

Chapter 1

Hunting through the World of Word Searches

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering everything you need to know about word searches
 - ▶ Considering the benefits of solving puzzles
 - ▶ Investigating the history of word searches
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Whether you call them Word Searches, Word Finds, Word Seeks, Word Sleuths, Find-a-Words, Wonderwords, Mystery Words, Seek-a-Words, Seek and Finds, or even Sopa de letras, these puzzles are hugely popular worldwide. They may even be more popular than crosswords, which is saying something!

In this chapter, I tell you a little about each type of word search puzzle in the book. I also delve into some of the benefits of word searches and round off the chapter with a fun history of these popular puzzles.

Word Searches at a Glance

Word searches in their simplest form provide a list of words that have been placed in a grid of seemingly random letters. Your task is to discover the words within the grid. The words can show up in any direction but always run in a straight line. Well, almost always.

In this book, I've written eight different types of word search puzzles, plus a bunch of bonus anagram puzzles. You may have come across some of these puzzle flavors before, but some may be new to you. (Chapter 2 gives you tips for solving word searches in general, and anagram-style puzzles. And Parts II and III have an entire chapter devoted to each puzzle type.)

The puzzle varieties are

- ✔ **Simple Word Searches:** These puzzles are the popular plain-vanilla variety — they have a list of words that are hidden in a grid of letters in straight horizontal, vertical, and diagonal lines. Head to Chapter 3 to try your hand at these puzzles!
- ✔ **Story Word Searches:** Read a short story and search for the bold words from the article in the grid. Otherwise, these searches are the same as Simple Word Searches. Chapter 4 contains the Story Word Searches.
- ✔ **Hidden Words:** Find all the listed words in the grid, and the leftover grid letters spell out a hidden message. Be careful to find all the extra letters to get the right answer! Some of these puzzles are in different shapes, a nice break from squares. Check out Chapter 5 for a plethora of Hidden Words puzzles.
- ✔ **Secret Shapes:** These word search puzzles have gridlines on them; after you find all the words from the word list, color in the leftover squares to reveal a picture. You can also color in the words, and leave the leftover letters blank — either method works. Chapter 6 lets you take a shot at some Secret Shapes.
- ✔ **Scrambled Words:** This puzzle may look like a Simple Word Search at first, until you realize that the word list makes no sense! The letters of each word are muddled up, so you need to unscramble each entry and then look for it in the grid. You can find these puzzles in Chapter 7.
- ✔ **Quiz Word Searches:** These puzzles are the closest thing you can get to a crossword in the world of word searches. Solve each quiz question and then find your answers in the grid. You can also work backward by finding potential words in the grid and then matching them to the word list. Chapter 8 features these searches.
- ✔ **Secret List Word Searches:** These puzzles are quite a challenge — you need to discover the words in the grid without a list to guide you. I do give you the theme, the number of words to find, and hints for most of the words. Try these puzzles in Chapter 9.
- ✔ **Winder Words:** In these puzzles, the words don't go in straight lines but rather turn on right angles. Words don't wrap around onto themselves, but different words do overlap. Winder Words appear in Chapter 10.
- ✔ **Anagrams and other word games:** This category includes anagrams, jumbled words, and other puzzles that require you to shuffle letters around to form words. Chapter 11 gives you some of these puzzles.

This list may seem like a lot of puzzles, but brains equally as warped as mine have created even more word search variations. And given how inventive humans are, I'm sure new variations on word search puzzles will appear in the future!

Using Word Searches to Keep Your Mind Sharp

In Chapter 15, I discuss the many good reasons to get hooked on word searches. Here's a quick rundown of some of the top reasons:

- ✓ They improve your vocabulary and spelling.
- ✓ They're very portable — you need only a pen or pencil.
- ✓ They're fun! (And who doesn't need more of that in life?)
- ✓ They're easy enough for children, so they're a great activity for families to do together.

Those benefits are pretty easy to understand. Less clear-cut is the link between doing puzzles like word searches and benefitting your long-term brain health.

Understanding dementia

The benefit of mental exercise (including solving puzzles) for your long-term mental health has been the subject of a great deal of research — and a lot of talk in the media — over the past 20 years or so. Does solving a puzzle a day keep dementia at bay? The short answer? *Maybe*.

And now for the long answer. *Dementia* is a blanket term for more than 100 conditions, all of which involve a gradual deterioration in thinking, memory, and everyday abilities. Science doesn't completely understand the causes of dementia — at least not yet!

The experts are still studying how dementia develops and progresses, and whether humans can do anything to delay or even prevent it. The scientific results aren't straightforward — human biology rarely is — and the results are varied.

In general, as we humans age, our brains shrink, and our mental abilities get worse (though this doesn't necessarily lead to dementia). However, recent research shows that you can prevent and maybe even reverse this decline by being physically active and giving yourself mental challenges.

In some studies, people improved their abilities in whatever aspect of mental training they were working on — so someone who was practicing memory skills, for example, showed improvements in memory, but not much improvement in speed of processing or reasoning.

Physical changes happen within your brain when you learn something new. Recent research has revealed that this flexibility or plasticity exists for your entire life span. It's your brain's lifelong ability to rearrange neural pathways based on new experiences.

Other recent findings show that humans have lifetime memory — so if you once played guitar or spoke French in your youth, picking those activities back up can reactivate those circuits in your brain, and you can regain those abilities relatively quickly. You won't end up learning from scratch.

Boosting your brain health

The following activities have been shown to benefit your brain's health:

- ✓ **Exercising:** Gardening, walking, cycling, dancing, swimming — whatever you enjoy. One study shows that 15 minutes of aerobic exercise three times a week cuts the risk of dementia by at least a third. Even stretching helps.
- ✓ **Training your brain:** The particular aspect you train improves that aspect of mental functioning, so solving logic puzzles like Sudoku helps your logical thinking, for example. To improve your memory, play memory games.
- ✓ **Studying a new language:** Try learning how to count to ten in a couple of languages if a whole language is too daunting.
- ✓ **Taking up a new hobby:** Knitting, embroidery, archery, camping — anything will do. And if it involves physical exercise benefits, even better!
- ✓ **Learning to use your computer:** Lots of courses are available (as well as younger people who know far too much about such contraptions for their own good).
- ✓ **Cultivating an interest in art and music:** Visit galleries, pick up a paintbrush, take a class or two, or listen to music. Play an instrument or sing if you can. If you can't carry a tune, try going to concerts or the theater.
- ✓ **Playing card and board games with your friends and family:** These pastimes are a great social activity as well as a good mental activity! Chess is rated as one of the top brain workouts around.
- ✓ **Solving puzzles:** This book is a good start, but don't stop here! You can do crosswords, cryptic crosswords, Sudoku (check out the *Sudoku For Dummies* series, published by Wiley), mazes, logic puzzles, and lots more.
- ✓ **Reading:** Widen your horizons, try new authors, and challenge yourself. Delve into the fun world of a book club at your local library or check out BookCrossing (www.bookcrossing.com) — both free and fun activities.
- ✓ **Doing jigsaw puzzles:** They help with visual and hand-eye coordination.
- ✓ **Socializing with your family and friends:** This activity is more important than you may think. And it doesn't have to involve the aforementioned board games — just hang out and chat.



Factors such as low education level, a family history of dementia, increasing age, head trauma, poorly controlled diabetes, stroke, smoking, and high blood pressure all increase your risk of developing dementia.

Sometimes, a person still develops dementia despite his best efforts. It's not his fault. The cause and effect is never that straightforward.



Even though you may not be able to avoid dementia or Alzheimer's entirely, you can probably stave off the onset and hopefully reduce the severity of the disease by being mentally active.

Research into dementia will continue, with new theories, studies, and discoveries hopefully leading to new treatments. While scientists work away on the mysteries of the brain, you can work away on the mysteries in this book and discover some benefits for yourself!

Considering the importance of mind puzzles and games

What you're looking for here is getting out of that rut. Doing something the way you've always done it seems to weaken the brain's wiring. Changes to your routines at work, school, and home always help, no matter what age you are.

Switching things up doesn't need to be terribly hard — even changing the way you normally drive to work helps your neural pathways grow and strengthen.

The four qualities to look for in the brain-friendly activities of your choice are

- ✓ **Novelty:** New is better! If you've only worked traditional word searches, try your hand at the nontraditional types. (See the earlier section "Word Searches at a Glance" for more info.)
- ✓ **Stimulation:** Activities that challenge you force you to concentrate. Look for word searches that use words you're unfamiliar with, involve solving extra puzzles like scrambled words or quizzes, or have odd shapes or challenging directions.
- ✓ **Escalation:** Activities that become increasingly difficult allow you to work up to higher levels of achievement. As you master a particular difficulty level for the word searches in this book, move up to the next level.
- ✓ **Reward:** Rewards improve learning and memory at a biochemical level. The sense of satisfaction you get from solving a difficult word search puzzle or discovering a hidden message is just one of the rewards you have to look forward to.

A Fun Romp through Word Search History

There isn't a lot of information available on the history of word search puzzles. Here's what I've been able to piece together; don't say I never gave you anything.

Around 1860, puzzle books of the day started to publish a new puzzle. A phrase, short poem, or other piece of writing (generally something frightfully educational and moralistic) was written along a path that was folded up to make a grid of letters, a bit like a maze. The paths were generally very regular, and each word came after the other in sequence. Diagonal movement was a no-no in these puzzles, and the letters didn't overlap.

You can try one of these puzzles for yourself in Figure 1-1. I wrote this puzzle in an old-fashioned style; you can find other puzzles like it in the book *Everybody's Illustrated Book of Puzzles*, by Don Lemon (Kessinger Publishing), originally published in 1890 in London. Start at the middle, with the big letter **A** and work your way out from there. You can find a hint in Chapter 12, and the answer is in Chapter 13 if you get stuck!

Proverbs within a Maze

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|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| E | R | T | H | A | N | T | H | E | B | E | S | T |
| T | T | H | E | Y | O | U | N | G | A | N | D | M |
| T | E | H | E | W | H | O | K | N | O | W | T | E |
| E | S | G | A | D | T | O | A | F | R | S | H | M |
| B | I | N | O | K | E | T | H | A | I | N | E | O |
| S | A | O | R | A | D | B | E | G | E | O | Y | R |
| I | R | L | E | M | R | A | G | O | N | T | W | Y |
| K | P | R | H | G | A | H | I | O | D | H | I | S |
| N | G | E | T | N | I | N | N | D | S | I | L | M |
| I | N | V | G | N | I | D | N | E | H | N | L | E |
| T | I | E | N | S | I | E | S | U | O | G | B | R |
| S | H | T | O | N | S | T | B | U | O | D | L | G |
| E | L | A | P | E | H | T | M | O | S | S | O | F |

This is a kind of maze. Find the first letter of the first word, and then follow on till you have solved the secret. You may read from one letter to the next, north, south, east or west, but never in a diagonal direction. You will find here a small collection of proverbs which, if you heed, will be as useful to you as they have been to many others before you.

Figure 1-1:
A puzzle
in the
early style
of word
searches.

Another early version of the word search was known as Word Chess, Knight's Tour Letter Puzzles, or Knight's Tour Crypts. The letters of the phrase or sentence in this sort of puzzle run along the path a knight in chess takes (two squares forward, one to the left or right; or one forward, two to the left or right). Very convoluted! You can still find these puzzles around in puzzle aficionados' magazines and Web sites.

Pinning down the first contemporary word search puzzle (with a set of words randomly placed in a grid of letters) is very difficult. Several people in several countries seem to have invented it independently around the same time.

The prolific Spanish puzzle writer Pedro Ocón de Oro, who designed around 125 different types of puzzles, invented *Sopa de letras* ("Soup of Letters"), probably sometime in the 1960s. This creation was a true word search puzzle with a word list and letter grid.

Norman E. Gibat from Norman, Oklahoma, seems to have been the first person to design a word search in English. He came up with the puzzle as a way of attracting readers to his small advertising publication, the *Selenby Digest* ("Sell and Buy," get it?). He put the names of 34 Oklahoman cities and towns in a 20 x 20 grid. He placed the words vertically, horizontally, and diagonally like they typically appear today, and his puzzle contained overlapping letters. It was published on March 1, 1968.

This new puzzle quickly became the most interesting item in the *Digest* (ads versus a puzzle — no contest!), and Gibat's readers clamored for more. The town's teachers quickly discovered these newfangled word searches and gave them to their students, establishing a long classroom tradition.

Two years later, French-Canadian Jo Ouellet developed the Wonderword puzzle, a themed word search whose leftover letters reveal a hidden word (see Chapter 5 for puzzles like this one). Her son David Ouellet has been writing these puzzles professionally for many years.

The word search's popularity has spread ever since: Word searches in a wide range of languages appear in ever-increasing varieties in classrooms, puzzle books, magazines, newspapers, and online under many different names.

Word search puzzles seem to be widespread in the Latin/Roman languages but are not common in Asian languages. The Spanish still solve *Sopa de letras*, the Swedish play *Sökord*, Germans unravel *Wörterraten*, the French solve *Mots Caches*, the Dutch enjoy *Woordzoeker*, Afrikaaners play *Woordsoek-raaisels*, and in Finland they have *Sanaverkko*, just to name a few.

One thing is for certain — if you love these puzzles, you're in good company!

