Q&A

What is your favorite example of a humorous, ironic, or spot-on gene name?

It’s hard to slip humor into grant applications and scientific papers, but when it comes to naming genes, scientists’ wit shines through. From tiggywinkle hedgehog to cheapdate and Van Gogh, amusing gene names abound in biology. Here, four scientists share their favorites.

— Edited by Sarah C. P. Williams

Hugo J. Bellen
HHMI Investigator
Baylor College of Medicine

“In the Drosophila field, the tradition has been to name a gene based on the phenotype caused by its absence or loss of function. Of course, we follow suit today, but there is somewhat of an underlying competition to find a memorable name, especially one that would be a snapshot of modern trends in our culture. Some of my favorites from my own lab are couch potato and benchwarmer (the mutant flies appear lazy), and tweed (flies quiver like a nervous South Park cartoon character).”

Jeannie T. Lee
HHMI Investigator
Massachusetts General Hospital

“With gene names like Xist, Xite, Tsix, Tsx, my field of X-inactivation has yet to utilize the complete alphabet. But I credit fly geneticists for a long history of creative gene names. My favorite: Piwi, a class of fly mutations causing testes of “pee- wee” stature—originally, P-element induced wimpy tests. Piwi has spawned whole families of related gene names in plants and mammals. Some roll off the tongue, like “piRNA” (piwi-interacting RNAs). Others are less imaginative, like Hin and Miwi, for human and mouse Piwi (mammalian geneticists are not known for creative nomenclature).”

Isabel Roditi
HHMI International Research Scholar
University of Berne

“When it comes to gene names, Drosophila wins hands down. My favorite for a long time was “schnurr,” which I thought was a Swiss lab’s ironic use of dialect (it means boaster or bragger, and I wondered who it referred to!). But before writing this I thought I had better check with someone who actually worked on it. I found that its origins lie in “aufgeschnurrt”—like a piece of wool that curls up on itself when it is pulled—because embryos with a defective gene look a bit like that. So it is an apt name, but not what I thought.”

Marc R. Freeman
HHMI Early Career Scientist
University of Massachusetts Medical School

“There are so many great names it’s hard to pick just one. One of the most hilarious has to be the Drosophila mutant that fails to develop recognizable external genitalia, ken and barbie. Who hasn’t been disturbed when they saw their first naked ken or Barbie doll? But my all time favorite may be the mutant that doesn’t grow sensory hairs and is therefore bald—you guessed it, kojak. These silly names are important—they add some fun, help us remember gene functions and phenotypes, and demonstrate that bench scientists are susceptible to extremely poor humor, just like other groups.”