



How Come We Must Dot an *i*?

by Douglas Evans

The Jovial King

The *alfibet*, or alphabet as it came to be known, spread across the world. Over the centuries, the shapes of its twenty-six letters changed very little.

All except one—the letter *i*.

In the earliest days of writing, *i* was a simple, straight stick. Today, as you know, it's a bigger bother to write.

“Remember to dot your *i*'s,” teachers say. “The word is spelled wrong if you don't dot your *i*'s.”

From its humble beginnings, the letter *i* has gone through many changes. The first came when the alphabet reached the Kingdom of Smiley, a sunny land

ruled by the happy King Fruity-Juice.

King Fruity-Juice loved to laugh and play. He never grew tired of telling jokes and riddles. All year long, his kingdom hosted games of every kind--hide-and-seek tournaments, capture-the-flag meets, kick-the-can championships, musical-chairs matches, and relay races that wound through the village streets.

But nothing thrilled King Fruity-Juice more than silly contests, the sillier the better. Every evening, Briar, the town crier, walked through the village ringing his bell to announce a new challenge.

"Citizens of Smiley, come play!" he cried one evening. "Whoever can guess the number of baked beans in the royal cooking kettle will win a giant pot of jelly beans!"

A week later, he called again, "Citizens of Smiley, come play! The winner of the Smiley Cupcake Eating Contest will win a life-long supply of cupcakes with sprinkles on top."

Other contests included the Whistle-While-You-Juggle Showdown, the Left-Footed Hop-a-Thon, and the famous Royal Spaghetti Slurp-Off, where the loudest slurper won a golden crown of noodles.

When King Fruity-Juice heard about the alphabet, he quickly learned to read. He also mastered the art of story writing, using Sir Cursive's fancy new handwriting.

One morning, the king summoned Sir Toot, the royal tutor, to his chambers to plan his next contest.

"I've made a decision," he declared. "Every subject in my kingdom must learn

to read."

"Excellent, Your Excellency," said Sir Toot.

"And to make the learning more fun, I shall hold a royal reading contest!" said the king.

"Splendid, sire! I would be honored to serve as the official reading teacher."

"Ha! Ha! This contest will be a hoot, Sir Toot," the king chuckled. "I'll be waiting in my throne room to test the first reader."

That evening, Briar, the Crier, rang his bell and made the royal announcement.

"Citizens of Smiley, come play!" he shouted. "Anyone in the kingdom who learns to read and can pass the king's reading test will win the biggest prize of all."

By morning, hundreds of people had signed up for reading lessons with Sir Toot. And for the next month, the Kingdom of Smiley grew quiet as everyone was busy studying.

Leer, the Reader

Six months later, a young boy named Leer rode his donkey through the palace gates.

"Ha! Ha!" King Fruity-Juice said. "My first reading contestant."

Timidly, Leer stepped into the throne room. He removed his felt hat and bowed. "I learned to read, sire sir," he said. "I wish to win the biggest prize of all."

The king handed the boy a sheet of paper. On it was a single sentence, and beneath it was the king's signature.

"Ha! Ha! Read this and the prize is yours, my boy," the king said.

“Hee! Haw!” brayed Leer's donkey from the courtyard.

Leer studied the paper and paused. He squinted and read the paper again. “Are you sure, sire sir?” he asked. “Do you really want me to read these words out loud?”

“Come! Come, my boy,” said the king. “Have you learned to read or haven't you? Read exactly what it says on the paper.”

I can read this, so I win a big prize.
Have fun,
King Fruity-Juice

Leer held the paper with both hands. He double-checked the king's signature, took a deep breath, and read aloud: “I can read this, so I win a big prize. Have fun...*King Frwty-Jwce!*”

King Fruity-Juice's smile vanished. “What? What did you say?” he snapped. “Are you mocking me?”

Though known as a merry monarch, the king had skin as thin as pudding. He did not take kindly to teasing. He also had a terrible temper. His face turned tomato red. He leaped from his throne, hopping from foot to foot.

“How dare you!” he roared. “I enjoy having fun, not being made fun of. Guards! Take this cheeky boy to the dungeon!”

Leer felt faint. His knees wobbled like jelly. “But...but...,” he stammered. He held out the paper. “I only read what it says, sire sir.”

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

“Ha! Ha! So it does, my boy,” he said. “Now I see it. The letters *u* and *i* in my name look like the letter *w*. *King Frwty-Jwce!* Ha! Ha! That’s what you read. Ha! Ha! Because that’s exactly how it looks.”

He chuckled some more and waved the paper in the air. “The fault isn’t yours...it’s Sir Cursive’s handwriting. You’ve won the big prize, my boy! It shall be delivered to your home within the week!”

“Hee! Haaaaw!” brayed the donkey.

The Smiley í

That evening, King Fruity-Juice called a meeting with Sir Toot and Sir Cursive.

“Gentlemen, we have a crisis,” the king said. “A clever boy named Leer uncovered a flaw in cursive writing.” He held up the reading test. “Look here. When you write a *u* and *i* side by side, it looks like a *w*. Ha! So my signature reads...*King Frwty-Jwce.*”

The two men struggled to hide their smirks.

“King Frwty-Jwce!” the king repeated. “We can’t have that. It doesn’t sound very regal.”

Sir Toot studied the page. “A *u* and *i* squished together would cause problems in other words, too, sire,” he said, “*Squirrel, quick, build, and guide*, to name a few.”

Sir Cursive groaned. “I’m ruined,” he said. “Or *rwned* if written in cursive.”

“Ha! But I have a solution to the *i* problem,” said the king. “From now on, whenever someone writes the letter *i*, they shall place a tiny mark above it.”

“Excellent, your Excellency,” said Sir Toot.

“And what sort of mark shall it be?” asked Sir Cursive.

“I’ve given this much thought,” said the king. “From this day forth, every citizen of Smiley shall add our royal symbol above the lowercase *i*. Ha! Ha! A tiny smiley face!”

And so it became official. For the first time, the letter *i* changed. It became trickier to write, but much easier to read. From that moment on, the small *i* looked like this:



And what about the biggest prize of all that King Fruity-Juice had promised young Leer? A week later, Briar, the Crier, arrived at Leer's farm, carrying a curious object. It stood about nine inches tall and an inch thick. It had a hard front and back cover with many pages bound in between.

“The king calls this a *book*,” Briar said. “And you’re holding the very first book in the world.”

Leer read the title on the front cover.

1000 Jokes From the
Kingdom of Smiley
by
King Fruity-Juice

He burst out laughing. “Ha! Ha!”

From the yard came his donkey's call. "Hee! Haaaaw!"

The Changing i

After centuries of fun and laughter in the Kingdom of Smiley, trouble arrived. Pirates invaded the land.

The pirate captain spotted the letter *i* and growled, "Garr! That smiley face must go. Aye! I want that mark above the *i* to be a skull and crossbones."



Fortunately, the pirates soon sailed from Smiley to pillage elsewhere, and peace returned to the land. The people elected a president who declared, "From this day on, all small *i*'s shall have a peace symbol floating over them."



Unfortunately, peace didn't last. A few years later, a strict army general seized control. He ordered that the mark above the *i* be changed to a tiny star.



Not long after, a young traveler set off from Smiley. In every note he wrote and letter he sent, he replaced the tiny star above his *i*'s with a little heart. From land to land, wherever he wandered, he shared his hearted-*i* idea. Slowly, it caught

on until it was popular in every country around the world.



The letter *i* stayed that way for many years. Until one day, not long ago, a third-grade girl named Mimi Mississippi sat at her desk practicing handwriting. The teacher had assigned the class to write their names in cursive ten times.

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

Mimi got to work. With great care, she drew a tiny heart above each of the five i’s in Mimi Mississippi. But halfway through the third line, she slammed her pencil on the desktop.

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

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

“How come?” asked Mimi. “Why do grown-ups make things harder than they need to be?”

She jabbed her pencil above the last *i* in her name. It left a small dot.

“There. Much simpler.”

The teacher blinked. “A dot?” she said. “Why not? I guess no one ever thought of that before.”

“Dot, dot, dot,” said Mimi. “From now on, I’m dotting all the *i*’s in my name.”

i

Mimi's teacher hung Mimi's handwriting paper in the hall, where the school principal happened to see it.

"Dotted *i's*," he said. "What a brilliant idea!"

The principal showed the paper to the school superintendent, who showed it to the town mayor, who showed it to the state governor, who claimed the idea was his all along. The governor passed it to a U.S. senator, who brought it to Congress. Before long, a law was passed declaring that all lowercase *i's* must have a dot above them. The law still stands today.

"Remember to dot your *i's*, students," teachers still say.

As for the future of the letter *i*? Who knows? It's changed before, and it could change again.

But for now, unless you have a better idea...be wise and dot your *i's*.