

Newbie's First SCRABBLE® Lesson

By Joel Sherman

Editor's Note:

This article is part of the New York, NY, Club #56 website <http://mysite.verizon.net/vzeskktx/>
Joel Sherman, the director of the club and a past National and World SCRABBLE Champion gave us permission to share this. We think this will be a terrific help to our new members.

Buy a SCRABBLE® dictionary. As of March 1, 2006, the *Official Tournament and Club Word List, Second Edition*, commonly referred to as *OWL2*, was named the official word source for tournament SCRABBLE® and available only to NSA members through www.wordgear.com.

The Official SCRABBLE Players Dictionary, Fourth Edition (OSPD4), a "politically correct," expurgated volume sold in bookstores, is not the source used for adjudicating challenges, but can be a helpful learning supplement, as it contains brief definitions which can't be found in *OWL2*. Become familiar with all the acceptable two- and three-letter words; these are the glue of the game -- that is, they hold together all the longer, higher-scoring words.

Don't play scared. Don't worry how good your opponent is, or how good her tiles may be at the moment. Concentrate on what you can do with your tiles, play offensively first.

Accept the idea that SCRABBLE® is a math game just as much as it is a word game. The strategic theory of the game is based on statistical analysis, probabilities, and spatial relationships on the board. Experienced players seek to maximize the value of small-numbered tiles by playing bingos (using all 7 tiles on your rack to earn the 50-point bonus), and large-numbered tiles by causing them to interact with the colored premium squares on the board, or with other words on the board. (i.e., one can score just as much for placing a 4-letter word in a place where it lies parallel to 4 other letters or whole words without hitting any premium squares as you might for the same play hitting a double- or even triple-word-square but forming only one or two words.)

But don't get into the habit of holding onto the highest-numbered tiles until you make big plays with them. They suffocate your rack, and you don't score enough with the in-between plays while you wait. That is the most common mistake made by novice players. The worst letters in the pool are the Q, J, W, in that order. If you have them, they are the first things you should be looking to use up, and the last you should consider holding.

Balance your rack. Look at the distribution of the letters in the set at the start of the game and notice that with 56 consonants and 42 vowels (plus 2 blanks = 100), there is a clear ratio of 4c to 3v, which ideally should be what you strive to maintain in your rack of 7 tiles. The more often you achieve this balance, the more often you can hope to make bingos. Expert players average close to 2 bingos per game!

Always look for ways to break up duplicates -- letters that appear more than once in the same rack. Flexibility is a key to having, finding, and being able to play bingos. Each time a tile is duplicated in the rack, the number of possible letter orders that might be acceptable words is cut in half.

The best tiles in the SCRABBLE® set are the blanks and S's; don't waste them. An S should generally not be played in a non-bingo unless it yields a score at least 8 points more than anything you can play without it, and the blank should net at least 20 more points.

Two reasonable exceptions to that rule are when you have more than one S in your rack, and when you need to close off a dangerous opening from your opponent. S's and blanks are extra valuable because they add flexibility both to your rack, and to your options for fitting words on the board (S *starts* 50% more words than any other letter, in addition to all the nouns and verbs it pluralizes) -- they usually allow bingos to be played, but they can't do it without other useful letters...

* ... the best of those others are the letters in "CANISTER." If you can collect any five or six letters in this word, there are a great many letters that can complete your rack to yield a 7- or 8-letter bingo. But don't forget your vowel/consonant balance while trying to collect these letters. If you make a play that keeps CNRST in your rack, chances are, one of three things has happened or will happen:

- 1) You already had a bingo and failed to play it
- 2) You didn't have a bingo because you just found it necessary to play off two consonants
- 3) Your next rack will still have too many consonants. If you keep 5 of CANISTER, they should include at least one vowel, and keeping 6 of CANISTER should include at least two of the vowels.

Avoid playing vowels next to dark blue and red squares; they let your opponent play a heavy consonant parallel and earn the premium in two directions. Be eXtra alert to this while the X is still unseen.

Building larger words is easier if you think in terms of common prefixes like re-, pre-, post-, for-, fore-, co-, con-, sub-, over-, bi-, di-, tri-, poly-, mono-, hypo-, hyper-, dis-, be-, de-, out, mis- and un- ; and suffixes such as -ed, -er, -or, -age, -ing, -al, -ly, -ally, -ic, -oid, -tion, -able, -ible, -less, -ness, -man, -men, -ment, -est, -ier, -ies, -iest, -ist, -ism, -ish, -ium, -ia, -ity, -ify, -ize, -ise, -ary, -ory, -ology, -ate, -ite, -ine, -ive, -ase, -ose, -ful, and -like. But don't fixate on UN-; U is UsUally the worst vowel you can hold, and don't fixate on -ING either; a lot of words contain those three letters but don't end with them, and the G can be a very awkward tile if you don't have a word that ends with -ing, more so if you have more than one G at a time.

Keep your mind open, and shuffle your tiles on your rack if you are having trouble finding words. When you find what you think is a good play, sit on your hands until you find a better one. Don't feel like you are in a race to finish the game -- there's no bonus for unused time -- you have 25 minutes to make all your plays, and the more of it you use without exceeding that limit, the less you'll miss and the more strong plays you'll find.