

Of all the Scrabble letters, Q and Z hold the most value, at 10 points apiece. In 1982, Karl Khoshnaw — the Michael Jordan of Scrabble — used both letters to spell the word “caziques.” Caziques (plural form of a type of oriole) earned Khoshnaw 392 points, which still is the world’s top-scoring single Scrabble move ever.

You don’t see many Q words out there, but one has always intrigued me: queue. I’ve seen the following phrase online in many language humor forums, which probably means Mark Twain said it: “‘Queue’ is just the letter ‘Q’ and four silent vowels waiting in line.”

Queue can’t be a word. It looks ridiculous and feels even more strange to type. However, it’s a word.

Pronounced like its first letter, queue (as a noun) means “a line of people or cars.” As a verb, queue means “to get in line.” It’s more often used in British English in the same way that the word “line” is used in American English.

In computing, a queue is a type of linear data structure. I won’t get into any more detail, as I have reached the limits of my hacker knowledge.

We get “queue” directly from the French word for tail. This makes sense, as a line of people is essentially the “tail” for the head of the line. The French term for “ponytail” is “queue de cheval,”

which directly translates to “horsetail” or “tail of the horse.” I really wanted to get horses into this column, as I am deathly afraid of them and do not trust them.

As many people agree with me (about typing “queue,” not about horse panic), we find people writing “que” instead of “queue.” The word “que” is an often-used word in French, Spanish and other Romance languages that means “that” or “what,” depending on context. Que and queue are not the same. If you didn’t know — now you know.

Do you find yourself more often getting “queue” and “cue” mistaken? You’re not alone. As the two words are homonyms, “cue” seems like the right word to write.

“Cue” generally means “a signal to start something. In billiards, you hit the “cue ball,” which is the first ball hit before all mayhem breaks loose.

So, as you queue up for a burger at your next barbecue, an awkward silence is the perfect cue to begin explaining to people the difference between these confusing words. I’ve been told people love English language explanations while waiting for their meat.

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