



How Come We Must Dot an *i*?



The idea of the *alfibet*, now called an alphabet, and its twenty-six *let-hers*, now called letters, spread around the world. Apart from the design of capital letters by Lady Cornelia Capital in the year 1666, the shape of the original letters has changed little to this day.

The exception is the letter *i*. In those early days of writing, the lower case *i* was the easiest letter to make, a short straight stick. But today it's a bother.

“Dot your *i*'s, students,” teachers insist. “Remember to dot your *i*'s. The word is spelled wrong if you don't dot the *i*?”

The small *i* has changed many times from its humble beginning. The first revision came when the alphabet idea reached the shores of a small kingdom called Smiley.

A wise and jovial monarch named King Fruity-Juice ruled the land. King Fruity-Juice enjoyed a good laugh and having fun. He never tired of playing games and holding contests throughout his kingdom.

As soon as the king learned about the alphabet, he summoned the royal teacher, Sir Toot, to his chambers.

“Sir Toot, you shall teach the people of Smiley the new alphabet,” he said. “Ha! Ha! It looks fun to learn.”

“Excellent, your Excellency,” said the tutor.

“Ha! Ha! And to set a good example for my subjects, I shall be your first student,” said King Fruity-Juice.

For the next nine months, Sir Toot tutored the king. After teaching him many words to read and spell, he taught him how to write the words using the new fancy cursive handwriting that Sir Christopher Cursive had just invented.

On King Fruity-Juice’s graduation day, the king again called for the royal teacher.

“Sir Toot, now sally forth throughout the Kingdom of Smiley and teach my subjects the subjects you taught me,” King Fruity-Juice said.

“Excellent, your Excellency,” said the tutor.

“Ha! Ha! And to make the learning more fun, I’ve thought up a contest,” said King Fruity-Juice. “Bring me the royal handwriting pen.”

With pen in hand and a sheet of paper before him, the king wrote in his best cursive handwriting:

Royal Reading Contest
The first person in the
Kingdom of Smiley who can
read this message will win a
chest of gold. To collect your
prize, bring this paper to my
throne room. Then stand on
one foot and shout the words
King Fruity-Juice three
times.

Have fun,
Your Royal Highness

“Ha! Ha! This game will be a hoot, Sir Toot,” the king said. “I’ll be waiting on my throne for your first reader.”

“Excellent, your Excellency,” said the tutor. “Lessons will begin at dawn.”

That evening a royal messenger rode to Smiley Village and nailed King Fruity-Juice’s document to a tree in the village square. When the people saw the squiggly black lines on the paper, they scratched their heads. But when the messenger announced that Sir Toot would be teaching everyone to read and write, the crowd became joyful.

Early the next morning, Sir Toot arrived in town with his band of teaching aids. They set up large classroom tents and began teaching the people, adults and children alike, the ABC’s.

Six months after Sir Toot and his band of teaching aids started reading instruction, a small boy named Lu entered the village square. He spotted King Fruity Juice’s paper posted on the tree. Filled with curiosity, he walked up to it and studied the squiggly lines.

“I saw this paper six months ago,” Lu told himself. “Those squiggly marks don’t look as confusing as they did back then. They’re some of the words that Sir Toot taught me. And those words make sentences. I wonder what they say.”

Lu ran home to retrieve his reading textbook. Soon he was back at the tree decoding the king's message. In less than an hour, he had the first line figured out.

"It's one of the king's fun contests!" he said.

More eager than ever, Lu struggled to read the handwriting. When he finished the first sentence, he leaped for joy.

"A prize! A chest of gold!" he said, dancing around the tree.

Not until night had fallen did the boy finish reading the announcement. Despite the late hour, he tore down the paper and raced for his donkey. Soon he was riding toward the castle, waving the notice in the air.

"I can win! I can read!" he shouted the entire way. "I can read and I can win!"

Lu arrived at the royal castle and rode his donkey straight into the throne room.

King Fruity-Juice sat on his throne reading a paperback book. A large chest of gold coins sparkled at his feet. When he saw Lu mounted on the donkey and waving the paper, he howled with laughter.

"Ha! Ha! Bravo, my boy!" he said. "Now all you must do is perform the last task that you read on the paper, and this gold is yours."

Trembling, Lu climbed down from the donkey. He looked at the chest and at the king's grinning face.

"Are you sure, sire sir," he said, "Do you really want me to speak those words?"

"Come! Come, my boy," said the king. "Out with it, and claim your prize. I want to get back to reading my book."

Lu held the paper with both hands. He double-checked the handwriting and stood on one foot. Then, at the top of his lungs, he shouted, "*King Frwty-Jwice! King Frwty-Jwice! King Frwty-Jwice!*"

"Haaaaw!" went the donkey.

King Fruity-Juice's smile fell. "What? What did you say?" he asked. "Are you mocking my name? How dare you. I enjoy having fun, not being made fun of."

Lu felt faint. "But...but..." he stuttered. "That's what this paper says, sire sir."

King Fruity-Juice snatched the paper from Lu's hands. He read it and read it again. After a long moment, the grin returned to his face.

"Ha! Ha! So it does, my boy," he said. "Now I see it. The *u*'s and *i*'s in my name appear as a *w*. *King Frwity-Jwice*. Ha! Ha! That's what you read. Ha! Ha! Because that's what it looks like. Take the gold, my boy. The blame is not yours, but Sir Christopher Cursive's cursive writing."

“Haaaaw!” the donkey repeated.

The next morning, King Fruity-Juice called a meeting. In attendance were Sir Toot, Sir Christopher Cursive, the Queen of Hawaii, and the director of the Smiley Ski Resort.

“Ha! Ha! A young boy from Smiley village has discovered a flaw in cursive writing,” the king announced. “A *u* and *i* side-by-side look like a *w*. Ha! Therefore, if anyone writes my name in cursive, it appears as if contains two *w*’s. King *Frwity-Jwice*. Not very regal.”

“The people of Hawaii have the same problem,” said the Hawaiian queen. “Two *i*’s together appear as a *u*. Tourists to our islands think they are visiting *Hawau*.”

“And vacationers at the Smiley Ski Resort ask me what is *skung* when I write *skiing*,” added the resort director.

Sir Christopher Cursive shook his head. “I’m *ruined*,” he said. “And that would appear as *rwined* if written in cursive.”

“But I can solve the *i* problem,” said King Fruity-Juice. “Whenever people write the letter *i*, they shall add a small mark above it.”

After a moment of silence, Sir Toot said, “Excellent, your Excellency. And what shall the mark look like?”

“I’ve given this much thought,” the king replied. “I’ve decided from this day forth, all the citizens of Smiley shall

add our kingdom's royal symbol above the small *i*. Ha! Ha!
A tiny smiley face!"

So it was official. The lowercase *i* changed for the first time. Although the letter became harder to write, it was easier to read in Sir Toot's textbooks. From that moment on, the small *i* looked like this:



Years later, however, pirates invaded the Kingdom of Smiley. The pirate captain took one look at the letter *i* and said, "Garrrr! That thar smiley face abo'e the lett'r *i* must go. Aye! Me thinks it be replaced with the jolly skull and crossbones."



Fortunately, the pirates soon abandoned Smiles to pillage elsewhere, and the land became peaceful again. The people elected a president who declared, "From now on, all small *i*'s shall have a peace symbol floating over them."



Unfortunately, an angry dictator soon took over the country. He ordered that the mark above the *i* be changed to a tiny star.



Not long after this, a civil war broke out in Smiley and the dictator was kicked out. The new leaders wanted the star switched to a little heart.



That's how the letter *i* remained for many years. Until one day, not long ago, a third-grade girl named Mimi Mississippi was sitting at her desk practicing handwriting. The teacher had assigned her students to write their names ten times.

“And don't forget to heart you *i*'s,” the teacher said.

Mimi began writing. With great care, she drew a tiny heart above all five *i*'s in Mimi Mississippi. She was writing a third signature, when she slammed her pencil on her desktop.

“Boring!” she said. “Drawing all these hearts is a waste of time and pencil lead.”

“I’m sorry, Mimi,” said the teacher. “But that’s how we make our *i*’s in school.”

“How come?” asked Mimi.

At that moment a tiny gnat flew over Mimi’s handwriting paper. It landed above the last *i* in her name that still lacked a heart.

Mimi spotted the gnat, and still angry at all the heart drawing she had to do, smashed the tiny insect with her pencil.

“Look at that!” she said. “The squashed gnat looks like a small dot above my *i* in *Mississippi*. It looks great! From now on, why can’t I just stick a dot above all the *i*’s in my name?”

Mimi’s teacher looked stunned. “A dot?” she said. “I don’t know why not. I guess no one ever thought of that before.”

Mimi began writing again. “Well, then that what I’ll do, she said. “I’ll dot my *i*’s. Dot, dot, dot, dot, dot.”

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Soon afterward, the school principal spotted one of Mimi’s book reports hanging on the hallway bulletin board.

“Look at those *i*’s!” he exclaimed. “Dots! What a brilliant ideas!”

The principal told the town mayor about Mimi's dots. The mayor suggested the idea to the state governor, who claimed it was his idea in the first place, and passed it along to a member of congress who made a law that all small i's should be dotted. The law still stands today.

The future of the *i* remains uncertain. The letter has changed many times in the past and will likely change again. In the meantime, unless you have a better idea, *be wise and dot your i's.*