Note to teachers: Witticisms, repartees and wisecracks have generated 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 well-known truisms? Once we understand some of the basic mechanisms underlying these manipulations, we can begin to write our own.

Let’s start by looking at a few of these mechanisms and then we can select a few examples from a dictionary of idiomatic expressions and begin writing our own.

1. Interpret an idiomatic expression literally

*It’s a small world – but I wouldn’t want to have to paint it.*

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:

1. Because there’s more to life than material possessions.
2. You still wouldn’t be happy.
3. After all, where would you put it?
4. 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.*

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”:

1. Wine
2. Kidney pie
3. My wife

3. Add a complementary phrase

*Life is not all beer and skittles. There are also girls.*

Here’s another every day 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:

1. Just buy two cakes.
2. Good, I’m on a diet.
3. You have to make some tough decisions.
4. Contradiction, opposition or negation

*Relationships are built on trust until you meet someone new.*

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

Here’s a truism**:** *Marriage requires compromise.*Which of the following contradictory or oppositional phrases is funny if it directly follows this expression:

1. So be ready to negotiate.
2. It sure ain’t a one-way street.
3. So does prison.

5*.* Create a pun

*Where there’s a will there’s a wake.*

*Girls just wanna have funds.*

Here’s a common complaint: *Uh-oh, we’re out of booze.**Better call* (*…*). Which of the following phrases best illustrates a sound-based pun when directly following “Better call…”?

1. The liquor delivery service.
2. Wine-one-one.
3. The fire department.

6. Fake ambiguity or false logic

*There is something wrong with my eyesight. I can’t see going to work.*

*When I was born I was so surprised I couldn’t talk for a year and half.*

Here’s a commonplace sentiment: *I’m not afraid to die* (…). As a follow-up expression, which of the following phrases generates humour by twisting common sense logic:

1. As long as my affairs are in order.
2. It wouldn’t be the first time.
3. I just don’t want to be there when it happens.