

FORBIDDEN LETTERS

GRADES

second and third

MATERIALS

one playing die

masking tape

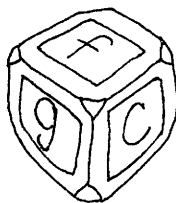
paper

pencil

pen

There was once a French writer named Georges Perec who wrote a whole book, *La Disparition*, without ever using the letter *e*. Every time he wanted to write a word with an *e*, he had to search his mind for an *e*-less synonym. Obviously, Perec had a phenomenal vocabulary. Exactly why Perec submitted himself to such a ridiculous rule, I cannot say. But his idea of writing without a particular letter does pose a challenge that can be amusing and instructive for children. Here's a game based on Perec's idea. It encourages children to employ a more varied vocabulary as they write.

Before you play, you must alter a playing die. Simply put little squares of masking tape over all six faces of the die. Then with a pen write letters on each piece of tape. For your first game, put the following six letters on the die, one on each face: *c*, *y*, *u*, *k*, *j*, and *g*.



Now roll the die. The letter you roll will be off limits to you for the duration of the game. You will write quite a bit during the game, but your forbidden letter may not appear in any of your words. Your child may use your forbidden letter when he writes, however. Of course he will also have a forbidden letter which he must studiously avoid using. He will discover this letter the same way you did, by rolling the die. If he rolls the same letter you did, then you must both avoid the *same* letter for the entire game.

What will you write? Begin a question-and-answer round-robin. You write a question for your child to answer—remembering, of course, to avoid your forbidden letter. Your child answers your question while avoiding his own forbidden letter. That is half a round in the game. Then your child writes a question for you, still avoiding his letter. You answer his question. That's the second half of a round. The game goes on for six rounds.

What happens if someone uses his forbidden letter? The game is over and the erring person has lost. If both players avoid their letters for all six rounds, you have a tie. In this game, if a child can manage a tie, I call him the winner. That means in order to win, I must make my young opponent write his prohibited letter. The child has two ways to win. He can make me use my forbidden letter or he can hold out for the full six rounds. Either way, victory will be his.

Once, while playing with Austin, a third-grader, I rolled a *c*. That meant no *c*ows, *c*amels, or *w*itches for me. Austin rolled a *g*.

I composed this question to start the game:

Where do people park
their automobiles?

I couldn't write "Where do people park their cars?" for the obvious reason that *c* was forbidden to me. But my question left Austin with a problem. He couldn't respond, "In the garage," or "In a parking lot," although these were the most logical answers. He had to think of a *g*-less parking place. It didn't take him long to solve this problem:

on the street

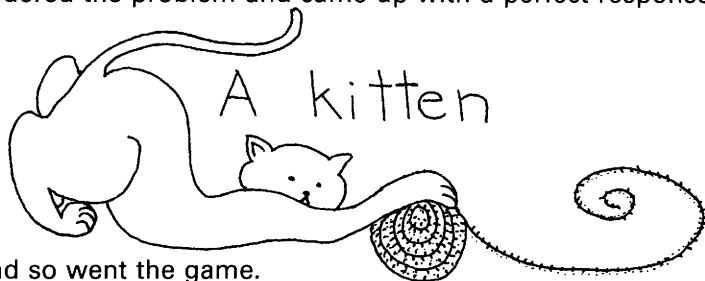
His answer was not a complete sentence, but there was no reason for it to be. Now he got to write a question for me to answer.

What animal *purs*?

Austin wrote *purs* instead of *purrs*, but I didn't mention his spelling mistake. I could read the word, and proper spelling isn't the



point of this game. Besides, I had my own troubles. I had to answer his question. I couldn't write, "A cat." I needed a new word. I considered the problem and came up with a perfect response.



And so went the game.

Austin didn't know it, but this game has a significant educational purpose. It helps players learn to think flexibly about words. Good writers know that there is always more than one way to express an idea, and to find the *perfect* way to do it sometimes involves a strenuous mental search. Or should I say, the *ideal* word to express an idea? Maybe I should say, the *optimal* way. There are always alternatives, and FORBIDDEN LETTERS is a game that gets children to see many different possibilities.

A week after our first game, Austin and I played FORBIDDEN LETTERS again. This time, though, I changed the letters on the die and, in this way, increased the difficulty of the game. Some letters are harder to avoid than others. *E*, being the most commonly used letter, is the hardest of all to avoid. I don't imagine a game would last very long if one of the players was forced to avoid an *e*, unless somebody as wordily brilliant as Perce were the player. On the other hand, it's fairly easy to avoid an *x*. To make the game more challenging for Austin, I taped the letters *f*, *g*, *m*, *o*, *i*, and *s* to the die. Sidestepping any of these letters for long can cause anyone's head to pound.

When you play at home, you can pick your preferred level of difficulty. Below, you will find six sets of letters. The first set has fairly easy-to-avoid letters. The letters in the second set are harder to avoid. Go with the fourth set, as I did with Austin, and you and your child may find yourselves moaning and groaning your way through the game. You can, of course, pick your own letters. Any half-dozen of the twenty-six alphabet letters will do.

Easy Letters: z x w q j v

Less Easy Letters: h k l p c r

Somewhat Easy Letters: u d m b c n

Somewhat Hard Letters: f g m o i s

Hard Letters: s a m n t i

Very Hard Letters: e s a t m b