

The art of wordplay:

Understanding English puns

1. What's the double meaning?

Many words in English have more than one meaning. Read the sentences below and discuss the two meanings of the bolded word with a partner.

1. The baseball player held the **bat** carefully as the **bat** flew out of the cave.
2. Please **book** a flight for me; I need to return this library **book**.
3. I used a **ruler** to draw a straight line for the portrait of the queen, who is a fair **ruler**.
4. I couldn't **bear** the sight of the hungry **bear**.

This play on words with different meanings is the key to understanding puns!

2. Key vocabulary for wordplay

Match the terms to their correct definitions. This vocabulary will help you talk about puns.

1. Pun

a. Words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings or spellings (e.g., 'son' and 'sun').

2. Wordplay	b. The clever and witty use of words and their meanings.
3. Double meaning (or double entendre)	c. A joke that uses the different possible meanings of a word or words that sound alike.
4. Homophone	d. A word or phrase that can be understood in two different ways.

3. Video: A masterclass in puns

You will watch a video of a man telling a series of puns, much to his friend's annoyance. First, watch the video to understand the general situation. Then, watch it a second time and fill in the blanks in the puns below.

1. "It doesn't matter how much you push the envelope, it'll still be _____."
2. "What did the mermaid wear to her math class? An _____."
3. "I stayed up all night wondering where the sun went, and then it _____ on me."
4. "Why did the scarecrow get an award? Because he was _____ in his field."
5. "Did you know diarrhea is hereditary? Yeah, it _____ in your _____."

[Watch the video on YouTube](#)

4. Breaking down the puns

Now let's analyze why these jokes are funny (or not!). For each pun from the video, identify the two different meanings being used. The first one is done for you as an example.

The Pun	Meaning 1 (The obvious meaning)	Meaning 2 (The hidden, funny meaning)
...it'll still be stationary .	Stationary : an adjective meaning not moving.	Stationery : a noun for writing materials, like envelopes.
...an algae bra.		
...it dawned on me.		
...he was outstanding in his field.		
...it runs in your jeans .		

5. Grammar focus: Literal vs. figurative phrasal verbs

The pun "it dawned on me" works because the phrasal verb **to dawn on someone** has a figurative meaning ("to realize something"). The joke plays on the literal meaning of **dawn** (the sun rising).

Many phrasal verbs have both a literal and a figurative meaning, which is a common source for jokes and wordplay.

- **Literal:** He **took off** his coat. (He removed it.)
- **Figurative:** Her career **took off**. (It became successful quickly.)

Write two sentences for each phrasal verb below: one using its literal meaning and one using its figurative meaning.

1. **Break down**

Literal: _____

Figurative: _____

2. **Run into**

Literal: _____

Figurative: _____

3. **Look up to**

Literal: _____

Figurative: _____

4. **Get over**

Literal: _____

Figurative: _____

6. Useful phrases: Reacting to puns and jokes

In English, people often react to puns with a groan because they are considered "bad" jokes. Here are some common ways to react. Which ones did the man's friend in the video use?

Positive / Appreciative reactions:

- "That's a good one!"
- "Haha, I see what you did there."
- "That's clever."

"Groaning" / Negative (but still playful) reactions:

- "Oh, that's terrible!"
- "That's so cheesy/corny."
- "That's a real dad joke."
- "You're losing it."

When you don't understand:

- "I don't get it."
- "Can you explain it to me?"
- "Oh, *now* I get it! That's funny."

7. Create your own pun!

Try to complete these sentences to create your own puns. Use the homophone pairs provided.

1. (ate / eight)

Why was 6 afraid of 7? Because 7 _____ 9.

2. (son / sun)

My dad was so proud, he called me his _____ shine.

3. (flour / flower)

To make bread, you need to use a _____ that has risen.

4. (see / sea)

What did the beach say to the tide when it came in? Long time no
_____.

5. (which / witch)

I couldn't figure out _____ one was the evil twin.

8. Role-play: The joke-off

Work with a partner. Your goal is to tell puns and react to them naturally.

Instructions:

1. **Student A:** Choose a pun from the video or from exercise 7 and tell it to your partner.
2. **Student B:** React to the pun using one of the phrases from section 6. You can react positively, negatively, or ask for clarification.
3. **Switch roles.** Continue for a few rounds. Try to make your conversation sound natural.

Challenge: Can you come up with a new pun on your own? Try it out on your partner!