

The 'worst alphabet book' becomes a bestseller

Level 3 • Advanced

1 Warmer

Five of these seven words begin with a silent letter. Can you find them?

- knowledge
- science
- wristwatch
- honest
- writer
- psychology
- wheel

2 Key words

Complete the sentences using these key words from the text.

aisle
absurd

spike
maddening

unwieldy
tsunami

awesome
pterodactyl

take
run

1. A _____ was a flying reptile that lived millions of years ago.
2. An _____ is a passage between rows of seats, for example in a church, theatre or plane, or between the shelves in a supermarket.
3. A _____ is the amount of something that a company or factory produces at one time.
4. When sales _____, they increase very suddenly.
5. If something is described as _____, it is extremely good.
6. A fresh _____ on a particular subject is a completely new approach to it.
7. If something is _____, it is completely stupid, unreasonable or impossible to believe.
8. If something is _____, it makes you feel very frustrated or angry.
9. A _____ is a very large wave or a series of waves caused when something such as an earthquake moves a large quantity of water in the sea.
10. If something is _____, it is difficult to use because it is too large or too complicated.

3 Find the information

Find the following information in the text as quickly as possible.

1. How many copies of *P is for Pterodactyl* were printed in the first run?
2. Which word is given as an example of a word beginning with a silent G?
3. How many words in English start with a silent B?
4. How many copies of the book are in the reprint?
5. When did the author first eat quinoa?
6. Which two words are given as examples of words beginning with a silent T?

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P is for pterodactyl, T is for tsunami: the 'worst alphabet book' becomes a bestseller

A picture book dedicated to English's strangest quirks has made the New York Times bestseller list, with the publisher scrambling to reprint. How did the rapper behind it dream it up?

Alison Flood

3 December, 2018

- 1 The self-declared "worst alphabet book ever" has become a surprise hit, with hundreds of thousands of parents rushing to get their hands on *P is for Pterodactyl*, a picture book that explains to children that while A might be for apple, it's also for aisle.
- 2 Dreamed up by Raj Haldar, also known as the rapper Lushlife, with computer programmer Chris Carpenter, *P is for Pterodactyl* was published by US independent Sourcebooks in November, 2018. The first print run of 10,000 copies sold out almost immediately, with the publisher now reporting more than 100,000 unfulfilled orders as they wait for a reprint of another 210,000 copies. Demand has also spiked in the UK. Sales representative Rob Richardson said that social-media buzz after a Facebook post saw sales spike from five to 3,000 orders overnight, with an additional and "pretty unprecedented" 10,000 advance orders the next day.
- 3 "The first day, we sold out of the entire first run. It's been quite surreal from there," said Haldar, whose book is now sitting at No 8 on the *New York Times* bestseller list. "It's been totally unexpected."
- 4 He and Carpenter came up with the idea after having lunch with a friend whose child had brought some alphabet flash cards with him. "Each one was of a food, so we were looking through them and reading them to our friends' kid, Isaac. We got to Q, and Q was for quinoa," said Haldar. "We were laughing about how it phonetically sounds weird – plus, I didn't have quinoa until I was, like, 25. We were joking about that and started talking about how it would be even sillier if an entire alphabet hinged on silent letters."
- 5 For a while, they just populated a Google document with words as they thought them up, but "what started to come to light was that the words in this document were implying a really rich universe that would make an awesome kids' book – gnomes and knights and tsars".
- 6 Illustrator Maria Tina Beddia came on board and they found a publisher in Sourcebooks, where editorial director Kelly Barrales-Saylor called the concept a "completely fresh take" on a standard alphabet book. "Word nerds, like me, love to argue about the complexities of the English language. Silent letters and absurd homophones can be incredibly maddening for all of us but especially for kids just learning their ABCs or how to read," she said.
- 7 Haldar admitted that he and Carpenter had struggled with some letters. "There are plenty of silent-first-letter words, but there are letters where there are very few examples and we had to come up with creative ways to think within the rubric of what we were trying to do," he said. "For the letter B, there is only one word in the English language starting with a silent B. Folks can get the book to figure that out."
- 8 Haldar, whose own favourite was "T is for Tsunami", said he was glad the book had not underestimated children's interest. "Kids really do love big unwieldy words – when we point at the cover of the book, even the three- or four-year-old just learning to read will be, like, 'Pterodactyl!'," he said. "It brings out the word nerd in everybody."

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4 Comprehension check

Choose the best answer according to the text.

1. What were the authors doing when they came up with the idea of the 'worst alphabet book ever'?
 - a. They were having dinner.
 - b. They were looking at a child's flash cards.
 - c. They were eating quinoa.
2. How does the book differ from a standard alphabet book?
 - a. It focuses on silent letters.
 - b. It doesn't only focus on food words.
 - c. It is aimed at adults.
3. Apart from words containing silent letters, what other words can be difficult for young children who are learning to read?
 - a. big, unwieldy words
 - b. homophones
 - c. irregular verbs
4. What led to a sudden increase in sales of the book in the UK?
 - a. an advertisement on Facebook
 - b. excitement on social media
 - c. people placing advance orders before Christmas

5 Find the word

Find the following words and phrases in the text.

1. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *think of a new idea or plan, especially one that is unusual* (para 2)
2. a noun meaning *a lively positive feeling* (para 2)
3. a two-word noun meaning *a small card printed with words or pictures that helps someone learn something* (para 4)
4. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *depend on something* (para 4)
5. a three-word idiomatic verb phrase meaning *become involved in a project* (para 6)
6. a noun meaning *someone who is very interested in a specific subject, often something technical such as computers* (para 6)
7. a noun meaning *a framework, or set of instructions or rules* (para 7)
8. a two-word phrasal verb meaning *begin to understand something or solve a problem* (para 7)

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6 Two-word expressions

Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- | | |
|-------------|-------------------|
| 1. advance | a. hit |
| 2. totally | b. representative |
| 3. surprise | c. take |
| 4. sales | d. order |
| 5. fresh | e. nerd |
| 6. word | f. unexpected |

7 Word-building

Complete the sentences using the correct form of the word in brackets at the end of each sentence.

- According to the publisher, there are currently more than 100,000 _____ orders for the book. [FULFIL]
- The UK sales representative described the demand for the book as pretty _____. [PRECEDENT]
- One of the authors said he was pleased the book had not _____ children's interest. [ESTIMATE]
- Quinoa sounds _____ quite weird to some people. [PHONETIC]
- The publisher is currently waiting for a _____ of 210,000 copies. [PRINT]
- Sales of the book have been totally _____. [EXPECT]

8 Discussion

Discuss the statements.

- English spelling is completely illogical and is the main reason that English is so difficult to learn.
- English spelling is fun.
- It would be much better if English was written phonetically.

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KEY

1 Warmer

knowledge
wristwatch
honest
writer
psychology

2 Key words

1. pterodactyl
2. aisle
3. run
4. spike
5. awesome
6. take
7. absurd
8. maddening
9. tsunami
10. unwieldy

3 Find the information

1. 10,000
2. gnome
3. one
4. 210,000
5. when he was 25
6. tsar and tsunami (Note, though, that many native speakers do pronounce the T in *tsunami* – /tsu:'na:mi/. *Tsar* is pronounced /zɑ:/.)

4 Comprehension check

1. b
2. a
3. b
4. b

5 Find the word

1. dream up
2. buzz
3. flash card
4. hinge on
5. come on board
6. nerd
7. rubric
8. figure out

6 Two-word expressions

1. d
2. f
3. a
4. b
5. c
6. e

7 Word-building

1. unfulfilled
2. unprecedented
3. underestimated
4. phonetically
5. reprint
6. unexpected