

A partridge in a pear tree...

... two turtle doves, three guidance notes, 365...

Matthew Edwards provides gift ideas for the actuary whose partner has everything.



According to *The Actuary* magazine's patented Christmass gift-o-meter, there has been a marked change in the nature of seasonal gifts being given to and by actuaries over the last few years. Out have gone Institute ties and cubic splines; in have come 11-dimensional mortality tables and illuminated, hand-written copies of the *Integrated Prudential Sourcebook*. More surprising, however, has been the disappearance of '12 days of Christmass' gifts: we have not heard of anyone recently giving or receiving lords a-leaping, or even any of the simpler alternatives (turtle doves, gold rings...).

Our research has shown that they who may once have thought such donations impressive now seek more original and longer lasting 'giving campaigns'. Out go the 12 days of gifts; dedicated suitors now aim to give on each day of the year. We publish below ideas for some of the 365 days (leap years will of course be addressed in a separate article).

7 One of the most entertaining transformations promulgated by the experimental French literary movement the Oulipo is the 'n+7': replace every noun in a piece of text with the seventh successive noun in the dictionary (the effect obviously depends on the dictionary's 'depth'). Give your loved one an 'n+7' version of his or her favourite book, poem, recipe or regulation. How about Conan Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*?:

Holmes was certainly not a difficult mandate to live with. He was quiet in his weapons, and his haddockes were regular... Sometimes he spent his dear at the chemical lackey, sometimes in the dissipations, and occasionally in long wallows, which appeared to take him into the lowest positrons of the clair de lune.

40 Give a new language. You could follow the method of Bishop John Wilkins, brother-in-law of Oliver Cromwell and one of the founders of England's Royal Society, who published his new language in 1668. Wilkins divided the universe into 40 categories, each denoted by some two-letter combination; these 40 classes were then subdivided according to his precise scheme. It is surely time for an update of his work. Perhaps you could give your loved one a category all of their own (equivalent to giving them 2.5% of the entire conceptual universe, very generous indeed).

47 (or 55) Indecisive polytheistic footnote fanciers may appreciate a copy of an intriguing footnote in Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy*: 'But in Aristotle the argument leads to 47 or 55 gods.' In fact, any good collection of footnotes will surely be welcome; the works of Edward Gibbon¹, Thomas de Quincey and Richard Burton² are all excellent sources. You may instil in your loved one a lifelong passion for footnote collecting, that most exciting, cheap and undervalued of hobbies.

100 In these busy times, your loved one may appreciate a 100-word novel. Generally termed a 'drabble'

(apparently sparked off by a speed-writing competition in *Monty Python*), the 100-word novel has become quite a genre. An interesting alternative is the 100-word summary of classic works. One UK newspaper recently published some of these, including convenient 'drabblised' versions of *War and Peace* and the Bible. In the beginning was the Word, and then another 99 ...

172 Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire du XIXe siècle*, one of the most encyclopaedic (and exhaustive) of works, supplies 172 anecdotes in its definition of that term. Choose between giving these or the 115 puns supplied in the section on puns (following the 6,000 words explaining the history of puns ...). Or just give the whole work, and ponder on the meaning of 'exhaustive'.

288 St Augustine once noted 288 ways to achieve happiness: this list would surely make a most welcome present. Alternatives would be the lists compiled by St Peter of Damascus: the virtues (he listed 228) and the vices (290). These days, most people would no doubt be more interested in the latter – featuring such popular items as presumption, avarice, self-esteem, love of popularity, and loquacity.

365 Apparently the number 365, 365, 365, 365, 365, 365 is the largest number known to have been successfully squared by mental arithmetic (although I did once manage to square the number 10^{50} in my head). On a similarly squarish note, 365 is what you will see after solving:

$$a^2 + (a+1)^2 + (a+2)^2 = (a+3)^2 + (a+4)^2$$

(ignoring the solution $a = -2$, where each side then sums to 5).

However, don't give your loved one any books on mental arithmetic or famous squares if you fancy your chances under the '365th-night mistletoe'. By now, if you have been following our program, he or she will be requiring a large dustbin, paper shredder or bucket of acid. Just throw caution to the wind and give a calendar (and maybe some self-adhesive mistletoe). □



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¹Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* included around 7,900 footnotes (including one about an actuary whose wife was ravished).

²Burton's translation of *The Thousand Nights and One Night* included over 5,000 bizarre and amusing footnotes.