

Onomatopoeia



DEFINITION

What is onomatopoeia? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Onomatopoeia is a figure of speech in which words evoke the actual sound of the thing they refer to or describe. The “boom” of a firework exploding, the “tick tock” of a clock, and the “ding dong” of a doorbell are all examples of onomatopoeia.

Some additional key details about onomatopoeia:

- Onomatopoeia can use real words, made-up words, or just letters used to represent raw sounds (as “Zzzzzz” represents someone sleeping or snoring).
- Advertising, branding, and slogans often use onomatopoeia: “Snap, crackle, pop.”
- Onomatopoeia can differ across cultures and languages, even when referring to the same sound. A dog’s “woof” in English is a dog’s “bau” in Italian ([how to say woof in 16 languages](#)).

Onomatopoeia Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce onomatopoeia: on-uh-mat-uh-**pee**-uh

The Four Types of Onomatopoeia

Onomatopoeia has a few distinct variants:

- Real words that sound like real things
- Real words *made* to evoke the sound of real things
- Made-up words that sound like real things
- A series of letters that mimic a “raw” sound

Real Words that Sound Like Real Things

This type of onomatopoeia, which we'll call conventional onomatopoeia, uses words whose own sound evokes the sound of real things. The word “meow,” which sounds just like the sound a cat makes when it actually meows, is a classic example of conventional onomatopoeia. This is by far the most common type of onomatopoeia.

Real Words Made to Evoke the Sound of Real Things

In this rarer type of onomatopoeia, a word or series of words is used to imitate a real-world sound, even though the words used don't mimic that sound themselves. Perhaps the most famous example of this type of onomatopoeia is Edgar Allen Poe's poem “The Bells,” in which Poe repeats the word “bell” 62 times to evoke the sound of a

bell ringing and tolling, even though the word “bell” itself does not itself sound like a bell ringing.

Made-up Words that Sound Like Real Things

Made-up words can fill the void when no word exists to sufficiently capture the nuances of a real-world sound. For example, when James Joyce needed a word to convey the sound of someone knocking on a door, he invented “tattarrattat.” Today, almost a hundred years after he coined it in writing his novel *Ulysses*, “tattarrattat” has become a legit word (it's in the Oxford English Dictionary).

A Series of Letters that Mimic a Raw Sound

Sometimes onomatopoeia involves no words at all, as in examples like “Zzzzzz” to represent the sound of sleeping or snoring, “hachoo” for a sneezing sound, or “tsk-tsk” or “tut-tut” to convey the scolding sound we make to express disapproval.

How Can You Tell if a Word Qualifies as Onomatopoeia?

There is no definitive test for whether a word qualifies as onomatopoeia. Some words, like “meow” and “buzz,” are clear examples of onomatopoeia because they're like transcriptions of sound spelled out in letters. But other onomatopoeic words are subtler, such as the words “throbbing” and “moaning,” which appear in the Edgar Allen Poe poem “The Bells.” Does the word “moan” sound like someone moaning? Does “throb” sound like a heart beating? Kind of, but not obviously so.

The [Onomatopoeia List](#) website has collected hundreds of examples of onomatopoeic words and lets users vote on their relative onomatopoeia-ness. It can be helpful to consult their list to get a sense of whether a specific word qualifies as onomatopoeia. But you can also just make the judgment call for yourself.



EXAMPLES

Because onomatopoeia can make language so expressive, impactful, and memorable, it's used almost everywhere you look, from literature to comics to advertising and more.

Onomatopoeia Examples in Literature

Writers use every type of onomatopoeia—and sometimes more than one type at once—to help bring characters, images, and scenes to life, as you'll see in the examples below.

Onomatopoeia in Edgar Allen Poe's “The Bells”

Poe's poem is an onslaught of onomatopoeia. Here in Stanza IV of the poem he uses **conventional onomatopoeia** in which words like

“throbbing,” “sobbing,” “moaning,” and “groaning” sound like the thing they refer to or describe. He also uses **repetition of non-onomatopoeic words to create an onomatopoeic effect**: repeating “time,” “bell(s),” and “knells” so many times evokes the tolling sound of a real bell.

Keeping **time, time, time,**
 In a sort of Runic rhyme,
 To the throbbing of the **bells—**
 Of the **bells, bells, bells—**
 To the sobbing of the **bells;**
 Keeping **time, time, time,**
 As he **knells, knells, knells,**
 In a happy Runic rhyme,
 To the rolling of the **bells—**
 Of the **bells, bells, bells—**
 To the tolling of the **bells,**
 Of the **bells, bells, bells, bells—**
Bells, bells, bells
 To the **moaning and the groaning** of the bells.

Onomatopoeia in E. E. Cummings’ “I was sitting in mcsorley’s”

In this poem Cummings uses a mix of **conventional onomatopoeia** (the real words “tinking” and “slush”) and **onomatopoeia with made-up words** (“glush,” “ploc,” and “piddle-of-drops”) to convey the raucous sonic atmosphere of drinks being poured and people getting sloshed at one of Manhattan’s oldest bars.

the Bar: **tinking** luscious jigs dint of ripe silver with warm-lyish wetflat splurging smells waltz the **glush** of squirting taps plus **slush** of foam knocked off and a faint **piddle-of-drops** she says I **ploc** spittle...

Onomatopoeia in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*

In Act 3, Scene 3 of *The Tempest*, Caliban uses onomatopoeia to convey the noises of the island. Note that “twangling” is a real word (it’s a less common form of the verb “twang”), so both examples in the lines below are **conventional onomatopoeia**.

Be not afeard. The isle is full of noises,
 Sounds, and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand **twangling** instruments
 Will **hum** about mine ears, and sometime voices...

Onomatopoeia in James Joyce’s *Ulysses*

The opening lines of the “Sirens” chapter of *Ulysses* contain three different types of onomatopoeic language: **conventional onomatopoeia** with real words that sound like the things they refer to or describe, **non-onomatopoeic words used to create an onomatopoeic effect**, and **onomatopoeia with made-up words**. In the latter type, Joyce fuses conventional onomatopoeic words (“ringing”

and “peep”) with other words (“steely,” “thnthnthn,” and “ofgold”) to create entirely new words with their own unique sonic effects.

Bronze by gold heard the hoofirons, **steelyringing**
imperthnthn thnthnthn.
 Chips, picking **chips** off rocky thumbnail, **chips.** Horrid! And
 gold flushed more.
 A husky fifenote **blew.**
Blew. Blue bloom is on the
 ...
Trilling, trilling: I dolores.
Peep! Who’s in the... **peepofgold?**
Tink cried to bronze in pity.
 And a call, pure, long and **throbbing.** Longindying call.
 Decoy. Soft word. But look! The bright stars fade. O rose!
 Notes **chirruping** answer. Castille. The morn is breaking.
Jingle jingle jaunted jingling.
 Coin rang. Clock **clacked.**

Onomatopoeia in James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*

One of the most famous and outrageous examples of onomatopoeia in all of literature: the 101-character word Joyce **made up** in his novel *Finnegan’s Wake* to represent the sound of the thunderclap that marked Adam’s **fall from grace** in the Garden of Eden.

The fall
 (**bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronnttonnerronnttuonnthunn
 varrhounawnskawntoohooohoordeenenthurnuk!**) of a once
 wallstrait oldparr is retaled early in bed and later on life
 down through all christian minstrelsy.

Though it looks like pure gibberish, the word contains elements of real words from several languages, including French, Greek, and Japanese. And yes, it is possible to pronounce it (listen [here](#)). This example comes from the first few paragraphs of *Finnegans Wake*, and Joyce used several more of these 100+-character “thunder words,” as they’ve come to be called, throughout the novel.

Onomatopoeia Examples in Comic Books and Superheroes

Though not so common in modern comics, comic book writers of the past often captured the power of superheroes in action with blunt onomatopoeic language, mixing real words like “Pow!” with made up neologisms like “Blap!”



Source: [Classroom Ideas](#)

Onomatopoeia Examples in Brand Names and Marketing

Companies use onomatopoeia in brand names and slogans to make their marketing more memorable. Here are some examples:

- Pop Rocks (candy)
- Slurpee (7-Eleven drink)
- “Get some Zzzs” (Republic of Tea slogan for herbal tea)
- “Plop plop fizz fizz, oh what a relief it is” (Alka Seltzer slogan for indigestion relief)
- “Crunch all you want, we’ll make more” (Doritos chips slogan from [Jay Leno days](#))
- “Snap, crackle, pop” (Rice Krispies cereal)



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Everyday plain language can be pretty dull. Consider this example:

- “The car drove fast down the street and turned quickly at the corner.”

There’s nothing wrong with this sentence and it conveys meaning in a clear way. But, now consider this revision of the same sentence:

- “We heard the **vroom** of the car’s engine as it **whizzed** by and **screached** around the corner.”

The three examples of onomatopoeia highlighted in blue here make this version of the sentence a lot more vivid and descriptive, right? And that’s exactly why writers use onomatopoeia:

- To enhance the expressiveness of written language to evoke the sounds and feeling of real life.
- To describe things with sound that are difficult to convey in any other way.

With onomatopoeia, a gun doesn’t just go off, it goes “bang!” Thunder doesn’t just make a sound, it makes a “clap,” “crack,” or a “boom.” Birds don’t just sing, they “tweet” and “chirp.” Onomatopoeic words like these help bring written language to life.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Onomatopoeia list](#): A database of ranked onomatopoeic words, with a rating of 1-10 for each word (10 being more onomatopoeia-y).
- [The Wikipedia Page on Onomatopoeia](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including helpful examples from literature, media, and pop culture.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Onomatopoeia](#): A basic definition, also with a bit on the etymology of onomatopoeia (spoiler: it’s derived from the Greek for “the making of a name or word”).
- **Onomatopoeia on YouTube**
 - An original [pop song](#) written to explain onomatopoeia, including lots of examples.
 - A [video lesson](#) that explains onomatopoeia in under two minutes.

HOW TO CITE

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