

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.

Meaning 1: a piece of equipment for hitting a ball. Meaning 2: a flying mammal.

2. Please **book** a flight for me; I need to return this library **book**.

Meaning 1: to reserve something. Meaning 2: a written work.

3. I used a **ruler** to draw a straight line for the portrait of the queen, who is a fair **ruler**.

Meaning 1: a tool for measuring length. Meaning 2: a person who governs.

4. I couldn't **bear** the sight of the hungry **bear**.

Meaning 1: to tolerate or endure. Meaning 2: a large mammal.

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	c. A joke that uses the different possible meanings of a word or words that sound alike.
2. Wordplay	b. The clever and witty use of words and their meanings.
3. Double meaning (or double entendre)	d. A word or phrase that can be understood in two different ways.
4. Homophone	a. Words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings or spellings (e.g., 'son' and 'sun').

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 **stationary**."
2. "What did the mermaid wear to her math class? An **algae bra**."
3. "I stayed up all night wondering where the sun went, and then it **dawned** on me."
4. "Why did the scarecrow get an award? Because he was **outstanding** in his field."
5. "Did you know diarrhea is hereditary? Yeah, it **runs** in your **jeans**."

[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 .	A bra (clothing) made of algae (seaweed).	Sounds like algebra , a type of math.
...it dawned on me.	To dawn on someone (figurative phrasal verb): to realize something.	Dawn (literal): the time of day when the sun rises.
...he was outstanding in his field.	Outstanding (adjective): excellent or brilliant.	A scarecrow is literally standing out in a farmer's field.
...it runs in your jeans .	The idiom " runs in your genes " means a trait is hereditary.	The literal image of diarrhea running down the inside of your jeans (pants).

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. (Example answers are provided).

1. Break down

Literal: Our car broke down on the side of the road.

Figurative: She broke down in tears after hearing the sad news.

2. Run into

Literal: He wasn't looking and ran into the glass door.

Figurative: I ran into my old teacher at the supermarket yesterday.

3. Look up to

Literal: You have to look up to see the top of the tall building.

Figurative: Many young athletes look up to professional sports stars.

4. Get over

Literal: The dog was able to get over the small fence.

Figurative: It took him a few weeks to get over the flu.

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."

In the video, the friend exclaims, "You're losing it," which is one of the playful negative reactions. He also calls the jokes "stupid" and tells his friend to "go to sleep," which are similar in tone to saying "Oh, that's terrible!"

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 **ate** 9.

2. (son / sun)

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

3. (flour / flower)

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

4. (see / sea)

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

5. (which / witch)

I couldn't figure out **which** 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!

Teacher's note: Encourage students to be creative and use the reaction phrases from section 6 naturally. The goal is conversational practice, not just reading the jokes.