

How to Play with Words

by Keith Sands

This paragraph is not ordinary. Look at it. At first, it won't look too odd. Just a normal paragraph - you may think. But look at it again and you might find it a bit unusual. Just a tiny bit. What's wrong with it, you may ask? Nothing wrong at all, in fact : as I said, it's just slightly unusual. It's difficult to put it in words. Look again. Is anything not right? Can you spot it? Is anything...missing?

What you've just read is a lipogram – a text written without using a particular letter of the alphabet. It's the hardest kind of lipogram, as it doesn't contain the letter E – the most common letter in the English language. Try writing one yourself, even a few sentences, and you'll see it's pretty difficult. Now imagine the task faced by the French writer Georges Perec, when a friend challenged him to write a whole novel without using E – a letter which is even more common in French than in English.

Perec was a frighteningly clever writer. He was a lover of word games and puzzles, and a master of the Chinese board game Go. He wrote crossword puzzles for Paris magazines. He had already written a 5000 word palindrome - a text that reads the same forwards and back, like the well known "A man, a plan, a canal – Panama." But his friends thought that this task would be beyond him. Indeed, they staked money on it.

Unlocking the imagination

He took up the challenge. He was unable to use more than 70% of the words in the French language. The most common articles and pronouns, most of the French verb endings, and nearly every feminine noun were off-limits. Imagine a French writer not being able to use "une", "le", "je", "elle", "est", "et"! Surely enough to kill any writer's ability to create.

But Perec was not just any writer. He discovered that, on the contrary, this "impossible" rule unlocked his imagination. He later claimed that he wrote his novel faster than any of his other books. He was forced to think. He had to fight for every sentence. He had no choice but to be original.

The result was *La Disparition*, a surreal detective story about the mysterious disappearance of a character named A.Vowl (Get it?) The only Es were the four in his name on the cover. He placed dozens of clues in the book about the fantastically difficult rule he was working under. (For example, the chapters are numbered 1-26, but there is no chapter five, E being the fifth letter of the alphabet.) Despite the clues, many of the original reviewers failed to spot what was staring them in the faces – the missing letter. Embarrassing for the critics, hilarious for the writer and his friends.

Fortunately, the game Perec was playing did not destroy the book itself. It's not just a novel without the letter E, it's a good novel in its own right – very funny, if you know its secret ; and rather disturbing if you don't. Every sentence seems twisted slightly out of shape, and the resulting style is unique. It's like chaos theory, which says that a butterfly's wingbeat in South America might cause a hurricane in China. Remove a tiny thing – a single letter, that you'd hardly notice – and the whole world is changed.

After he finished his novel, Perec decided he needed to use up all the Es he hadn't used in the novel, so he got rid of the As, Is, Os, and Us, - and wrote a short story in which e is the only vowel.

Has anyone matched Perec ? Probably only the British writer Gilbert Adair, who translated *La Disparition* into English. Again without using a single E. You could argue this is even more difficult than Perec's original task, as Adair had to keep to the original story. Nevertheless, he managed it. Even the title was hard to translate : it couldn't be called *The Disappearance!* The title of the English version is *A Void*, a play on words Perec himself would have enjoyed. "Avoid", of course, is what the writer does when he writes a lipogram – avoiding all those nasty words with E in them.

Instant poetry

Perec was given his "impossible" task by a fellow member of OuLiPo.-(Ouvriers des Literatures Potentials, The Workshop of Potential Literature.) This was a group of experimental writers in Paris in the 1960s, whose leading figures were Perec, Raymond Queneau, and the Italian Italo Calvino. The OuLiPo group developed the theory

that writing under constraints and rules was a way to achieve true originality. Perec liked the paradox – the more you limit yourself, the freer you have to become.

Perec's book is proof, perhaps, that this experiment works. But probably only if you're brilliant in the first place. However, another of the OuLiPo word games is within everyone's reach. Anyone can write an OuLiPo poem - all you need is a pen, paper and a dictionary.

Take a poem you like, or maybe one you don't like, and underline all the nouns.

Look them up in the dictionary, count seven entries forward from the noun you started with and replace the word in the poem with the word you find. If it's a verb, add -ing. So here are the first lines of Dante's *Inferno* :

In the middle of the journey of my life

I found myself in a dark wood...

Which becomes :

In the midnight of the joy of my life insurance

I found mythology in a dark woodpile...

You now have an Oulipo poem. It won't make much sense, but it'll probably have some surprising phrases in it you wouldn't otherwise have thought of. If you don't like it, change the adjectives as well. Then the verbs. It's cheating, but it's truly democratic. Anyone can be a poet – sort of. And it's a lot easier than lipograms.

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