

The last of puns: Understanding wordplay in English

1. Warm-up: What's the joke?

Read these two jokes. In pairs, discuss why they are supposed to be funny. What is the "trick" in the language?

1. "A book just fell on my head. I only have my **shelf** to blame."
2. "Why did the scarecrow get an award? Because he was **outstanding in his field**."

Discussion: This type of humor is called a **pun**. A pun is a joke that uses **wordplay**, often exploiting words that sound similar or have multiple meanings. Is this kind of humor common in your native language?

2. How puns work: Key vocabulary

Puns usually work in one of two ways:

- **Homophones:** Words that sound the same but have different meanings and spellings. Example: *genes* (hereditary) and *jeans* (trousers).
- **Homonyms/Polysemy:** A single word that has two or more different meanings. Example: *outstanding* (excellent / physically standing outside).

Match the bolded word or phrase on the left with its two different meanings on the right.

1. Then it dawned on me .	a. Given an electrical charge / Accused of a crime
2. Outstanding in his field.	b. Useful / Related to hands
3. The drink was a soft drink .	c. The sun began to rise / I suddenly realized it
4. The men will soon be charged .	d. I remembered / The object physically returned to me
5. Sign language is quite handy .	e. Excellent / Literally standing outside in a field
6. It came back to me .	f. A gentle, non-alcoholic beverage / Not a hard object

3. Video: Ellie's joke book

You will watch a video from the TV show "The Last of Us," where the character Ellie tells jokes from a book. Listen carefully and fill in the gaps in the punchlines 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 _____ me."

4. "Why did the scarecrow get an award? Because he was _____ in his _____."
5. "Did you know diarrhea is hereditary? Yeah, it _____ in your _____."

[Watch the video on YouTube](#)

Follow-up discussion

Now, work with a partner to explain the wordplay in each joke. What are the two meanings being used?

- **Joke 1:** The word sounds like _____, which are materials for writing, like envelopes.
- **Joke 2:** The words sound like _____, which is a type of mathematics.
- **Joke 3:** The phrase means both "the sun came up" and "I _____ it."
- **Joke 4:** The phrase means both "excellent" and literally "_____ in a field."
- **Joke 5:** The phrase sounds like "it runs in your _____," which are a type of pants.

4. Grammar focus: Forming questions for jokes

Many English jokes use a standard question-and-answer format, often starting with "What did...", "Why did...", or "What is..."

- **What/Why + did + [subject] + [base verb]...?**
Example: "What did the triangle say...?"
- **What + is/are + [subject]...?**
Example: "What is a pirate's favorite letter?"

Unscramble the words to form the questions for these jokes.

1. her / a / mermaid / did / wear / math / to / What / class?

→ _____?

An algae-bra.

2. an / scarecrow / Why / get / the / did / award?

→ _____?

Because he was outstanding in his field.

3. the / say / did / What / green / grape / purple / the / grape / to?

→ _____?

Breathe, you idiot!

4. did / soldier / Confederate / use / What / the / to / off / eat / of?

→ _____?

Civil ware.

5. the / to / triangle / circle / say / What / did / the?

→ _____?

You're so pointless.

5. Deconstructing puns

In small groups, read the puns below. For each one, identify the word or phrase with the double meaning and explain both meanings to your group.

Joke set 1:

- "I'm reading a book on anti-gravity. It's **impossible to put down**."
- "When a clock is hungry, it goes back **four seconds**."
- "I'm glad I know sign language. It's become quite **handy**."

Joke set 2:

- "People are making apocalypse jokes like there's **no tomorrow**..."
- "I tried to catch some fog earlier. I **mist**."

- "I forgot how to throw a boomerang. But it **came back to me**."

💡 **Dad jokes:** Puns are often called "dad jokes" because they are seen as simple, obvious, and a bit cheesy. The humor often comes from how "bad" the joke is!

6. Create your own pun

Now it's your turn! Try to create a simple pun using one of the homophone pairs below. You can use the question-and-answer format you practiced earlier.

Homophone pairs to use:

- see / sea
- ate / eight
- I / eye
- son / sun
- write / right
- flour / flower

Example: Why was the number 6 afraid of 7? Because 7 **ate** 9.

Your joke:

_____?

_____.