

Wit is me – Exercise 1

Teenagers enjoy a challenge and delight in questioning received wisdom – which explains why comical distortions of everyday sayings are so appealing!

So a good place to start is with witticisms, quips, repartees and wisecracks – humorous forms that have provoked laughs for centuries and are generally thought to be a sign of a quick and clever mind. But did you know that a great many of the wittiest gems are based on simple manipulations of common and pre-existing idiomatic expressions or time-tested truisms? Once we understand some of the basic mechanisms underlying these manipulations, we can begin to write our own. It's a lot easier than you think!

Let's start by looking at the most common mechanisms and seeing how they work. Then we can select a few examples from a dictionary of idiomatic expressions and begin to write our own.

1. Interpret an idiomatic expression literally

It's a small world. Sure is, but I wouldn't want to have to paint it.

If you let your head get too big, it'll break your neck.

Let's take another common expression: *You can't have everything*. Which of the following statements best illustrates the “literal “interpretation” mechanism when directly following this expression:

- a) Because there's more to life than material possessions.
- b) You still wouldn't be happy.
- c) You're right, where would you put it?

Let's practice on following expression: *Laughter is the best medicine*.

2. Substitute a single key word

*To have **loafed** and lost is better than never to have **loafed** at all.*

Monday is the root of all evil.

*Girls just want to have **funds**** (*Remember Cindy Lauper?)

This mechanism produces simple puns. Let's try another expression: *Time flies when you're having fun*. Which of the following words seems to humorously illustrate the “substitution” mechanism when replacing “time flies”:

- a) Wine
- b) Kidney pie
- c) My wife

Let's practice on following expression by finding a rhyming substitute for "stage": *All the world is a stage?*

3. Add a complementary phrase that subverts the first expression

Life is not all fun and games. There's also marriage.

This mechanism resembles the classic Rule of Three device in comedy writing. Here's another everyday expression: *You can't have your cake and eat it too*. Which of the following complementary phrases generate humour if added to this expression as a separate sentence:

- a) Just buy two cakes.
- b) Good, I'm on a diet.
- c) You have to make some tough decisions.

Let's practice on this expression: *You can't change the past.*

4. Contradiction, opposition or negation

If at first you don't succeed, quit – because it's probably not worth it.

For this mechanism, an idea of positive value is expressed, only to be overturned by its opposite. Here's a truism: *Just be yourself*. Which of the following phrases is funny if it directly follows this expression:

- a) Because it's important to be genuine.
- b) But not your real self; no one wants to see that.
- c) People will love you for who you are.

Let's practice on this expression: *You can do anything you put your mind to.*

5. Fake ambiguity or false logic

The way to a man's heart is through his aorta.

In this case, a cliché is subverted by an idea that runs counter to known facts. Here's a commonplace sentiment: *You're only young once (...)*. As a follow-up expression, which of the following phrases generates humour by twisting common sense logic:

- a) So take advantage of it.
- b) And you don't want to miss the boat.
- c) But you can be immature forever.

Let's practice on this expression: *Age doesn't matter.*