a Fire” by Jack London and “Outcasts of Poker Flats” by Bret Harte. For more details see: <http://www.usd.edu/engl/DWP/activities/gettingstudentstowrite.html>

Academy of American Poets

<http://www.poets.org>

As the sponsor of National Poetry Month each April, the Academy provides access to a wealth of resources, including a collection of more than 600 poems indexed by poet and poem title, and a soon-to-be-launched Online Poetry Classroom (developed in collaboration with Teachers & Writers). There is also a wide variety of literary links to information about poetry prizes, literary festivals, literary organizations, and other text databases.

Journal of Teaching Writing

<http://www.iupui.edu/~jtw/>

The peer-reviewed *Journal of Teaching Writing* publishes articles about writing at all grade levels, from preschool to college. The website doesn't actually republish articles from the print edition, though it does list titles of upcoming articles, such as “Responding to Students' Creative Writing: The Modes of Teacher Commentary” by Richard Straub and “Teachers as Writers: Tensions between Theory and Practice” by Bruce Robbins.

Learning Disabilities Online

<http://www.ldonline.org>

This site covers a wide range of topics relating to the learning disabled, offering professional opinions and papers, including the full text of *All Children Can Write* by writing-process guru Donald H. Graves, and other experts' replies to questions about teaching writing to kids with disabilities.

Inkspot

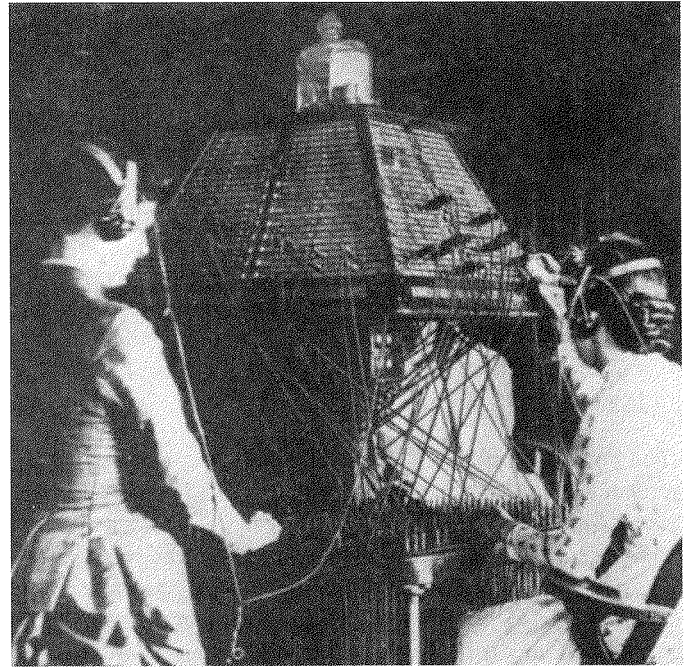
<http://www.inkspot.com/craft/teaching.html>

<http://www.inkspot.com/craft/style.html>

This general information site for writers is sponsored by Xlibris, Random House's self-publishing venture. The sheer amount of information and crowded design make Inkspot hard to navigate, though there are a few things worth finding, such as a lightly annotated list of links for teaching writing to children, and another list of links to grammar sites. One of these sites

<http://www.protrainco.com/info/grammar.html>

has a searchable collection of articles on grammar and style issues, as well as a list of links to online grammar and style



guides; you can even ask a question via e-mail (they can't promise they'll get back to you, though).

A number of individuals have created websites devoted to their own approaches to teaching writing. These individuals tend to be teachers eager to share knowledge, and their sites can be worth a browse for the sake of methodological variety, not to mention the possibility that you might be inspired by some of these teachers' lesson plans and exercises. One such site is:

Ideas for Teaching Writing

<http://www.angelfire.com/ks/teachme/writing.html>

This site (part of teachers.net) uses the author's “Six Trait Analytic Writing Model”: ideas and content, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and writing conventions. The method seems rather theory-heavy and analytical to me, with many steps detailed for every trait. Nonetheless, it might be worth a brief look, if just to see the incredible care and complexity put into each lesson plan.

Teachers & Writers Collaborative

<http://www.twc.org>

<http://www.writenet.org>

Last, but certainly not least, are T&W's two websites, which show up as links on many other sites, a testament to their utility. The T&W website (www.twc.org) features the T&W publications catalogue and information about writers-in-the-schools organizations across the country—a teacher anywhere can find out how to find a visiting writer. The WriteNet site (www.writenet.org) offers an e-mail discussion group, teaching techniques and strategies, lesson plans, interviews with poets and writers, and practical advice.

