

# THE LIPOGRAM



*Fin de soirée*, de Tristan Bastit

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## *Info Sheet*

### ***Jeux de mots:*** 7<sup>th</sup> Blue Metropolis Lipogram Contest

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By EVE PARISEAU

#### **What is a lipogram?**

Lipograms are literary word games in which the writer intentionally avoids using one or more letters of the alphabet. In 1969, the great French writer Georges Perec wrote an entire novel, *La Disparition*, without using the letter *e*.

Up for the challenge?

### A Brief Description of the Activity

Working with lipograms provides an excellent opportunity for integrating creative writing and word play into classroom work. Lipograms, with the formal constraints they place on which words can be used, encourage students to explore the limits of language.

### Educational Goals

The proposed activities are aimed at meeting goals for writing, reading and oral expression in poetry and narrative. The students' grammatical abilities, spelling and syntax, and their lexical and semantic development, will be put to the test, as well as their ability to work with humour. The challenges of the lipogram have a natural teaching effect.

### What's Needed

The understanding of a few basic concepts is required for the student to participate. For poetry, students should be able to identify structure, stylistic effects, the idea of meaning, thematics and lexical considerations. For fiction, students should be able to identify structure, narration, themes, style and language choices.

### Length

Between one and three sessions, depending on the teacher's availability. Teachers may wish to present one activity per session, or combine activities within a single session.

## FIRST ACTIVITY

### READING A LIPOGRAM

#### Activity Description

Teacher will read the excerpts proposed in Appendix 2, then the students will discuss the genre.

#### Educational Goals

Introduce the lipogram:

- ❖ Discuss the lipogram

#### Time Required

Twenty minutes

#### Material Required

Lipogram excerpts from *Eunoia* by Christian Bök (see Appendix 2)

#### How the Activity Works

1. Teacher reads the lipogram excerpts.
2. Students discuss their impressions.

## SECOND ACTIVITY

### LIPOGRAM WORKSHOP

#### Activity Description

Students search—with or without a dictionary, alone or in groups—lipogrammatic words (words without a certain vowel) having to do with a defined subject, and which can replace other words. Since this is the second exercise, the teacher may want to choose vowels less constraining than the “e”.

#### Educational Goals

- ❖ Develop the students' lexical skills
- ❖ Develop lexical fields
- ❖ Familiarize students with lipograms

#### Time Required

A half-session

#### Material Required

A dictionary

#### How the Activity Works

1. The teacher proposes a subject. Example: if we have a text about aviation and an “a” lipogram, what substitutes (words or paraphrases) can we find for “airplane?” Or “land?” Or “parachute?”
2. Students can work alone or in groups, using the dictionary if they choose. It may prove better to use the dictionary only at the end of the exercise as a way of checking their results.
3. Students can then share what words they came up with while the teacher records the results on the board.

## THIRD ACTIVITY

### WRITING A LIPOGRAM

#### Activity Description

Students compose a lipogram, either poetic or narrative, using the bank of words created by the first activity.

#### Educational Goals

To build a lipogram while respecting the following features:

- ❖ Unity of grammatical structure
- ❖ Cohesion of the text
- ❖ Narrative progression (verbs tenses, time markers)

#### Time Required

A half-session

### Material Required

The bank of lipogrammatic words created by the second exercise

### How the Activity Works

1. Individual students compose a lipogram.
2. Students read their creations to the class.
3. The teacher asks the students to discuss the contents of the texts, the challenge of finding words, the choice of genre, vocabulary, the imagery and variations created by each person.

## FOURTH ACTIVITY

### A LIPOGRAMMATIC TRANSLATION EXERCISE

#### Activity Description

In this activity, students are exposed to a writing situation that asks them to explore the language and practice of the lipogram. Students will rewrite a poem as a lipogram. They will have to replace words possessing the forbidden letter (in this case, the “e”). The choice of the substitute word must respect not only the rules, but also the cohesion of the text and the meaning.

#### Educational Goals

- ❖ Students should increase their lexical knowledge and use the additional words they have researched.
- ❖ Students should also work with various language processes: words, expressions, sound effects, rhythm, etc.

#### Time Required

One session

#### Material Required

*The Monday's Child* poem and his lipogrammatic translation (see Appendix 1).

#### How the Activity Works

1. Read the two sonnets.
2. A brief observation is presented by the teacher.
3. A discussion on the procedures used by the authors to rewrite the poem.
- 4.
5. The rewriting exercise. The teacher will choose which text to translate.

## FIFTH ACTIVITY

### LIPOGRAM CONTEST

#### Activity Description

Students are now ready to write their own lipograms, using the “e” rule. They know how lipograms work, they

will have large enough lexical baggage and they now will believe that writing lipograms are possible.

#### Educational Goals

To write a lipogram of five to ten lines without the letter “e” using the exercises learned in the four preceding activities.

#### Time Required

Variable. This activity can also be completed outside of the classroom if the teacher so desires.

#### Material Required

The Blue Met Lipogram registration form to download at [www.bluemetropolis.org](http://www.bluemetropolis.org), a dictionary and a grammar book.

#### How the Activity Works

1. Students write their lipograms.
2. Students self-correct their texts.
3. The teacher corrects the text.
4. The text is written on the registration form ([www.bluemetropolis.org](http://www.bluemetropolis.org)).
5. Fill out the registration form on-line.
6. Mail your text to the Blue Metropolis Foundation.
7. Or Fax the form at 514-932-1148

## CONTEST RULES

### JUDGING CRITERIA

Quebec high-school students are asked to write a short poem or piece of fiction of five to ten lines without using a single “e”.

Contest deadline: **March 13, 2009**

- **First prize for English:** \$350 cash prize, one free ticket to an entire day of writing workshops as part of the 2009 Student Literary Programme (11th annual Blue Metropolis Montreal International Literary Festival)
- **Prizes: English as a Second Language:** \$350 cash prize, one free ticket to an entire day of writing workshops as part of the 2009 Student Literary Programme (11th annual Blue Metropolis Montreal International Literary Festival)

#### Judging Criteria:

1. Ability to follow the lipogram rules.
2. The quality of the writing.
3. Creativity involved.
4. Syntactical and grammatical correctness.
5. Spelling.

## REFERENCES

BÖK, Christian, *Eunoia*, Coach House Book, 2001, 105 p.

BÖK, Christian, *Eunoia*:  
[http://www.ubu.com/contemp/bok/eunoia\\_final.html](http://www.ubu.com/contemp/bok/eunoia_final.html)

Lipogram's Definition  
<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/Lipogram>

English word lists and language resources :  
<http://phrontistery.info/>

FOURNEL, Paul, « Les ateliers de l'Oulipo : écrire ici et maintenant. Dossier : L'Oulipo, la littérature comme jeu », *Magazine littéraire*, 398, mai 2001, p. 26-28.  
[http://www.magazine-litteraire.com/dossiers/dos\\_398.htm](http://www.magazine-litteraire.com/dossiers/dos_398.htm)

Monday's Child – The Lipogram :  
<http://www.curiousnotions.com/home/lipo4.html>

Official Oulipo Website (in French) :  
<http://www.ouliipo.net/>

Oulipo  
<http://encyclopedia.thefreedictionary.com/ouliipo>

## Appendix 1

### *Monday's Child*

*Monday's child is fair of face.  
Tuesday's child is full of grace.  
Wednesday's child is full of woe.  
Thursday's child has far to go.  
Friday's child is loving and forgiving.  
Saturday's child works hard for a living.  
And the child that is born on the Sabbath*

Here is the traditional poem *Monday's Child* rewritten leaving out *Es* or *Vs*

Monday's child is fair of skin.  
Day Two's child shrugs off all sin.  
Following both, this child is sad.  
Thursday's child's a trail-blazing lad.  
Friday's child sports a kindly disposition.  
For Saturday's child, salary's his mission.  
And Sunday's child, on Sabbath born,  
Is bonny and mild -- not a whit forlorn

## Appendix 2

Bök, Christian, *Eunoia*, Coach House Book, 2001, 105 p.

'Eunoia', which means 'beautiful thinking', is the shortest English word to contain all five vowels. This book also contains them all, except that each one appears by itself in its own chapter. A unique personality for each vowel soon emerges: A is courtly, E is elegiac, I is lyrical, O is jocular, U is obscene. A triumphant feat, seven years in the making, this uncanny work of avant-garde literature promises to be one of the most important books of the decade.

### Chapter A

Awkward grammar appals a craftman. A Dada bard as daft as Tzara damns stagnant art and sprawls an alpha (a slapdash arc and backward zag) that mars all stanzas and jams all ballads (what a scandal). A madcap vandal crafts a small black ankh – a hand – stamp that can stamp a wax pad and at last plant a mark that sparks an *ars magna* (an abstract art that charts a phrasal anagram). A pagan skald chants a dark saga (a Mahabharata), as a papal cabal blackballs all annals and tracts, all dramas and psalms: Kant and Kafka, Marx and Marat. A law as harsh as a *fatwa* bans all paragraphs that lack an A as a standard hallmark. (p.12)

### Chapter E

Enfettered, these sentences repress free speech. The text deletes selected letters. We see the revered exegete reject metred verse: the sestet, the tercet – even *les scènes élévées en grec*. He rebels. He sets new precedents. He lets cleverness exceed decent levels. He eschews the esteemed genres, the expected themes – even *les belles lettres en vers*. He prefers the perverse French esthetes: Verne, Péret, Genet, Perec – hence, he pens fervent screeds, then enters the street, where he sells these letterpress newsletters, three cents per sheet. He engenders perfect newness wherever we need fresh terms. (p. 31)

### Chapter I

Pilgrims, digging in shifts, dig till midnight in mining pits, chipping flint with picks, drilling schist with drills, striking it rich mining zinc. Irish firms, hiring micks whilst firing Brits, bring in smiths with mining skills: kilnwrights grilling bricks in brickkilns, millwrights grinding grist in gristmills. Irish tinsmiths, fiddling with widgeons, fix this rig, driving its drills which spin whirring drillbits. I pitch in, fixing things. I rig this winch with its wiring; I fit this drill with its piping. I dig this ditch, filling bins with dirt, piling it high, sifting it, till I find bright prisms twinkling with glitz.