

Editor's Note: Mike Baron has been involved in organized competitive Scrabble since 1980, the year he provided the first of what has since been called THE CHEAT SHEET, used by players worldwide. He has written extensively on the game, having authored a number of articles and books, including Scrabble® Wordbook. A member of the National Scrabble Association's first Advisory Board, and a "Johnny Appleseed" ambassador for the game, he was instrumental in helping forge the first World Scrabble Championship and School Scrabble program. He states the best play he ever made in Scrabble was proposing to his wife Pamina Deutsch, who he met at the 1988 National Championship, on a Scrabbleboard. She did not challenge his play, finding it "acceptable." They live in Corrales, New Mexico.

Scrabble Tips

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"We don't stop playing because we grow old; we grow old because we stop playing."
George Bernard Shaw, 1856-1950

1. **Philosophy toward the game** from *The SCRABBLE® Wordbook*:

"Here is my unsolicited advice about Scrabble: Follow your passion, enjoy the game, and the people you meet through this wonderful, crazy enterprise. On average you will have 13 turns per game. Consider each turn a riddle to solve or question to answer, where the question is along the lines of: 'Given this rack, this board, my opponent's last play, the present score, and my present word knowledge, what is my best play?' On my 13 turns, I aspire to go 10-3 or better, in terms of best play selections. Realize, too, that there will be better plays possible that are not in your present word arsenal. Find joy in learning (and relearning) such words. When demonstrated, enjoy the beauty of your opponent's playmanship. Congratulate your opponent and yourself when either of you has come up with one of those special plays. Take pride in keeping your cool when the Tile Gods frown upon you. Be grateful that you have sufficient health and opportunity to play this wonderful game and to befriend some fairly amazing people who share your passion for the game. The gratitude for connections to such special people may continue, even if one's health prohibits or limits one's playing or playmanship."

2. **Primary strategic considerations: S C R A B O T I**

SCRABOTI (screh-BOE'-tee) is *not* an Italian dish, but a mnemonic, taking the first two letters of four major strategic considerations when deciding on what play to make each turn: **SC**ore, **RA**ck leave, **BO**ard development, **TI**le turnover.

- a. **SC**ore: Clearly the name of the game is to outscore your opponent. When all other considerations are essentially equivalent, the highest scoring play may well be your best. However, all else is never equal, hence these other considerations below.
- b. **RA**ck leave:
 - (1) **C/V ratio** is the ratio of consonants to vowels. A complete tile bag has a 56:42 ratio (plus two blanks). When playing off letters, try to leave a relatively balanced group of letters on your rack, ideally with a difference no greater than one between the number of consonants and vowels left on your rack. If an odd number is left, better to have an extra consonant than vowel.
 - (2) **Rid duplicates**: You're most likely to get higher scoring plays, including bingos, if left without duplicated tiles on your rack, possibly excepting the S and the E.
 - (3) **Rid high pointers**: Letters worth 3 or more points (BCFHJKMPQVWXYZ). Best would be to have the remaining rack be the low-point, bingo-prone tiles (ADEGILNORSTU). These are "the 3%-ers," as there are at least 3 of each tile in and account for 75% of the 100-tile set. They spell out phrases like REGIONAL STUD or U DATE NO GIRLS.

- (4) **Break up "death combos"**: WU, VU, YU, UU, II, VV, WW, YY, QW. If you can't play off both, play off one, as your future scoring chances will otherwise be compromised.
- c. **Board development**:
- (1) Does your play make an opening for yourself or your opponent? Better to get a few less points and not provide a disproportionately great scoring opportunity for your opponent.
 - (2) Close down the board if you are sufficiently ahead; open up the board if you are significantly behind. For example; if you're down by 60+ points and need to bingo to come back, and there's but one "hook spot" for a bingo, create a second spot in case the opponent blocks one of them.
- d. **Tile turnover**:
- (1) Play more tiles at game's outset in the race for the power tiles (a ? represents a blank tile): **??SSSSJQXZ**.
 - (2) Play more tiles if ahead thereby more speedily using up your opponent's comeback ammunition.
 - (3) Slow down, play fewer tiles, if behind.
 - (4) Endgame
 - i. Leave at least one tile in the bag, so that your tile-tracking opponent will not know exactly what you have. And, if opponent bingos, you will get to make at least one more play, which may prove to be the winning margin.
 - ii. Out-in-two: When confronted with your last rack of tiles with none remaining in the bag, more often than not, if you cannot play out all your letters, try to do so in just two moves, getting your opponent's leftover tiles.

3. On learning words:

- a. If nothing else, **Know Thy 2's**. It'll raise your score by 50 or more points per game. This shortest list will yield the greatest payoffs, as now your chances to construct parallel plays, making two, three, or more words at once, are greatly expanded.
- b. Rest of the Cheat Sheet: 3's, Vowel Dumps, Short JQXZ's are the workhorse words. If you go on to learn all the 4's as well, know that 75% of all words formed and accounting for 50% of all points are scored in a typical game come from the short (2-, 3-, and 4-letter) words.
- c. Winners, on average, out-bingo losers 2:1. The best "bingo-stems" (groups of letters which combine with one or more letters to form bingos) to learn are: TISANE, SATIRE, and RETINA.