

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*.