

Punning Vocabulary
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In my twenty-five years of teaching vocabulary to high school students, I have found that it is the unique that really helps in educating young mind. Their psyches have voracious appetites for new words, but they have to be fed in unusual ways.

One of the methods I use when approaching a new list of words is word play. Not every word lends itself to playfulness, but a large number do. Mix some of these frisky words in with the rest of the batch -- punctuating your lecture or introduction with them -- and you immediately capture your audience's attention. Many of the playful words I use are puns, but some of them are so forced -- based on sound and images -- that I prefer to call them Punnings.

Caveat #1: The words must be presented orally and the presenter must use some coyness in introducing the Punning words. Mix in several of these words and present each one (along with the definition and how it might be used in a sentence), doing it quite casually and with sincerity. It is interesting to notice which students are sharp enough to pick up on the word play. If you have a really slow class, you might have to milk the gag until somebody does pick up on it. Of course, you can explain the subtle humor of the word play, but then you know what happens to a pun when you have to explain it. It is better to wait for a reaction from one or two students and then let them lord it over the rest of the class.

Caveat #2: After you have had some fun with the word, be sure that the students understand the real definition of the word -- but encourage them to continue to play with the word on their own.

Caveat #3: Don't over use this gimmick. It works like a spice or an herb: Use it sparingly in a lesson and it works fine. Over use it and it becomes a little too much.

Below I offer a short dictionary of Punning words I use in my classes. Read these with an open (and slightly warped mind), and if you choose to use them, do it with caution and a good sense of humor. The sentences I have given are quick examples to show you how you might first introduce the words to your class. With a little practice you can make up your own, instead. To assure that you do get the full thrust of each Punning word, I have included some brief explanations, on occasion.

A Words

abashed Definition: embarrassed

Punner *A bashed* him in the head for makin' that remark.

(Read: I bashed him in the head for making that remark. Sometimes a little violence adds excitement to the word.)

acme Definition: highest point

Punner *Acme* any question, and I will give you an answer.

(Read: Ask me any question, and I will give you an answer.)

affirm Definition: assert

Punner I got *a firm* grip on the situation.

(Sorry, but I had to break the word and change the spelling to make it work.)

amnesty Definition: pardon

Punner *Amnesty* when people don't forgive me.

(Read: I'm nasty when people don't forgive me. Requires emphasis on the pronunciation to make this one work. Use some nastiness in your pronunciation.)

amoral Definition: unconcerned with the questions of right and wrong

Punner Does a story always have to have *a moral*?

anneal Definition: toughen by heating and then cooling

Punner *Anneal* down when I pray.

(Read: I kneel down when I pray. Don't worry -- I've never been called in on the issue of State and Religion with this one.)

ascetic Definition: of rigorous self-denial

Punner If *a setic* once *a setic* a thousand times.

(Read: If I said it once, I said it a thousand times. This usually gets a long Ooooooooo from the class.)

attune Definition: bring into agreement

Punner Please sing us *a tune* to make us happy again.

avarice Definition: greed

Punner You know *Ava Rice*; she wants everything.

(Actually, I have created a whole neighborhood of characters with words that break up into proper names, like this one. *Ava Rice* lives down at the end of my street, and she is very greedy.)

B Words

benison Definition: blessing

Punner The deer will give his *benison*.

(Actually, if you shoot the deer, he will give you his venison, reluctantly.)

buoyant Definition: able to float; cheerful

Punner The *boy ant* was happy with the girl ant.

(Okay, so this is an old joke, but it still works in class. In Brooklyn, *goil ant* goes over well.)

buxom Definition: plump

Punner The cowboy said, "Boy, that horse sure can *buxom*."

(Read: The cowboy said, "Boy, that horse sure can buck some." Don't hesitate when you read this, and make the ending really abrupt.)

C Words

cauterize Definition: heal by burning

Punner As he walked by his nasty scar *cauterize*.

(Read: As he walked by his nasty scar caught her eyes. Okay, this is another groaner.)

cede Definition: surrender

Punner Let's *cede* the lawn before we water it.

(Read: Let's seed the lawn before we water it. On the basis of sound, the class is never quite sure if you are going to give the lawn away or simply plant it with grass seed.)

censer Definition: vessel for burning incense

Punner No one can stand her *censer* perfume gave out.

(Read: No one can stand her since her perfume gave out. Emphasis is everything in presenting this one.)

chaste Definition: pure

Punner He *chaste* the man for being bad.

(Read: He chased the man for being bad. Mispronunciation is what makes this Punner work.)

chattel Definition: personal property

Punner The cowboy rounded up all the *chattel*.

(Read: The cowboy rounded up all the cattle. Use a slanted pronunciation.)

cholera Definition: anger

Punner He was so angry he couldn't pick up the phone and *cholera*.

(Read: He was so angry he couldn't pick up the phone and call her. Or if you prefer: He went out and bought his dog a new collar. Ooooooo!)

coarser Definition: horse

Punner His horse's fur was *coarser* than a piece of sandpaper.

(Read: His horse's fur was coarser than a piece of sandpaper. Or: Of coarser name is not the same as mine.)

cremate Definition: burn to ashes

Punner Lloyd liked his coffee with *cremate*.

(This is a play on the brand name Creamate.)

D Words

decorum Definition: correctness and good taste

Punner Before they eat the apples *decorum*.

(Read: Before they eat the apples they core them.)

defame Definition: attack the reputation of

Punner *Defame* makes the picture look ugly.

(Another mispronunciation: The frame makes the picture look ugly.)

default Definition: to fail to make payment

Punner "*Default*, dear Brutus, is not in our stars."

(Famous Shakespearean quotation from *Julius Caesar*:
"The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars. . . .")

defile Definition: to make unclean

Punner *Defile* is in the toolbox.

(Read: The file is in the toolbox.)

demote Definition: reduce in rank

Punner *Demote* is around the castle.

(Read: The moat is around the castle.)

devise Definition: to work out

Punner *Devise* man always figures a way out.

(Read: The wise man always figures a way out.)

diatribe Definition: abusive speech

Punner Let's use these colors to *diatribe*.

(I usually concoct a story about an ancient Indian clan that lived in the deepest jungles, and they were peculiar because their skin was entirely white -- until a group of explorers came along with some colored inks and decided to dye a tribe. If you seem serious about this, you will get the biggest Oooooo you have ever had.)

dilemma Definition: situation involving a difficult choice

Punner I have a problem so I think I will *dilemma*.

(Read: Emphasis is important with this one. Emma is one of those neighbors in my mythical village -- She lives three houses down from Ava Rice (remember her). You can dial Emma anytime you feel like it.

disconcert Definition: suddenly confuse

Punner The noise at *disconcert* is confusing me.

(Read: The noise at this concert is confusing me.)

discredit Definition: throw doubt on

Punner *Discredit* card is probably no good.

(Read: This credit card is probably no good.)

discursive Definition: rambling

Punner *Discursive* writing is killing me.

(Read: This cursive writing is killing me.)

dishevel Definition: rumple

Punner I dug a hole, but I ripped my sleeve with *dishevel*.

(Read: I dug a hole, but I ripped my sleeve with this shovel.)

dismantle Definition: to take apart

Punner *Dismantle* has to come off of the fireplace.

(Read: This mantle has to come off of the fireplace.)

dismember Definition: to cut up

Punner *Dismember* of the club is a real "cut up."

(Read: This member of the club is a real "cut up.")

disperse Definition: break up

Punner Please get the money out of *disperse*.

(Read: Please get the money out of this purse.)

dissertation Definition: manuscript

Punner The train will leave *dissertation* at five o'clock.

(Read: The train will leave this here station at five o'clock. Okay, so we let the grammar go to satisfy the gag.)

E Words

endorse Definition: lend your name to

Punner The little boy likes to play *endorse*.

(Read: The little boy likes to play in doors.)

euphonious Definition: pleasant sounding

Punner *Euphonious* as soon as you get there.

(Read: You phone us as soon as you get there. This was probably a command given to E.T. before he left for earth.)

expound Definition: state in detail

Punner That was an *expound* of fat I lost.

(Used to be a pound of fat, but is no more?)

F Words

fissure Definition: crack

Punner The valley girls said, "*fissure*."

(Read: The valley girls said, "fi sure.")

floe Definition: large floating sheet of ice.

Punner *Floe* said she was cold, today.

(Floe, of course, is a member of our neighborhood and lives next to Emma, whom we dialed.)

franchise Definition: right to sell

Punner Always get the *franchise* with your hamburger.

(Not to be confused with getting french fries with your hamburger.)

G Words

genus Definition: classification

Punner My boy is a *genus* when it comes to math.

(Here again we must mispronounce: My boy is a genius. . .)

germinate Definition: to start growth

Punner What did the *German eat*?

ghoul Definition: eats dead bodies

Punner Who is your *ghoulfriend*?

(Read: Who is your girlfriend?)

gist Definition: main point

Punner "*Gist* you wait and see, pah dner."

(Read: "Just you wait and see, pah dner." Probably said by some cowboy.)

gruesome Definition: horrible

Punner I used to be three feet tall, but then I *gruesome*.

(Read: I used to be three feet tall, but then I grew some. Or: I didn't have any tomatoes so I gruesome. This usually turns out to be another groaner.)

H Words

hierarchy Definition: grouping in order of rank

Punner He will work, if you *hier Archy*.

(Read: He will work, if you hire Archey.)

humus Definition: decayed vegetable matter

Punner *Humus* get rid of that garbage today.

(Read: You must get rid of that garbage today.)

L Words

lionize Definition: hold in great esteem

Punner Everyone said she had *lion eyes*

(Read: Everyone said she had lying eyes. The kind that don't tell the truth.)

M Words

minimum Definition: smallest amount

Punner The flower was a *minimum*.

(Read: The flower was a mini-mum.)

O Words

octagon Definition: eight sided figure

Punner When they came back they said I *octagon*, too.

(Read: When they came back they said I ought to have gone, too. Okay, so you will have to stretch this to make it work.)

opiate Definition: sleep inducing drug

Punner What did *Opi eat*?

(Read: What did Opi eat? Same as the German ate?)

P Words

pasteurize Definition: remove bacteria

Punner The ball flew right *pasteurize*.

(Read: The ball flew right past your eyes.)

paucity Definition: lack of

Punner The cats live in *paucity*.

(Read: The cats live in Paw City. This is just outside of. . . hmmmmm?)

pedagogue Definition: teacher

Punner You can pet a cat but never *pedagogue*.

(Read: You can pet a cat but never pet a gog. Gogs are very dangerous instructors of English. So watch out for them.)

progenitor Definition: ancestor

Punner The custodians were *progenitor*.

(If you mispronounce janitor this will work. The custodians were pro-janitor. Or were they just professional janitors?)

S Words

sedition Definition: rebelliousness

Punner This *edition* of the book is very unusual.

(Read: This edition of the book is very unusual.)

surfeit Definition: excess

Punner "What a wave. Get your board and *surfeit*."

(Read: "What a wave. Get your (surf) board and surf it." Sometimes you have to make up your own syntax to make these Punnings work.)

tenet Definition: rule

Punner Get that *tenet* out of the apartment, now.

(Read: Get the tenant out of the apartment, now.)

transition Definition: change

Punner My mechanic says my car needs a new *transition*.

(Read: My mechanic says my car needs a new transmission.)

W Words

waft Definition: be carried on air

Punner I wode my *waft* down the wiver.

(Read (like Elmer Fudd): I rode my raft down the river.)