

Word of the month The letter 'e'

A word? Well, it was voted “word of the year” by the American Dialect Society in 1998, because it was becoming increasingly used in such expressions as email and e-business – “e” being short for electronic. But for most of us, e is just a letter – though in English an especially interesting one.

I’m reminded of this because this article is being published in September – along with December, a month in which “e”s predominate. It’s the letter we see most often, mainly because it’s used in the two most common words in the language: *the* and *be*. As a result, it’s not too difficult to construct a univocalic – a piece of writing in which just one vowel is used throughout. The pastime appealed greatly to the Victorians, and wordplay competitions still go in for it. The American writer CC Bombaugh published a collection of linguistic oddities in 1871. This is the opening of the e-poem:

*Eve, Eden’s Empress, needs defended be;
The Serpent greets her when she seeks
the tree.
Serene, she sees the speckled tempter
creep;
Gentle he seems – perversest schemer
deep.*



GETTY

Georges Perec: no easy task

Then there’s the opposite game, which is more difficult: write a story without using a particular letter at all – a lipogram. Perhaps because of the greater challenge, this has attracted more interest. Ernest Wright wrote a 50,000-word novel called *Gadsby* in 1939 in which “e” is entirely absent. Does it sound natural? You be the judge:

In almost any big town, around Autumn, you will annually run across that famous agricultural show known as a County Fair; and, as Branton Hills had a big park, which you know all about, right

in front of Nancy’s and Frank’s small bungalow, it was a most natural spot for holding it.

Georges Perec did the same thing for French, in a novel called *La disparition*, published in 1969.

Even trickier is to tell a story in which each word begins with the same letter. Genesis again provided the stimulus for one such competition, which I report in my book *Language Play*: retell the Adam and Eve story in that style, using letter “a”. No problem with Adam, but what would you do with God, Eve, the serpent? The winner had a solution. The story begins: “Adam and alert associate, agreeably accommodated, aptly achieved accord and amiability ...” And the names of the other characters? “Adonai, almighty author”; “Apollyon, archangel-adder”. All of which leads to the classic lines:

*“Avoid apples and abide amid abundance,” admonished Adonai.
“Admire apples and acquire acumen,” advised Apollyon.*

And, as all are aware, Adam ate also. Alas!

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