

A Better Scrabble Strategy Than Memorising Half the Dictionary

This article was written by Mark Abadi for Insider.

Scrabble at its highest level is very different from the board game you grew up playing around the living room table.

I would know — I've been a tournament Scrabble player for more than 10 years and I've played in competitions around the country, including two North American Scrabble Championships.

Becoming a Scrabble expert requires memorising thousands of obscure words from the far reaches of the English dictionary, like 'adz' (a cutting tool), 'pahoehoe' (a type of lava), and 'crwth' (a Celtic string instrument, and no, that's not a typo).

But when friends ask me what it's like to play top-level Scrabble, they're most surprised to learn how strategic the game is. Knowing words is only half the battle — you also need to know how to create high-scoring plays for yourself and limit them for your opponent.

It could take years to become a proper Scrabble master, but if all you want to do is improve your strategy for your next game night, I can give you one piece of advice that is sure to elevate your game. And by following it, I'd wager you can beat anybody, regardless of their vocabulary.

Always Look for Hotspots on the Board

Top Scrabble players average more than 30 points a turn. That wouldn't be possible unless they were always looking for ways to maximise the value of their tiles.

The most obvious way to maximise your points is to take advantage of the bonus squares on the board — the double- and triple-letter scores and the double- and triple-word scores. Those squares will help you pile on the points if you can spot the best way to use them.

For example, take a look at this opening move. In this position, the word ZESTY scores **34** points (the first score of every game is doubled).



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But if you move ZESTY a couple of spaces to the right, slotting the Y on that light blue double-letter score, your score shoots up to **42** points. That's an eight-point improvement!



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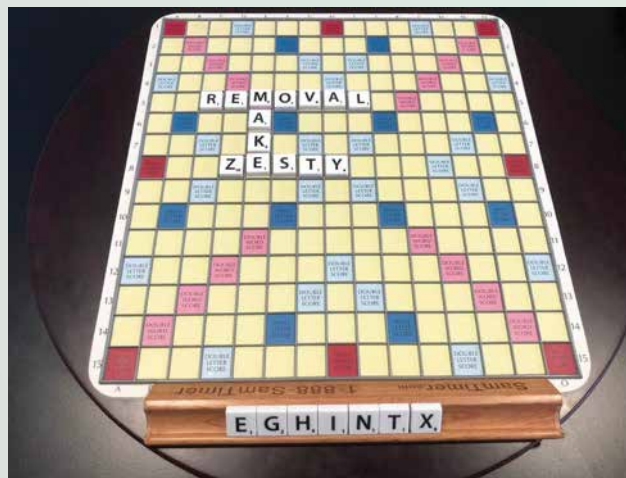
But even that is not the best play. If you move ZESTY over to the left a few spaces, slotting the 10-point Z on the double-letter score, now you've got yourself a **54**-point move:



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As you can see, bonus squares can make the difference between an average play and a great play. Yet many casual players treat using the bonus squares as an afterthought, something that comes secondary to finding a nice word. On the contrary, you should always be on the lookout for ways to capitalise on bonus squares at every stage of the game.

After the first turn, even more opportunities to use bonus squares will emerge. As the game develops, certain areas of the board will become especially prone to high-scoring plays. Let's take a look at the same game a couple of turns later:



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There are hotspots all over this board just begging to be used. Here are some of the potentially lucrative areas you might try to take advantage of on this turn:



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Starting from the bottom, the Z in ZESTY offers the chance for a big score going down to the pink double-letter square. If you can manage to find a word that's five letters or longer and begins with Z, you're guaranteed at least 28 points. ZENITH for 36 does the trick.

Nearby, the S in ZESTY is two squares above a juicy triple-letter square. It would be a good idea to try to find a word that places your highest-value letter — in this case, the X — on that square. SIX and SEX score 26 points each.

In the top left corner, there's a hotspot that allows you to hit two bonus squares: a double-letter and a double-word. If you can find a five-letter word that places a high-scoring tile on the double-letter and ends with E, you'll be in business. HINGE, for example, scores 26 points.

But neither of those come close to the best plays available. Over to the right of the board, there's a hotspot that would allow you to play HEXING for a whopping 55 points by hitting a double-letter and a double-word square at the same time. And there's even a way to score 50 points with just a single letter — by placing the X on the triple-letter score beside the A and O, forming the two-letter words AX and OX in the process.

By now you can see how bonus squares factor into Scrabble strategy. Next time you're playing Scrabble, take stock of every hotspot that opens up, and before you choose a word to play, consider whether it takes full advantage of the scoring opportunities available to you.

The more you can benefit from those high-scoring areas, the more likely you are to come out on top.

Source: Abadi, M. (2019, Jan 27). I'm a nationally ranked Scrabble player. If you want to win, there's a better strategy than memorizing half the dictionary. *Insider*.

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