

A waste of words

Playful word games for lockdown life

#AWasteOfWords

Layout and design

creative triangle

Words and ideas

text wizard
IRRESISTIBLE WRITING

Them's fighting words

The English language bristles with phrases in which words get lost, jumbled up, twisted round, or snatched away.

So-and-so
doesn't mince
their words

You'll eat
your words

One day you'll
take those
words back

You took the
words right out
of my mouth

The words
stuck in my
mouth

Let me explain
in words of one
syllable

Even if English isn't your favourite subject, playing with words is something you already do, usually without thinking about it. Especially if you like a good pun.

So this is a collection of simple word games for all ages and all abilities. Word-lover or word-leaver, you're sure to find something you like.

For most games, all you need is pencil and paper. Some you can play on your own, but most games are more fun if you have someone else to play with. Which is great because they're nearly all suitable for playing or sharing online with friends or relatives.

Share your ideas

To share your words online or see what other people are doing with their words, use the hashtag:

#AWasteOfWords

Sources of word games

There are plenty of books stuffed with word games. For this collection we invented some of our own and borrowed or adapted ideas from other keen word-gamers, such as Gyles Brandreth and Tony Augarde.

Here are the books that inspired us:

Wordplay, Giles Brandreth,
Severn House 1982, ISBN 0 7278 2017 6

Pears Word Games, Peter Newby,
Pelham Books 1990, ISBN 0 7207 1883 X

Wordplay, Tony Augarde,
Jon Carpenter 2011, ISBN 978 1 906067 10 6

Oxford Guide to Word Games, Tony Augarde,
Oxford University Press 2003, ISBN 978 0 198662 64 8

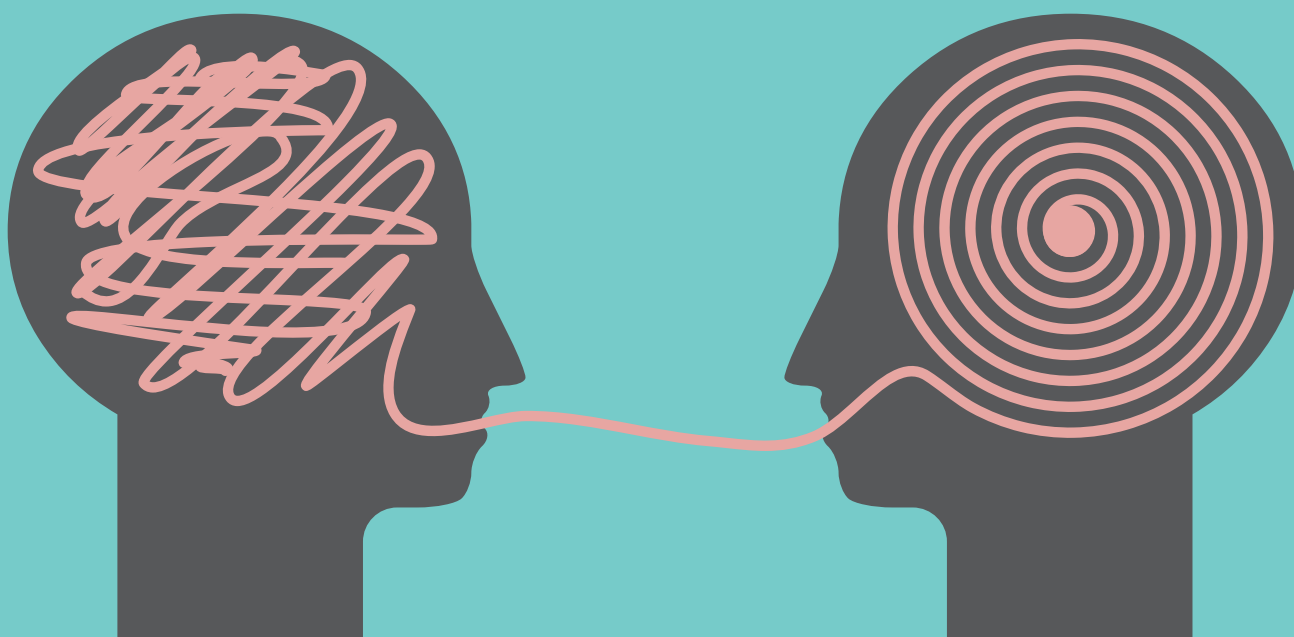
Oxford A-Z of Word Games, Tony Augarde,
Oxford University Press 1994, ISBN 0 19 866231 9

Playing Word Games, John Smyth,
Stanley Paul 1995, ISBN 0 09 180772 7

Making the Alphabet Dance, Ross Eckler,
Macmillan 1997, ISBN 0333 90334 X

Some of them may no longer be in print.

Verbal games



Saying – or not saying – certain words really makes you think. These are inventive games that reward you for sometimes saying – and sometimes not saying –the first thing that comes to mind.

Banned words

- » **Number of players :**
» 2 or more

Can you answer a string of questions without saying 'yes' or 'no'?
Yes – sorry, no – er ... yes, of course I can!

What you need :

- » Nothing
(if you want to score the game: mobile phone with timer, pencil and paper)

Guess what, it's not that easy.

1. Take it in turns to ask or answer the questions. You don't need to prepare questions in advance, just ask whatever comes into your head. Often the simplest questions – "Did you have your breakfast?", "Do you like school?" – are the most likely to catch people out.
2. Set your timer for two minutes. Press 'start' and then fire off as many questions as you can think of. Your interviewee has to answer quickly without saying 'yes' or 'no'.
3. Keep a record of the number of times they do say 'yes' or 'no'. The winner is the player with the lowest number of yesses and noes.

If you don't want to score, just swap roles each time you hear a 'yes' or 'no'. The person who was answering becomes the questioner.

* The five-bar gate is an easy way to count yesses and noes. Pencil a short vertical mark on your page each time you hear a 'yes' or a 'no'. On the fifth occasion, strike through with a horizontal line. Then start again with more vertical marks. This is what a count of 12 would look like:



Variations

You can play the same game with other banned words. The simpler and more common the word, the better. Here are a few obvious ones:

and I it is you

Or you could play it by banning words that contain certain letters. But that's harder because you have to be a lightning-quick speller to spot someone's mistakes.

Tackle terrible tasks in Texas

- » **Number of players :**
» 2 or more

- What you need :**
» Nothing

For this game you have to think of a town or city (anywhere in the world) and then come up with a set of three words that all begin with the same letter as the town.

When you put your three words together, they have to sound like some kind of weird – but could be true – task. The format of the three words is always the same: *verb-adjective-noun*, but don't let that put you off. The pattern is easy to grasp. Here are some examples:

To B irmingham	To b urst b loated b uffalo
To R ichmond	To r epair r otten r ods
To C arlisle	To c apture c urvaceous c andles

1. Take it in turns to ask and answer two questions.
2. The Questioner asks: "Where are you going?"
3. You answer: "To Nantwich"
4. The Questioner then asks: "Why are you going there?"
5. You answer: "To **n**ame **n**autical **n**erves"
6. Now swap places. When the next person answers, they can choose any town or city they like, even if it begins with the same letter as one that's gone before. But what they can't do is name the same town or repeat any other word that's already been used.

Variations

You can make the game even more nonsensical by inventing your own places and words. The weirder, the better. Something like this, perhaps:

"Where are you going?"

"To **B**ismander"

"Why are you going there?"

"To **b**efriend **b**elacious **b**ogle-toes"

Collective nouns

- » **Number of players :**
» 1 or more

A collective noun is the name for a group of people, animals, or objects: a **herd** of cows, a **crowd** of people, a **pack** of cards, a **band** of musicians.

- What you need :**
» Nothing

Some collective nouns – especially those for groups of animals – are particularly colourful: a **gaggle** of geese, a **charm** of finches, a **pod** of dolphins.

And some are just weird: a **shiver** of sharks, an **implausibility** of gnus, an **ostentation** of peacocks.

Many of the weirder ones are nothing more than jokes that someone once made up: a **flash** of paparazzi, a **storm** of paratroopers, a **whisper** of gossips.

Invented collective nouns say something about the people they describe: paparazzi cameras **flash**, paratroopers **storm** an enemy stronghold, and gossips lower their voices to a **whisper**.

Maybe you could invent some too.

1. Think of the jobs that people do – plumbers, dentists, zookeepers, teachers.

Or maybe types of people – goal-scorers, dog-lovers, video-gamers, word-gamers.

Or perhaps the way that some people might sometimes feel – happy people, bored people, hungry people, confused people.

You can think of anything. The more odd your group of people, the more fun you can have with their collective noun.

2. Now invent a collective noun to describe your chosen group of people.

Here are a couple to start you off:

a **marking** of teachers

a **flea-pit** of dog-lovers

an **emptiness** (or perhaps a **rumbling**) of hungry people

Acting and storytelling



Every actor needs a script – some words to get them going. Sometimes just one word is enough. Sometimes they have to make it all up as they go.

Acting uppily

» **Number of players :**
» 2 or more

What you need :
» Nothing

To play this game, you have to know what an adverb is.

An adverb describes how you would perform some activity. You could do it **happily, slowly, easily, lazily, excitedly, majestically, or inscrutably**. Just about any word that ends in 'ly' is an adverb.

1. Choose a player to start. If it's you, you now have to think of an adverb. But don't tell the others; their task is to guess what it is.
2. From now on, everything you say or do has to be in the manner of your chosen adverb. It's not easy. If you were to choose **greedily**, you'd have to talk, walk, or sit greedily. A bit easier perhaps if you chose **chaotically, cheekily, or clumsily**. And much easier with **slowly** or **speedily**.
3. The player who guesses your adverb takes the next turn.

Variation for at least three players

One player leaves the room while the rest choose the adverb. When the player returns, everyone acts in the manner of the chosen adverb, and the one lonely player has to guess it. This version of the game can look and sound totally mad. Imagine everyone acting **frostily** or **idiotically**.

The never-ending story

» **Number of players :**

- » 3 to 5 (too many players make the game unwieldy)

What you need :

- » pencil and paper

The idea of this game *is* to finish the story, but the Story-Changer does their best to stop you getting there.

Each player has a unique ending (the ‘finishing line’) to the game’s never-ending story. Their challenge is to drop in that finishing line where it convincingly fits the story. Whenever it looks like they’re getting close, the Story-Changer switches to another player who has to pick up the same story and continue it in a way that now leads logically to their finishing line. But before they get there, the Story-Changer switches again.

One thing the Story-Changer can’t do is stop a player once they’ve begun their finishing line. If a player manages to speak the first word of their finishing line at a logical place in the story, they can continue to the end.

1. Decide who is going to be the Story-Changer. Let’s start with you, which means you have to write down an unusual ending to a story for each of the other players.
2. Hand each player their finishing line and give them a moment or two to think about what kind of story might lead to it.
3. Ask the first player to begin the story. After a while – and before they get a chance to end the story with their finishing line – cut them off and tell the next player to continue.
4. The second player continues the same story, but now has to twist it round in a way that leads towards their finishing line. Once again, the Story-Changer cuts them off and passes the story to the next player.
5. Play continues with each player contributing in turn until one winner manages to fit their finishing line into the story. The winner becomes the next Story-Changer.

Continued »

The never-ending story

Example for Story-Changer and two players

The Story-Changer gives the two players the following finishing lines:

Player 1: “That’s when I realised that my cat had eaten both my neighbour’s goldfish.”

Player 2: “Now you understand why wearing odd socks can cause so much trouble.”

Here’s how the story might pan out:

Player 1: If there’s one thing my cat, Sparkle, likes, it’s fish. She eats them whenever and wherever she can. A few weeks ago I was at my neighbour’s house. It was a sunny day ...

Story-Changer: Next player ...

Player 2: ... so I thought I’d dress more brightly than usual. I picked a pair of odd socks from my sock drawer – one canary yellow, the other sky blue ...

Story-Changer: Next player ...

Player 1: ... My neighbour immediately noticed my ridiculous choice of socks. I lifted my feet in turn to give her a better look. It was while we were distracted by the glow of those dazzling socks that Sparkle slipped in through the neighbour’s door ...

Story-Changer: Next player ...

Player 2: ... Suddenly there was an awful crash of breaking glass and a shout of horror from my neighbour’s son in the next room ...

Story-Changer: Next player ...

Player 1: ... We ran to see what had happened. There was glass and water everywhere, but not a single flapping fish ...

Story-Changer: Next player ...

Player 2: ... because Sparkle had eaten them. Now you understand why wearing odd socks can cause so much trouble.

Using the bag of letters in your word game



The world's most famous word game (which we can't mention) contains a board and a bag of 100 letters. But you don't have to commit to a full game; you can play simpler word games with just the bag of letters.

Roll out the words

- » **Number of players :**
» 2 or more

This is a simple word-making game involving letters plucked from the bag. Since there's a big element of luck, it's good for all ages to play together and maybe help each other out.

What you need :

- » Bag of letters, pencil and paper, two dice (or one dice if that's all you have)

1. Players take it in turns to roll the dice. The score on the two dice (or on two rolls of a single dice) tells you how many letters you take from the bag.
 2. Lay the letters out, face up, in front of you. Rearrange them to make as many words (or one big word) as you can. Any word containing two letters or more counts. Letters left over score zero. The blank tiles can be any letter you like.
 3. Put the letters back in the bag, give it a good shake, and pass the dice and bag to the next player.
-

Variations

If there's a wide age gap between players, you can make it easier for younger ones by giving them three dice to roll. Or you can make a simple scale to level things up for players with a wide range of abilities. In this version all players roll two dice, but less able players can pick 1, 2, or 3 extra letters.

Super wordsmiths: Number of letters on dice score

Teenagers: Number of letters on dice score + 1 extra letter

Older children: Number of letters on dice score + 2 extra letters

Younger children: Number of letters on dice score + 3 extra letters

Another way to play the game is to connect your words, crossword-puzzle style. That gives you a chance to score some letters twice.

Continued »

Roll out the words

Scoring



To score the game, you have two options:

- Score 1 point for every letter used to make a word (good method for a wide range of ages)









or

- Count the scores on each of the letters: score 1 for an A, 10 for a Z (gives clever players a chance to score well)

Example









Dice roll:  +  = 8

Letters drawn:        

Words made:      (no letters left over)
  

Score: **8** (8 letters played)
or **12** (value of the 8 letters played)

Crossword-style variation

Words made: 

    


Score: **9** (one of the Ds counts twice)
or **14** (one of the Ds scores twice)

Name that cat

- » **Number of players :**
» 1 or more

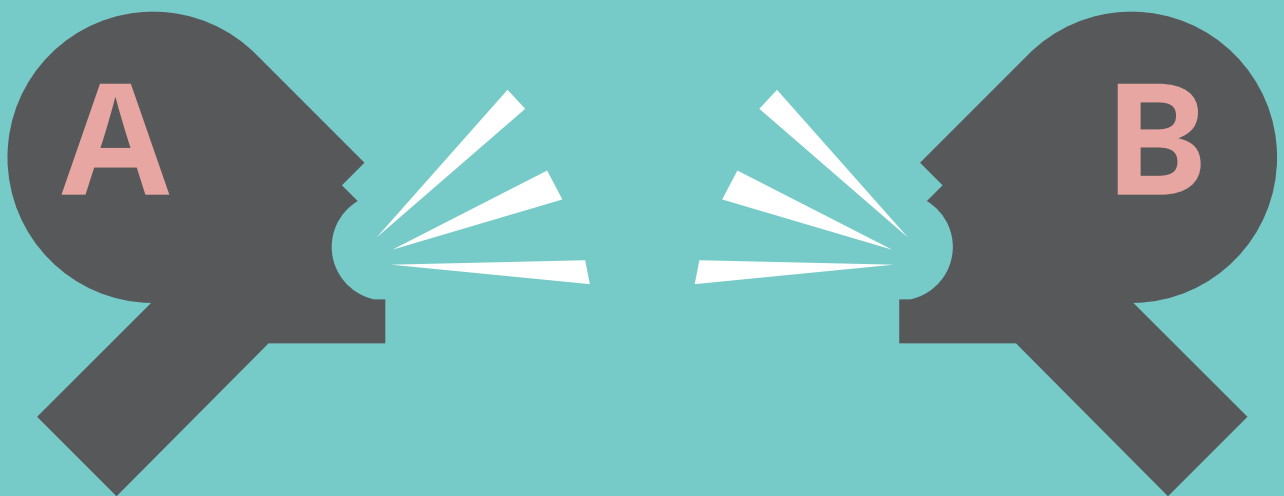
This time let's use your bag of letters to name your cat. Or your imaginary cat. Or your dog, your goldfish, or your porcupine. Name any creature you like.

What you need :

- » Bag of letters, three dice (or one dice if that's all you have)

1. Roll all three dice (or one dice three times). The total score on the upper faces tells you how many letters you take from the bag.
2. Lay your letters out, face up, in front of you. Rearrange them to spell out a name for your cat. An ordinary name like **Glen** or **Tibbles**, or a mad name such as **Sharpus**, **Mousgink**, or **Flingo**.
3. Put the letters back in the bag ready for the next roll.
4. Imagine having ten cats. Keep rolling the dice to name all ten. And one more roll to name the spider that scuttled under the sofa yesterday evening.
5. Getting the hang of it now? So let's roll the dice to name your favourite teacher. And once more for your least favourite.

Squaring up to your opponent



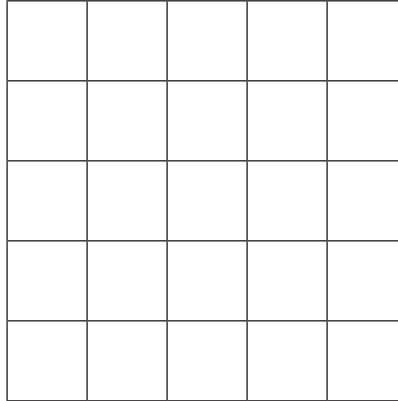
Some word games are more competitive than others. If you have to draw up a grid before you start, you know that you and your opponent are going to have to slug it out on your own mini battlefield.

Gridlock

» **Number of players :**
» 2

What you need :
» Pencil and paper

Each of you starts with a 5x5 square grid drawn on a piece of paper:



-
1. Place your grid where you can see it, but your opponent can't.
 2. You are Player 1, so you start by calling out a letter – any letter you like from the alphabet.
 3. You and your opponent both write that letter into a square of your grid – any square you like, but only you know which square you've chosen.
 4. Now Player 2 – your opponent – calls out a letter. Again, it can be any letter, including letters that have already been used.
 5. Both of you write that letter into another square of your grid.
 6. Play continues with each of you calling out a letter alternately. By the time the last grid square is filled, player 1 will have called 13 letters and player 2 will have called 12.
 7. Now the fun begins: both of you try to make as many 3, 4, and 5-letter words as you can from the letters in your grids. Your words can read forwards or backwards in a straight line in any direction – horizontally, vertically, or diagonally.

Continued »

Gridlock

Variation

You might find it easier to ignore words that read backwards.

Scoring

Score 3 points for every 3-letter word, 4 points for every 4-letter word, and 5 points for every 5-letter word. Words within a word also count. If you can read **R-A-C-E-R** from your grid (scores 5 points), you can also score another 4 points each for **R-A-C-E** and **A-C-E-R** and 3 points for **A-C-E**. That's 16 points in total. And if you're also counting words that read backwards, you can pick up another 3 points for **C-A-R**.

The winner is the player with the most points.

Example

The trick with this game is to place the letters on your grid in a way that helps you form lots of words. But it's not that easy because every second letter comes from your opponent. In the early stages you can probably place letters to spell out words across the top row and down the first column. But after that it gets harder and harder.

Here's how a typical grid might look:

P	R	I	C	E
A	O	L	R	N
N	D	F	Y	M
D	X	U	B	E
A	T	H	E	M

Row 1 (forwards and backwards):	PRICE, RICE, ICE	score: 12
Row 2 (forwards and backwards):		score: 0
Row 3 (forwards and backwards):		score: 0
Row 4 (forwards and backwards):		score: 0
Row 5 (forwards and backwards):	THEM, THE, HEM	score: 10
Column 1 (down and up):	PANDA, PAN, AND, NAP	score: 14
Column 2 (down and up):	ROD	score: 3
Column 3 (down and up):		score: 0
Column 4 (down and up):	CRY	score: 3
Column 5 (down and up):		score: 0
Diagonals (top left ➤ bottom right):	DUE, LYE	score: 6
Diagonals (bottom left ➤ top right):		score: 0
Diagonals (top right ➤ bottom left):	ION	score: 3
Diagonals (bottom right ➤ top left):		score: 0
	total:	51

Word battleships

» **Number of players :**
» 2

What you need :
» Pencil and paper

This is the word-lover's version of the famous nautical war game. Each of you starts with two 6×6 square grids drawn on separate pieces of paper. The rows are numbered 1 to 6, the columns are lettered A to F. One of the grids is for your words, the other is for your opponent's.

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						

Before you start, you need to agree how many words you'll both put on your grids and how many letters each word should have. The game works well with the following words:

1 × 6-letter word

1 × 5-letter word

1 × 4-letter word

2 × 3-letter words

Here's how a typical grid might look.

Your words must connect as in a crossword puzzle.

	A	B	C	D	E	F
1		C		P		
2		H	O	R	S	E
3		I		I		
4		P	I	N		
5				C		
6				E	Y	E

Continued »

Word battleships

1. Don't let your opponent see your grid. Try sitting far apart or facing away from each other.
2. Write your own secret words into your grid. Make sure you have the right number of words and that they all interlock.
3. When you're both ready, take it in turns to take a shot at the other player's grid. Let's say that the grid on the previous page is yours, and your opponent starts by calling out a grid square – **A2** or maybe **D4**.
4. You now look to see if there's a letter on the square they called. If they said **A2**, you can shout 'miss' (and blow a raspberry for good measure). If they said **D4**, you'd have to say 'hit – **N**'. At which point they'll punch the air as they write a big fat **N** in square **D4** on their empty grid.
5. Now it's your turn. Call out a grid square. If you get a hit, write the letter in your empty grid.
6. Carry on taking shots alternately. As the letters build up, you'll begin to see some word patterns emerging.
7. Each time you achieve a successful grid-square hit you can follow up (all within the same turn) with a shot at the entire word. Imagine if the grid above was your opponent's and you had hits for the letters **O-R-S-E** on squares **C2** to **F2**: you might guess that the missing letter on square B2 was an H. If you say '**HORSE**', your opponent has to say 'hit' and you can strike out the entire word. But if you'd guessed '**GORSE**', they'd say 'miss', and you'd have to wait till your next successful hit to have another shot at the word.
8. The winner is the first player to reveal all their opponent's words.

Starting out with initial letters

LOL



People love playing around with initials. Anything that can be shortened to its initial letters, usually is. But it's more fun to work the other way – to start with a string of letters and invent the thing they're short for.

Acronyms

- » **Number of players :**
 - » 1 or more

What you need :

- » Pencil and paper,
a book or magazine
(anything that's a
source of words)

An acronym is a short and simple name for something. The acronym is made from the first letters of the object's full name. So **radar** is an acronym for **RADio Detection and Ranging**, and **laser** is an acronym for **LIGHT Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation**.

The fun starts when you take a random word and pretend that it's an acronym for something else. For example, **butter** could potentially be an acronym for **Best Used Tea-Time Edible Resource**, and **zebra** could be one for **Zany Elegantly Beribboned Rare Animal**. The connection works best if your invented phrase sounds like it really could be a long-winded description of the word you started with.

1. Open a book or magazine at any page, then choose a word at random.
2. Can you or your friends use the letters of your random word to create a wildly imaginative description of it? Choose a different word each or all have a go at the same one.

Initialisms

- » **Number of players :**
 - » 1 or more

What you need :

- » A view of some car number plates

An initialism is a bit like an acronym. It's another short and simple name for something composed from the initial letters of its full name. The difference with initialisms is that you can't say them as a word. They're always spoken as a string of letters. So **BBC** is an initialism for **British Broadcasting Company**, **GCSE** is an initialism for **General Certificate in Secondary Education**, and **CIA** is an initialism for America's **Central Intelligence Agency**. Common initialisms tend to be three letters long.

To play this game you need to be able to see some car number plates. Can you see them from your window or from your garden? – if you have one. If you're stuck on a long car or bus journey, this is a great way to pass the time.

Most number plates are in the format **XY99 ABC**. For this game we're only interested in the three letters – **ABC** – at the end. Could they be an initialism for the **Association of Bedspring Coilers**? Or maybe the **Aeronautical Bistro Club**?

1. Look out for a passing car or lorry. Can you read the last three letters of its number plate?
2. Imagine they're an initialism for something – an organisation, a process, or an activity. What would it be? The wilder and funnier you can make it, the better.

Make your own mnemonics

- » **Number of players :**
» 1 or more

- What you need :**
» Pencil and paper

A mnemonic (pronounced nemonic) is a way of remembering lists. You take the first letter of each word in the list and put them together to create a sentence of your own that seems to make sense, and is much easier to remember.

The most famous mnemonic is:

Richard **O**f **Y**ork **G**ave **B**attle **I**n **V**ain

The first letters of each word represent the colours of the rainbow:

Red, **O**range, **Y**ellow, **G**reen, **B**lue, **I**ndigo, **V**iolet

But it's much more fun to make up your own mnemonic. If you create your own, you're likely to remember it for the rest of your life.

On this page and the next, you'll find three lists worth remembering. Can you make your own mnemonics using the letters in bold?

To make it easier, we've listed the letters for your mnemonics in both directions. Choose the direction that gives you the funniest or most memorable sentence.

Colours of the rainbow

Most people list the colours from top to bottom – from the outermost colour to the innermost:

Red, **O**range, **Y**ellow, **G**reen, **B**lue, **I**ndigo, **V**iolet = **ROYGBIV**

Can you create a mnemonic that's better than
Richard **O**f **Y**ork **G**ave **B**attle **I**n **V**ain

If you prefer, you can memorise the colours in the other direction – from the innermost colour to the outermost:

Violet, **I**ndigo, **B**lue, **G**reen, **Y**ellow, **O**range, **R**ed = **VIBGYOR**

Could you create a mnemonic using these letters?

Continued »

Make your own mnemonics

Planets of the Solar System

The usual order for listing the planets is to work outwards from the Sun. Since Pluto was downgraded a few years ago, you can choose whether to include it or not:

Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, Neptune, (Pluto)
= **MVEMJSUN(P)**

Popular mnemonic: **My Very Easy Method Just Speeds Up Naming Planets**

Can you create a better one than this?

There's nothing to stop you working inwards from the depths of space to the scorching heat of the Sun:

(Pluto), Neptune, Uranus, Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Earth, Venus, Mercury
= **(P)NUSJMEVM**

Taxonomy – a way of fitting all living things into the tree of life

Everything that lives on planet Earth – animals, plants, bacteria – fits into something called a taxonomic classification. It's a way of showing how species relate to each other. The classification contains seven levels, usually listed from top to bottom:

Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species = KPCOFGS

Popular mnemonic: **King Phillip Came Over For Good Soup**

Can you create a better one than this?

It's not the usual way, but you could memorise the order backwards: bottom to top:

Species, Genus, Family, Order, Class, Phylum, Kingdom = SGFOCPK

Do your own thing

Can you think of a list that you have trouble remembering?

- The names of the main characters in a TV show you like.
- The songs on an album by your favourite artist.
- The players in your favourite team.
- The names of all the actors who have played Doctor Who.
- The towns that your parents have lived in since they were born.

- The stops on your railway or underground line.
- All the teachers you've ever had – or maybe just the best or the worst.

Only you know what wild and wonderful list you'd love to remember. Whatever it is, you now know how to create a mnemonic that will lock it in your memory, possibly for the rest of your life. Give it a go.

**‘When / use a word,
Humpty Dumpty said in a
rather scornful tone,
‘it means just what I
choose it to mean
– neither more nor less.’**

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

#AWasteOfWords

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