Pun

ℹ DEFINITION

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

> A pun is a figure of speech that plays with words that have multiple meanings, or that plays with words that sound similar but mean different things. The comic novelist Douglas Adams uses both types of pun when he writes: "You can tune a guitar, but you can't tuna fish. Unless of course, you play bass." In the first sentence, Adams puns on the similar sounds of "tune a" and "tuna," while in the second he puns on the two meanings of the word "bass"—the musical instrument, and the fish.

Some additional key details about puns:

- Puns are ancient and important. Not only were they present as far back as the ancient Sumerian and Egyptian civilizations, but the writing systems of those civilizations, including Egyptian hieroglyphs, were in fact *based* on systems of punning.
- Puns are usually used to create humor, but can also be used in non-humorous ways.
- The word "pun" can be both a noun and a verb. The actual figure of speech is called a pun, while the verb form "to pun" describes the act of *making* a pun.
- Puns are also—but much less commonly—referred to using the more technical term *paronomasia*.

Pun Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce pun: **puhn**

Types of Puns

There are three main types of puns. All of them are based on words or phrases that either have multiple meanings or that sound similar:

- **Homographic puns** play with words that are spelled identically but have different meanings *and* are pronounced differently. Douglas Adam's pun about "bass," which references both the instrument (pronounced "beyss") and the fish (pronounced "bass"), is an example of a homographic pun because the words are spelled the same, but they sound different and mean different things.
- **Homophonic puns** play with words or phrases that are spelled differently but sound the same. Adam's pun on "tune a" and "tuna" is homophonic, because it makes a joke out of the fact that they sound identical even though they mean totally different things.

- ○ Note that homophonic puns don't always have to involve words that sound *identical*. They can also involve words that sound merely *similar*. For instance, a book about the history of puns called *The Pun Also Rises* exploits the similarity of the words "pun" and "sun" to make a pun on the famous Hemingway novel *The Sun Also Rises*. The words aren't identical, but the pun is still classified as homophonic.
- **Homonymic puns:** These puns involve homonyms, words that have identical spellings *and* sounds, but different meanings. Here's an example: "Two silk worms had a race. It ended in a **tie**." This pun plays on the fact that "tie" can refer to a race in which two participants finish at the same time, and also to neckwear that's often made of silk.

Compound Puns

Many websites on the internet also refer to compound puns, but these sites aren't always particularly clear about what that term means. In fact, the term often seems to refer to two separate things:

- **A buildup of multiple puns that play on each other.** The most famous example is this quip from Richard Whately: "Why can a man never starve in the Great Desert? Because he can eat the sand which is there. But what brought the sandwiches there? Why, Noah sent Ham, and his descendants mustered and bred." Here the original pun is on "sand which is"/ "sandwiches" and then all the puns that follow (Ham/ham, mustered/mustard, and bred/bread) build on the initial pun.
- **Puns that combine phrases through a shared word.** In this sort of pun, two different phrases are joined together through a pun on a shared word. Here's an example: "Where do mathematicians go for fun? To a Möbius strip club!" Here the pun is built on "Möbius strip" and "strip club" through the shared word "strip."

Put another way: the definition for compound puns is *really* not settled, but it's enough to know that the term can refer to either of these two things.

Puns, Double Entendres, and Malapropisms

Puns are sometimes confused with double entendres and malapropisms, two other figures of speech.

- **Double entendre** refers to any word or phrase that is open to two different interpretations. Often, though not always, double entendres have a sexual or illicit undertone. While double entendres *can* be created through the double-meanings of puns, they may also be created by other means, such as simple ambiguity about how to interpret a given word or phrase.

◦ For instance, a double entendre based on ambiguity occurs in the movie *To Catch a Thief*. In it, a woman named Francie says to a man named John: "I have a feeling that tonight, you're going to see one of the Riviera's most fascinating sights... I was talking about the fireworks." Francie's double entendre here depends on the fact that she at first ambiguously leaves unclear just what the "fascinating sight" might be, until she clears up that it's the fireworks. This double entendre doesn't play on any double meaning of "fascinating sight," so it's not a pun. It instead plays on the ambiguity of what the "fascinating sight" refers to.

• **A malapropism** is similar to a pun in that it involves substituting one word for another. But a malapropism doesn't involve purposefully playing with double meanings. Instead, it is the unintentional use of an incorrect word.

◦ For instance, if someone advised you to "Illiterate your ex from your memory" when they meant "obliterate," that would be a malapropism.

✳ EXAMPLES

Puns often appear in short quips or jokes, but also commonly appear in all sorts of literature, from poems to plays to novels.

Example of a Pun in *Alice Adventure's in Wonderland*

Lewis Carroll's novel *Alice Adventure's in Wonderland* is full of all sorts of wordplay, including puns. In the example below, Carroll makes a homophonic pun on the words "lesson" and "lessen."

> Puns appear in short jokes or quips, as well as in all sorts of literature, from poems to plays to novels.
> "And how many hours a day did you do lessons?" asked Alice, in a hurry to change the subject.
> "Ten hours the first day," said the Mock Turtle: "nine the next, and so on."
> "What a curious plan!" exclaimed Alice.
> "That's the reason they're called lessons," the gryphon remarked: "because they lessen from day to day."

Example of a Pun in *Hamlet*

In the beginning of Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, the main character Hamlet is upset at the death of his father and what he considered to be the too-hasty remarriage of his mother Gertrude to his uncle Claudius. In Act 1, Scene 2, Claudius asks Hamlet why he's so gloomy by using a metaphor of about "clouds" hanging on him:

> **CLAUDIUS**
> How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

> **HAMLET**
> Not so, my lord. I am too much i' the sun.

Hamlet uses the phrase "in the sun" to deny that he's gloomy, directly refuting Claudius's use of "clouds." However, at the same time, Hamlet is making a homophonic pun on "sun"/"son" to refer to the fact that Hamlet is actually upset that Claudius's marriage to Gertrude has made Hamlet his step-son. This example shows a way that puns can operate in a way that is not merely humorous. Here Hamlet uses a pun to hint at a meaning he can't say outright. The pun allows him to land a punch at Claudius without even obviously throwing one.

Example of a Pun in George Carlin's Comedy

The comedian George Carlin could toss off the occasional excellent pun. For instance, he once described atheism like this:

> Atheism is a non-prophet institution.

Here Carlin makes a homophonic pun on the words "profit" and "prophet" in order to play with the meaning of the common phrase "non-profit institution."

Example of a Pun in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

The title of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a triple pun: not only is it a homophonic pun on the name "Ernest" and the word "earnest," but it's also a homonymic pun (and an example of double entendre) because "earnest" was a Victorian slang word meaning "homosexual." The play itself is also full of puns. Here's one the character Algernon makes about his piano playing:

> As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte.

This pun operates in a variety of ways. First, it uses the primary meaning of "forte" as strength, and so Algernon is dismissing his not very good technical skill by saying that his real strength lies in the *feelings* behind his playing. But the word "forte" also refers to a kind of marking in musical notation, and it *also* refers to the actual name of the instrument itself (pianos were originally called *pianoforte*). So here Algernon is making a triple pun on a single word.

It's also worth thinking about the fact that there are so many puns in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. This is a play in which *many* of the characters are pretending to be people who they are not. All the puns, then, with their double and even triple meanings, thematically fits with the characters and their double lives.

Example of a Pun in *Romeo and Juliet*

This is another pun from a Shakespeare play, which is fitting because Shakespeare used a *lot* of puns in his plays. In this example from *Romeo and Juliet*, Mercutio (who is always playing with language in a way that makes him seem both hyper-smart and cynical—and on the verge of a nervous breakdown) puns homonymically on the word

"grave" even as he knows he is about to die from a wound he has received from Tybalt. Referring to his wound, he says:

> No, 'tis not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church-door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man.

Here Tybalt plays with two meanings of "grave," implying that the next day he will be "serious" as well as literally *in* the grave. In this pun, he captures both how death will rob him of his wry humor and also how it will put him in the ground.

🛠 WHY WRITERS USE IT

When most people think of puns, they think of groan-inducing jokes. But writers use puns for a variety of reasons:

- **To make groan-inducing jokes:** Of course, no one should ever *deny* that puns are perfect for making groan-inducing jokes.
- **To create humor:** The humor from puns can also be surprising and delightful. In other words, they can also create non-groan-inducing jokes.
- **To create double entendres:** The double meanings in most puns are very clear. But they don't have to be. A subtle pun can allow someone to communicate a hidden meaning only to those in the know, or to make a comment without definitively appearing to be

saying that thing. Such double entendres might be illicit, sexual, or even political.

🌐 OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia entry on puns:** Somewhat technical, but with coverage of the history of puns and how puns translate to visual mediums.
- **Shakespeare puns ruined by modern English:** An article that identifies puns that Shakespeare wrote but we don't notice because of changes in pronunciation over time.
- **The 10 Best Puns of all time:** At least according to this YouTube video.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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Chicago Manual

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