

However you type the acronym, it's OK with me

Staff Report

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Typing on keyboards is ubiquitous today, but the younger whippersnappers among us have few memories of using real, manual typewriters. Some aging relics even took typing classes where they met qwerty.

Qwerty is the acronym formed by the first six letters on the standard keyboard, and was designed in 1868 by Christopher Sholes, father of "the first practical typewriter," according to <http://inventors.about.com>.

Sholes started out in life a printer, but he soon became a newsman and had been editing the leading Milwaukee newspapers for years when President Lincoln appointed him "Collector of the Port" for that city. This political plum afforded Sholes the leisure to pursue his real passion: mechanical engineering.

In 1864, Sholes and a buddy, Samuel Soule, developed a page-numbering machine that another pal, Carlos Glidden, helped modify into a workable typewriter. Typewriting contraptions had been around at least since 1714, when a London engineer named Henry Mill was granted the first patent.

However, "The first patent of any consequence" the Encyclopedia Americana tells us, was issued "in 1829 to William Austin Burt of Detroit. This machine was also unwieldy, resembling a soapbox on one end of which was a face similar to that of a clock. A hand on the clock indicated the amount of paper in the machine."

Letters were produced one-at-a-time on Burt's slow typewriter by turning an arm on top to the desired letter and pressing. Inventors around the world took cracks at improving the concept, ranging from Xavier Projean of France, who in 1833 introduced the first manual keyboard, to Baltimore's Oliver Eddy, whose 1850 innovation of piano-style keyboard didn't catch on, but whose use of inked ribbons did.

I believed the qwerty scheme was intended to enhance typing speed by grouping the most frequently-used letters near the middle of the keyboard. While that was beneficial, Sholes wanted to spread out the most frequently used letters so that the type-bars, those spindly strips of metal with a letter on the end, wouldn't tangle as often. He also separated letters frequently typed sequentially, like "T" and "H," so that one hand can move while the other strikes a key.

Unfortunately, Sholes and his associates couldn't produce the necessary funding to manufacture and distribute their creation and sold the rights to someone who did, the Remington Arms Company.

Typewriters seem awfully archaic here in the computer age, but if you're patient enough, everything comes around again. Acronyms are an extremely popular form of shorthand for young electronic communicators. Some are benign, like "imho" (in my humble opinion), others have confusing, multiple meanings, like "lol" (laugh out loud, lots of love. There are 63 others listed at www.acronymfinder.com), and more at www.netlingo.com's "Top 20 Internet Acronyms Every Parent Needs to Know," like "P911" (parent alert) and "KPC" (keep parents clueless) have scary implications.

My favorite computer acronym is “FAQ” (frequently asked questions) that’s often found in the explanatory section of Web sites. Or is it spelled “web sites,” or “Websites”? I went to Oxford University Press’ excellent AskOxford.com FAQ section and found the preferred way of spelling is indeed “websites.” The preferred Associated Press style is “Web sites.”

While there I also learned that no words rhyme with “orange” and “silver,” people who eat fish but are otherwise vegetarians are properly called “demi-vegetarians,” and the longest one-syllable word is the 10-letter “scaunched,” which appeared in a 1620 translation of Don Quixote, with a seven-way tie between more common words, like “screeched,” “scratched,” and “stretched.”

The AskOxford.com editors had no precise answers for some frequent questions, including the name for a word which is another word spelled backwards?” While admitting “There is no generally accepted term,” they suggested “Semi-palindrome,” but included “the elegant ‘heteropalindrome,’ the ugly ‘reversegram’ (or better, ‘reversible anagram) and the outrageous ‘semordnilap.’”

What goes around, comes around as they say. Acronyms, especially military ones. like “ADCOMSUBORDCOMPHEIBSPAC,” (“Administrative Command, Amphibious Forces, Pacific Fleet Subordinate Command”) have pervaded the English language since World War II.

But we can’t touch the Russians, whose acronym for their concrete construction administration established the Guinness record with “NIIOMTPLABOPARMBETZHELBTETRABSBOMONIMONKONOTDTEKHSTROMONT.”

And two centuries ago, young Americans were agitating their elders by using acronyms of slang expressions, one of which became the most popular acronym of all: “OK.”

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