

Advice Column for Nothing in Common Puzzles
“Uncle Bob”

The Setup: You are given a set of 12 letters. You are to make a cycle of 16 five-letter common, unhyphenated, English words, avoiding any letter held in common by adjacent words. The words must use five distinct letters.

The Letter Pool: Say you are given the set A, C, D, E, I, L, N, O, R, S, T, and V.

Puzzle Prep: My advice is to make a long-range plan and start out with a categorized bank of words that support that plan. For example, you might decide to keep A and E words separate from an O and I list, so that RACED may be used next to TOILS. Another helpful category might be words that use only one vowel like STAND.

There are many words that use R, S, and T, and these will show up in all your lists. The problem might be the lack of words that avoid using them. It will be helpful to have a NO RST list. Taken from above I see LACED and LINED. Also helpful would be words that avoid two of RST, for example, SCALE, RILED, and VOTED.

In your lists mark any anagrams like LIVER and VILER. These two could be words #3 and #5, for example. The disadvantage of relying on anagram pairs is that you are stuck with the same pool of seven letters for the three words surrounding those two. That said, anagram pairs might come in very handy for ...

The End Game: The most difficult step is the last: finding a word that completes the cycle by linking two words and avoiding using any of their letters. Part of your plan might be to save an anagram pair like LIVER and VILER to surround the final linking word. This will give you the maximum of seven letters for that link. It doesn't always work out.

In solving you will find words you didn't know or had forgotten. Have a dictionary handy. These puzzles are vocabulary builders for certain.

Often you will not be able to close the cycle. You will have to backtrack and reconsider some of your letter usage in the words leading up to closure. This is why Uncle Bob recommends having two erasers for each pencil. Ha!

Happy solving to you.