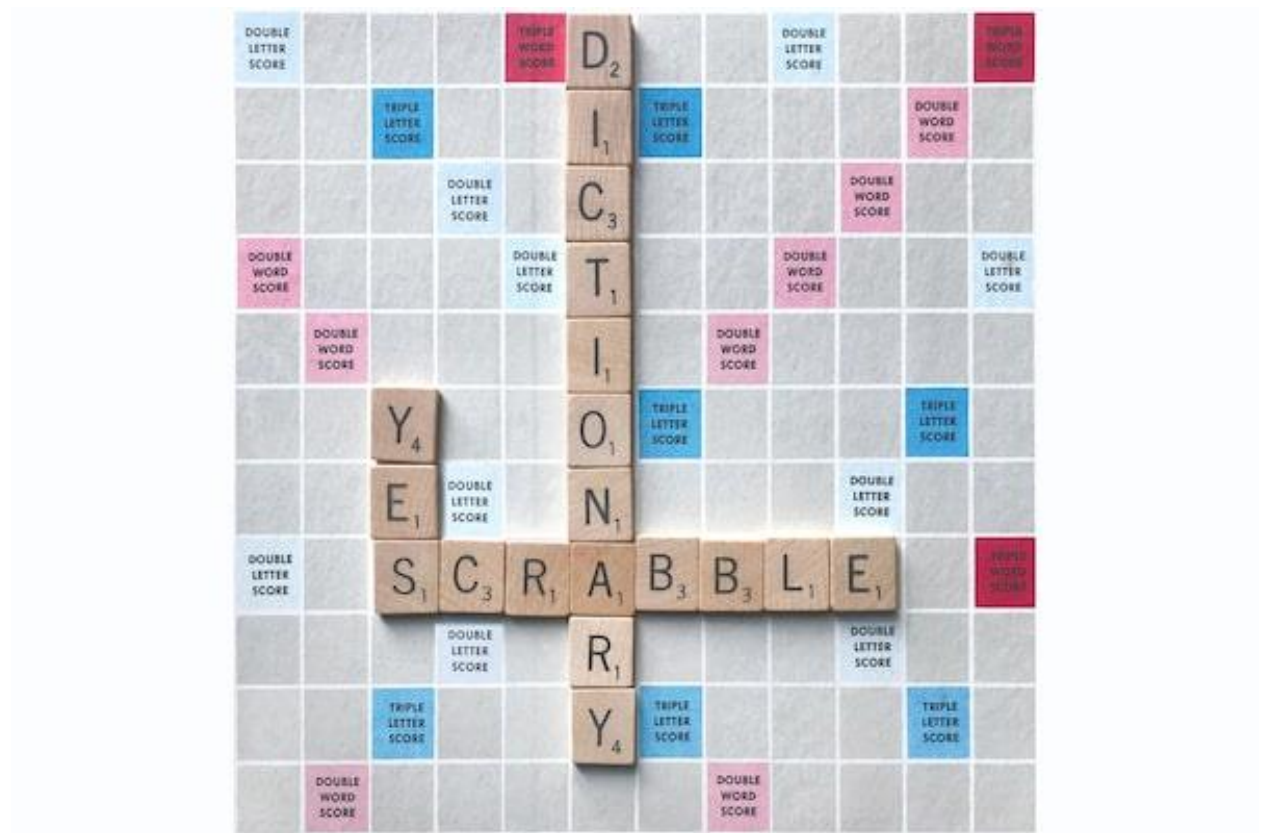


A Better Way to Play

Allowing free use of the dictionary in Scrabble makes the game more inclusive and egalitarian, and could make it more fun for all players, **Thelma Fayle** writes

Thelma Fayle
Special to *The Globe and Mail*
Published December 23, 2022



Thelma Fayle is a Victoria writer working on her MFA at University of King's College School of Journalism and her second book, Letters to Obasama: Undressing Stereotypes.

My mother taught me to play Scrabble almost 60 years ago, when I was 7. Twelve years ago, I started experimenting with a different way to play. Whenever I tell Scrabble buddies about it, they lower heads, raise eyes, wince and ask with great skepticism: “Reeeaaally?”

The Better Way, as I have dubbed it, involves breaking a cardinal rule – something that might trigger you. Are you ready? (Please don’t hyperventilate.) Each player must have their own hard-copy Scrabble dictionary and can use it – with no time limits. (No cellphones though!)

I know. “The Rules” are right on the underside of the old solid maroon Scrabble box cover: “A dictionary should be consulted for challenges only.” In other words, no dictionaries allowed. This Better Way may be tough to accept as most players are rule abiders by nature. I was once a rule abider too.

It is no secret to you that there are people who hate Scrabble and those who adore the game. I fell in love with a man in the former category. Even though he had a good vocabulary, he couldn’t spell if his life depended on it. They might not admit to it, but many such people are afraid of Scrabble. Isn’t that heartbreaking?

When Daryl, now my partner, politely agreed to play a few games with my mother, who was in her 90s at the time but still sharp in that Scrabble player’s way. I was charmed. But he was slow at coming up with even small words. (My mother adored Daryl, and when he was out of earshot after a long, long game she said quietly: “He may be a bit slow, but it doesn’t matter. He is a good man.” Later, I defended him to my mother. “Ma, he isn’t ‘slow,’ he is an economist with three degrees.”)

And so, we began using dictionaries. In the early years, I kept The Globe and Mail handy and would discreetly read a few articles while we played and he looked up words. If he apologized for taking long, I assured him: “Take your time, no rush at all.”

Most Scrabble players would throw up their arms and call this cheating.

So, why is this the Better Way? By using the dictionary all the time, you discover new words, increase your vocabulary, get higher scores, improve your spelling and – this is the important part – expand the game to poor spellers. A dictionary levels the playing field. If my partner and I played without it, I would win every time – and it’s not a game if the winner is preordained. Games aren’t fun when you have no chance of winning.

One day, while visiting the local trophy-making shop, I decided to order a Scrabble Bowl trophy. We established a once-a-year competition – sort of like the Stanley Cup or the Super Bowl, only with two people playing head-to-head Scrabble. We play three games a day between Christmas and New Year's. Whoever wins a game gets an Altoid in their designated dish. The one who reaches 11 candies first wins all of the peppermints. The highbrow part is they get their name on the trophy for that year. It is exciting. Honestly!

Last year, I bought two T-shirts with "Scrabble Bowl Jersey" printed on them to wear during the competition. Daryl likes the Seattle Seahawks and dons a jersey whenever they play. I don't know much about sports, but I gather jerseys are important in sporting things.

Years ago, I let him win – once. These days he wins his fair share, often with seven-letter words. To be honest, even though I hate to admit it, his name appears on the trophy more than mine. He can spell words he once could not and has migrated to crosswords from Sudoku. And I have found joy in constantly loping through the dictionary and getting seduced by magnificent words that good Scrabble players are just "supposed" to know.

Our dictionaries are so well-used we've had to replace them several times. (When was the last time you wore out your dictionary?) We have played two games before bed most evenings for years. We find it a soothing way to end the day. We don't play for the first couple of weeks in December, however. We store our Scrabble mojo for the annual competition.

If brilliant Scrabble players lightened up on the dictionary rule and let non-spellers into our purist tent, maybe we could all have more fun in our diverse and polarized world. We are not painting the Sistine Chapel, my friends. The tactic is about turning more people into Scrabble-lovers. This holiday season, shall we start a new, more egalitarian, inclusive tradition?

Yes, Virginia, there is a better way to play Scrabble.