
CHAPTER

WORD PLAY

ELEVEN

Word play is the category of discourse that includes tongue twisters, puns, word puzzles and games, pictographs and cryptograms, brain teasers, concrete and typographical poetry, lighthearted verse and songs. Poems that are more vehicles of thought or significant feeling than verbal contrivance will be considered in other chapters. The emphasis in word play is more on gaming than on communicating, although meaning is never lost, of course. Sound and rhythm are played up, thus bringing out the kinship with music and dance. Word play is sporting with the medium as medium. This focuses on rhyme, alliteration, assonance, meter, stanzaic form, and phrasing in the musical sense; it plays on sense and imagery to create the humor and nonsense of unusual connections.

For all these reasons, word play is a good medium for learning technical aspects of the language, such as sound, spelling, homonyms, and syllabic stress. As with other kinds of discourse presented in this last part of the book, however, student choice is essential. Far too many exercises and drills have been imposed on learners under the phony guise of games. Unless a person chooses to play a game, she's not really playing.

Because word play aims at language creativity, it encompasses the highest skills of poetry, which exploits the full resources of language—sense, musicality, and movement—to spring the mind and spirit. The poet is a profound player with language.

THE WORD AS THING

Words have sounds, rhythms, spellings, and visual shapes—all qualities that can be played with, turned around, responded to. Contrived repetitions are common in the oral culture of the young; they may owe their appeal to their origin in babbling and the pattern practice of crib monologues.

■ TONGUE TWISTERS

Tongue twisters exercise physical articulation and auditory and visual discrimination, stringing together words that are nearly alike. The game is to catch the *differences* between:

- Same sound, different spelling—"which *witch*," "tooted the *flute*"
- Same spelling, different sound—"placed *plain* plums on *plaid* plastic"
- Same letter, different combinations—"freshly *fried* flying fish"
- Same ending, different beginning—"the *Smith* youth's *tooth* was underneath"
- Same beginning, different ending—"Tom *threw* Tim *three* thumbtacks"
- Similar spelling, one consonant substitution—"sheik's sixth *sheep's* sick"

Books of tongue twisters provide alluring reading matter. Partners and small groups can read them aloud, first slowly and then faster and faster. Children can make recordings and compare them, do choral readings, hold contests, and make up new tongue twisters to share. They're delightful verbal playthings.

■ CHANTS AND CHEERS

Clapping out the rhythm of words is fun for children, makes them aware of stressed and unstressed syllables, and relates to singing and dancing. Children can start by chanting and clapping the metrical patterns of their own names one at a time (JEN-ni-fer BROWN, for example). Once they have the meter of a name, they can just repeat it with and without the name. Several names can then be strung in such a way that the metrical pattern is pleasing. For example, CIN-dy, Pa-TRI-cia, CHRIS-to-pher, DON can be chanted several times just to experience the rhythm, then maybe they can think of other words to fit the same rhythm—WA-ter, po-TA-toes, VI-ne-gar, MILK. Any words can be put together in this way, of course.

Place names, tongue twisters, nursery rhymes, limericks, or jump-rope jingles, school cheers and chants, and rhythmical games all lend themselves to this. Clapping and chanting can accompany swaying in place, stepping, or other rhythmic movement. This physical experience will help children connect body with mind and resonate to textual rhythms.

■ PUNS AND CONUNDRUMS

The peculiarities of English spelling are a source of a great many of children's favorite jokes. For many older students, Ogden Nash's puns and zany slant rhymes provide a handy model for their own composition. Collections of riddles and puns not only provide popular texts but also call for close and careful reading to discriminate between similar spellings. Puns—like much of the greatest literature in our culture—are deliberately ambiguous. An appreciation of ambiguity is a sign of growth.

HOMOGRAPHS

Homographs and homophones provide a rich source for jokes. *Homographs* are words that are spelled alike but differ in origin and meaning. They may either be pronounced alike like *butter* (the food) and *butter* (one who butts), or be pronounced differently like *wind* (breeze) and *wind* (coil up). For example:

How can you make a slow boy fast?

Don't let him eat.

Do you know how to drive a baby buggy?

Tickle its feet.

HOMOPHONES

A great many of children's riddles are based on *homophones*—words that sound alike but differ in meaning, origin, and sometimes spelling, like *bear* and *bare*. Here are a couple of riddles based on homophones:

What is a cartoon?

Music to drive by.

How is an army officer like corn?

Both are colonels. (kernels)

Or a joke:

Two fishermen came to a lake and read the sign posted there: "DON'T FISH HERE." One of them said "Yes"; the other one said "No." Then they began to fish.

Or a poem:

I saw a pair of peers
Sitting on a pair of piers
Paring a pair of pears.

CONUNDRUMS

These are more elaborate verbal riddles that pun more than once in the answer. For example:

What's the difference between a cat and a sentence?

A cat has claws at the end of its paws, and a sentence has a pause at the end of its clause.

What's the difference between a person late for a train and a schoolteacher?

One misses trains and the other trains misses.

Here's one by a fourth grader who followed the pattern of these two:

What's the similarity between moisture in the air and a library book that has been sitting around in a classroom for three years?

They were both dew (due) a long time ago!¹

¹ Our thanks to Wanda Lincoln, Baker Demonstration School of National College of Education, now National-Louis University, Evanston, Illinois.

MADE-UP WORDS

Puns can be the basis for new words that play on the sound and meaning of combined words. In brainstorming sessions, students can think up new words our language needs, such as *zappy* for a feeling that is part surprise (*zap*) and part (*happy*).

■ SPELLING GAMES

A great many popular games for adults and children such as *Spill 'n Spell* are based on spelling, including commercial and computer software versions, and activity cards presenting directions for such games should be available as an option in the classroom. For other spelling games see pages 133–138 in *BECOMING LITERATE*.

I SENTENCE YOU

Partners or members of a small group take turns giving each other a word. The other person has to make a sentence using, in order, each of the letters in the word as the first letter of each word in her sentence. Thus, if a player says “cat,” the other player must quickly come up with a sentence like “Charles always teases.” Players can time each other. Teenagers will have longer words and a shorter time to answer than young children. When elementary school youngsters are just beginning, they may not need to time each other at all because they may give up after a short time anyway.

FORBIDDEN LETTER

Everyone in a group agrees on a letter of the alphabet that will be forbidden. Then a questioner is chosen who does not need to omit the forbidden letter. She may ask any question she likes, and the person answering it must be sure to use words that do not contain the forbidden letter. For example, if the forbidden letter is *k*, and the questioner asks, “What do you think of this weather?” a player cannot say “It’s O.K.” or “I like it,” but she can say “It’s all right.” If a player uses the forbidden letter, she’s out of the game. Each player in turn answers a question, always omitting the forbidden letter in her answer.

SPELLING RIDDLES

To make these up, youngsters decide which letters or combinations must either be avoided or must be always included. For example, if they decide that the letter *i* is to be shunned, then they can make up a riddle like this: “My aunt has eyes, but she cannot see everything. She can see a dollar, but she cannot see a nickel or a dime; a boy, but not a girl; men and women, but not children.”

If they decide that any word the fictitious person likes must have a double letter in it, then they have a riddle like this: “Mrs. Wiggles likes coffee but not tea, kettles but not pots, kittens but not cats, and puppies but not dogs.” The person who answers the riddle must figure out the spelling principle involved.

ANAGRAMS

This popular old game consists of making one or more new words out of the letters of a given word. Beginners can play with words like *tan* and get *ant* and find out that *nat* sounds right but *gnat* actually spells the word. A word of four letters

dealing with long vowels might be *meat* (*team, mate*). Such short words allow players to try out all possible letter combinations. While one player manipulates the letters, the other can look up words in a dictionary, if mature enough, and both can try to sound words.

Beginners can start with the familiar game of finding little “kangaroo” words in big ones, like *every*, *very*, and *day* in *everyday*. Later they can rearrange letters as well and thus find in a word like *valentine* such words as *lean*, *in*, *it*, *live*, *eat*.

More experienced players can rearrange words of more than four letters, such as:

plates—staple—pastel—petals—pleats
kitchen—thicken

or phrases such as:

breakfast—fast bake
constraint—cannot stir

Collections of these can be put onto wall charts or into riddle books.

PALINDROMES

A *palindrome* is a word that can be read forward or backward and still make sense, such as *tot*. Guessing games can be made up of definitions of palindromes, such as:

What is a baby’s garment? *bib*
What is a legal document? *deed*
What is midday? *noon*
What is a joke? *gag*
What is flat or even? *level*
What are arias? *solos*
What were Adam’s first words to Eve? *Madam I’m Adam*

Some words yield a new world when read backward, such as:

tea—eat
straw—warts
ten—net

These can be made into riddles, such as: “What word will reverse a *piece* to get a *snare*?” (*part—trap*)

BEHEADINGS

Some words when decapitated become other words. Thus *glove* becomes *love*. Many words can be beheaded more than once such as *braid* to yield *raid* and *aid*. Riddles can be devised giving definitions of these words in a series, for example:

dish—tardy—consumed (plate, late, ate)
cost—cereal—frozen water (price, rice, ice)
put—intertwine—topnotch (place, lace, ace)
stored—lugged—was indebted—married (stowed, towed, owed, wed)
defraud—warmth—devour—preposition (cheat, heat, eat, at)

CAPPINGS

This game is like "Beheadings" except that a letter is added to, rather than omitted from, the front of a word to form another one. The word gets a cap at the front. Thus, members of a small group think up as many riddles as they can that are like these:

Cap a word that is a garden tool with a *b* and get a device that stops cars and trains. (*rake—brake*) Cap a word that means "aged" with an *s* to get "exchanged for money." (*old—sold*)

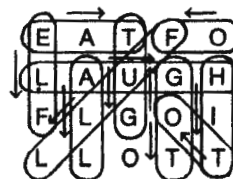
Here are others:

ox—box	able—table
hen—then	ought—sought
ounce—bounce	hop—shop

DIZZY WORDS

A popular puzzle that children can begin to make up as soon as they have mastered basic literacy is a square in which their partners can find and circle words written either forward, backward, or diagonally. Here's what a "Dizzy Word" square looks like before and after the words are circled:

E	A	T	F	O
L	A	U	G	H
F	L	G	O	I
L	L	O	T	T



Beginners can start with words that can just be read forward; they can progress to backwards and diagonal readings.

More mature students might construct word squares that have words that can be read both from left to right and from top to bottom. Here are two such common squares:

T	E	A
E	A	T
A	T	E

R	E	A	D
E	L	S	E
A	S	I	A
D	E	A	R

Puzzles can be devised that give only the definitions. Thus for the two squares above, the puzzles would be:

- Nine letters: *beverage, consume, consumed*
- Sixteen letters: *peruse, instead, a continent, darling*

CROSSWORD PUZZLES

This popular word play in which words are arranged in crisscross patterns, and definitional clues are given, should be a regular option for students. Correct spelling is crucial to success; errors are checked when new words are tried. Weak spellers can work together and pool their spelling capacity. Looking up the spelling of words in the dictionary becomes natural as an adjunct of the sport. New words are added to the player's working vocabulary as she guesses the words called for by the clue and tries to fit them into her blank puzzle. Crossword puzzles represent a fine combination of attractiveness and effectiveness.

Encourage students to look for crossword puzzles in magazines and newspapers and to bring them to class. Since many of these may be too hard, you may need to buy some consumable booklets of puzzles. Computer software, such as *Crossword Magic* (L and S Computerware, Division of HLS Duplication, Inc.,) takes student-generated lists of clues and words they target and forms them automatically into a crossword puzzle. Teachers and students can use such software to construct puzzles that deal with vocabulary of a certain difficulty or on a particular theme.

Beginners can construct and exchange simple crossword puzzles like this one:

B	E	O	A	N	A
T	M	F	T	T	D

The player fills in the blanks with a word (in this puzzle she is told that it's a man's name) that, when written across, completes six three-letter words reading from top to bottom. In this case the word is *Alfred*.

COMMERCIAL GAMES

Like the puzzles listed here, a great many commercial games such as Probe, Anagrams, Scrabble, and Upwords not only impose close attention to spelling but also provide a challenge to come up with new words. Using heavy cardboard, students can make their own playing pieces with letters of the alphabet painted on one side and design their own Scrabble-type boards.

■ VOCABULARY GAMES

As with spelling games, commercial dictionary games provide a fine opportunity for students to learn new words. The popular Password is one based on word definitions. The first two games listed below are old favorites that stimulate both vocabulary and spelling growth.

HANGMAN

This game (known by other names also) is the prototype of the spelling game that features guessing, letter by letter, a word one player has in mind. She draws a gal-

lows and below it puts an appropriate number of dashes, one for each letter of her secret word. Her partner asks, for example, "Does your word have an *e*?" If the first player's secret word does have one, she puts an *e* above the dash where it would appear if the word were written on the dashes. If the word does not contain an *e*, a head is drawn in the noose. As the game continues, each correct guess is rewarded with a letter on a blank and each incorrect one punished by another part of the body added to the drawing. The goal is to hang one's opponent before she guesses the word. Then it's the other player's turn to think of a word.

GHOST

In this game players try to keep adding letters to an ongoing spelling without being the one who ends the word. One player thinks of a word of more than three letters but doesn't tell the other players what it is. She calls out the first letter. Each player, in turn, then adds another letter to the one(s) that has already been called—*trying not to form a word*. After three letters have been called, each time a player ends a word she becomes a fifth of a ghost—a *G* first, then a *GH*, and so on. When she loses five times she is a whole *GHOST* and is eliminated from the game. If a player is suspected of adding a letter without having a word in mind, another player may challenge her. If she can spell a legitimate word using the letters already called, the challenger is penalized one-fifth of a ghost and a new round is started. For example, a player who's faced with these three letters, *m i n* might add a *u*. Another player could challenge her. If she doesn't have a word like *minute* in mind, she becomes a fifth of a ghost. The last player to remain mortal wins.

STREAMLINED GHOST

Members of a small group take turns making up word pairs or compound words; the last word of the first pair must become the first word of the next pair. Thus a group might string along this sequence: *lunch box—box spring—springtime—time lock—lock up—upstairs* or this one: *red hot—hot dog—dog collar—collar button—button hook*. Anyone who gets stuck must start a new pair and take the first letter of the word *GHOST* against her. When she misses five times, she's a streamlined ghost and nobody may talk to her.

I'M THINKING OF A WORD

This game and the next are rhyming games. This one is played by partners:

A: I'm thinking of a word that rhymes with *bear*.

B: Is it a fruit?

A: No, it's not a *pear*.

B: Is it a female horse?

A: No, it's not a *mare*.

B: Is it unusual?

A: No, it's not *rare*.

B: Is it something you do with clothes?

A: Yes, it's *wear*.

STINKY PINKY

The leader thinks of words that make a rhymed phrase, such as: *fat cat, soggy doggy, effective directive, or Afghanistan banana stand*. She tells the group how many syllables are in her words by saying that she is thinking of a STINK PINK, a STINKY PINKY, a STINKETY PINKETY, or a STINKETEROO PINKETEROO, but she doesn't tell them what the words are. Instead, she gives a definition. For the phrases above she would say: *obese feline, wet pup, productive command, or Middle Eastern fruit stall*. The partner or group members then try to guess the rhymed phrase. The computer software version of this game is Hinky Pinky.²

■ WORD PICTURES

When the word is looked at as an object, its shape and arrangement of letters can be played with to suggest visually what the word means.

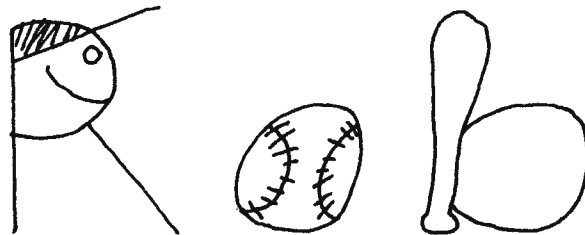
LETTERHEADS

Personal initials or names can be presented pictorially and used for personalized stationery or stylized signatures, symbolizing interests or values, as in Figure 11.1. Letterheads for famous real or imaginary persons can also be designed. Making up a monogram, a family crest, or an individual coat of arms is another way to visually depict interests and values and build positive attitudes towards oneself.

CONCRETE POETRY

Older students might try their hand at concrete poetry, which unlike traditional poetry, that appeals to both the eye and ear, appeals only to the eye. It is a graphic presentation; the meaning depends on the way the words are placed on the page. For example, in the poem in Figure 11.2, both the intertwining of the letters and the serpent connotation of the S say visually what a conventional printing of the word does not.

FIGURE 11.1 LETTERHEAD



² Available from DSR, Inc., 5848 Cromton Ct., Rockford, IL 61111.

FIGURE 11.2 CONCRETE POETRY



Source: Pedro Xisto, "She," in *Anthology of Concretism*, ed. Eugene Wildman, the Swallow Press, Inc., Chicago, Ill., 1969, p. 120.

TYPOGRAPHICAL POETRY

Like concrete poetry, typographical poetry depends for its meaning on the arrangement of the words and letters on the page. Unlike concrete poetry, it uses conventional capital and small letters rather than altered or distorted versions of the letters. Examples of the kind of typographical poems sixth graders can do are shown in Figure 11.3. Keyboarding students can use typewriters or computers to experiment with typographical poetry. In this example by e. e. cummings, complete words within other words are set apart and played on:³

tw
o o
ld
o
nce upo
n
a(
n
o mo
re
)time
me
n
sit(l
oo
k)dre
am

³ "tw" is reprinted from *Complete Poems 1913–1962*, by E. E. Cummings, by permission of Liveright Publishing Corporation. Copyright © 1923, 1925, 1931, 1935, 1938, 1939, 1940, 1944, 1945, 1946, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960, 1961, 1962, by the Trustees for the E. E. Cummings Trust. Copyright © 1961, 1963, 1968 by Marion Morehouse Cummings.

■ REBUSES

A *rebus* is pictographs or letters arranged to suggest a word or syllable. The figures may simply be letters cited by alphabetical name rather than used to spell a sound. Thus this rebus:

YYURYYUBICURYY 4 me

reads:

Too wise you are; too wise you be;
I see you are too wise for me.

Position may also indicate meaning as in:

stand	take	2	takings
I	you	throw	my

which reads:

I understand you undertake to overthrow my undertakings.

Young writers can put messages or stories into rebuses, using such figures as a drawing of a bee for *be* or a picture of an eye. They intersperse their pictures with conventionally spelled words, and words that are to be pronounced as the sound of the letters of the alphabet, just as children who are using invented spelling do, creating such terms as, DK for *decay*, BUT for *beauty*, MT for *empty*, NE for *any*, B4 for *before*. Vanity license plates are often written in this form, using both letters and numbers to substitute for a syllable or word. A reluctant writer might enjoy putting together a rebus story for a younger child. Collections of rebuses can be part of the classroom library to provide beginning readers with easy-to-decode material and to make spelling fun (see Figure 11.4).

■ PICTOGRAPHS

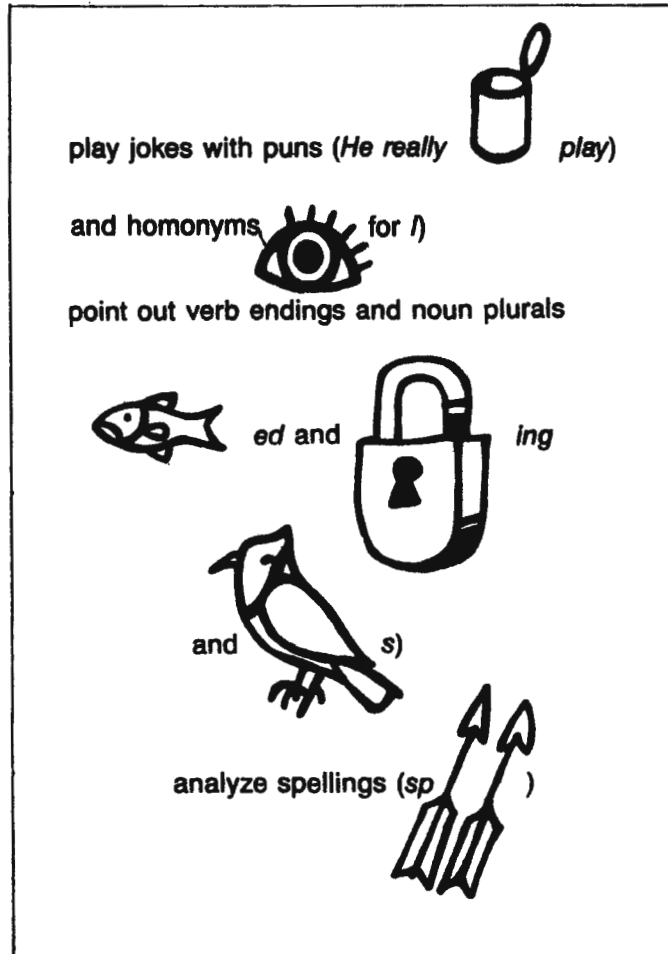
Telling stories in a series of pictures is a fairly simple process, but creating a *system* of pictures standing for ideas, or pictographs, as in Chinese, presents a much more challenging task and moves into the complexity of devising a code. Examples of stylized picture chronicles such as Indian winter counts can stimulate the development of actual pictographs, whereby certain pictures always represent certain categories of events or things. Graphic presentation is never outgrown; the maturity level of the students will determine the degree of sophistication of their representations.

■ CIPHERS AND CODES

Collections of ciphers and codes, which appeal to youngsters' love of secrecy and private language, stimulate very careful examination of a text and manipulation of symbols. Young children have had more recent experience than most adults at code-cracking, for as infants they heard spoken language as a foreign tongue, and as illiterates they found the written word a perfect cipher in which unfamiliar symbols encode familiar sounds.

Ciphers substitute secret symbols for individual letters or rearrange letters in a predetermined way. In order to use ciphers, one must substitute the secret sym-

FIGURE 11.4 REBUS MESSAGE



bols for individual letters, literally spelling out a message correctly letter by letter in the right order. Some ciphers such as *igpay atinLay* (pig Latin) may be spoken as well as written. A side benefit in working with ciphers is that one has to analyze the language, thereby learning, along with spelling patterns, such facts about English as the relative frequency of different letters.

Codes, on the other hand, are alternative languages with symbols for whole words or ideas, not individual letters. Codes, which include pictographs, cattle brands, and food-dating systems, give youngsters an alternative to regular language and hence a way of detaching themselves from the native tongue, so deeply embedded in our life from childhood as to be difficult to objectify otherwise. Like mathematical, foreign, and computer languages, codes enable us to objectify the native language, conceptualizing syntax and parts of speech in a new way. Students become aware of the arbitrariness of any language and the possibility of creating new languages that may serve them better for certain purposes. Students

reading ciphers and codes are introduced to a means of communication that has been in use since Biblical times.

One easy way for students to construct a cipher is to substitute numbers for letters or letters for numbers. For example, the letter *m* could be 1; *n*, 2; *o*, 3; and so on, with the numbers continuing at the beginning of the alphabet after *z* is designated 14: thus *a* is 15, *b* is 16, and so on. Another simple method is to substitute letters of the alphabet that are two or more letters ahead of each letter. For example, if the letter three steps ahead were substituted for each letter, the message, "Meet me at 10:00," would look like this:

Phhw ph dw 43:33.

Transposition or scrambling is another method of cipher-writing that a child can figure out and enjoy using. Here's a cryptogram or message written in a scrambled cipher:

TNTX HIHO ESEB KIML EYAI

To unscramble it you write each of the four-letter "words" in a vertical column like this:

T H E K E
N I S I Y
T H E M A
X O B L I

The first line is read left to right; the second, right to left; the third, left to right; and the last backward, so the message is: "The key is in the mailbox."

Scrambled ciphers may be made more complicated by rearranging the regular order of the vertical columns, putting them in some other predetermined order such as with the even vertical columns together first, and then the odd ones. Thus the square above is changed from:

1 2 3 4 5
T H E K E
N I S I Y
T H E M A
X O B L I

to:

2 4 1 3 5
H K T E E
I I N S Y
H M T E A
O L X B I

Dummy letters can be added at regular predetermined intervals to further throw the reader off. Let students experiment widely in developing their own codes. The possibilities are endless.

■ RIDDLES

Inasmuch as riddles disguise something, they act as a code that has to be puzzled out. Following the model of many of the poems of May Swenson,⁴ students can create riddle poems, which are simply elaborated descriptions of an object without actually naming it. Less verbal children can put together picture riddles by using just parts of familiar objects, the way Tana Hoban did in *Look Again!*⁵ See also page 218 in "Sensory Writing."

Like tongue twisters and jokes, riddles thrive in the oral folk culture of children, who enjoy stumping one another. And because of the question-response format, riddles beg to be read aloud with partners. They can be collected from classmates or new ones made up and shared via tape, transparencies, booklets, and so on. Students need to figure out a way to keep the answer or punch line hidden until the reader has a chance to puzzle it out for herself. For example, if youngsters make riddle books, have them put each answer on a different page than the riddle.

THE SENTENCE AS THING

Just as a word can be a plaything, so can a sentence. It has qualities of order, repetition, cadence, or style. Experimenting with sentence manipulation is for some learners a fascinating exercise. Again, the tone must be playful and the choice the student's, not the teacher's.

■ SCRAMBLED SENTENCES

One student cuts up into words a sentence that she has found or written, scrambles the pieces, and gives them to a partner to reconstruct. To challenge each other more, partners come up with harder sentences (and may find that some can be put together in more than one way).

■ SENTENCE BUILDING

Again playing in pairs, one player makes up a sentence by writing words or placing word cards in a sequence; then her partner attempts to add to that sentence with other words; then the first tries to build further; and so on, the object being to make as long a sentence as they can. Thus:

Bobby plays ball.

After school Bobby plays ball.

Every day after school Bobby plays ball

Every day after school Bobby plays ball with his friends.

Every day after school Bobby plays football with his new friends.

⁴ See May Swenson, *New and Selected Things Taking Place* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978).

⁵ Tana Hoban, *Look Again!* (New York: Macmillan, 1971). This is a book with holes in the page, and provides a model that is easy for children to imitate.

Every day after school Bobby plays football with his new friends until his mother calls him.

Every day after school Bobby plays football with his new friends until his mother calls him to come eat supper.⁶

■ MAD LIBS

This is a very popular game outside as well as inside school and goes under several names. One player reads a story which lacks certain parts of speech and asks listening players to supply these or other sentence elements, naming for them the part of speech or element needed:

"In [*a place*] on a particularly [*adjective*] evening, [*a noun*] was sitting [*adverb*] on the couch when there was a [*adjective*] knock on the door."

Parts of speech are taught as part of the game directions by exemplifying them in sample sentences, where verbs can be circled, nouns boxed, adjectives underlined, and so on, or colors used.

When the story is read back, results are very amusing because of the nonsensical but grammatically correct mixture of the original story with the random elements supplied: "Wildly the striped man coughed into an embarrassed rose." Children who play Mad Libs learn the parts of speech very quickly by the examples because their success in the game depends on it. The grammar can be made as sophisticated as desired by asking for a noun phrase instead of a noun, an adverbial phrase of time instead of an adverb.

■ FOUND POEMS

Word play is often merely novel juxtaposition. Students can cut out phrases or other excerpts from ads, magazines, or catalogues and glue them together in word collages, poems, or posters. Sometimes a complete statement becomes a poem just by being isolated or shifted to another context or broken into unusual sentence segments and set off in lines as a poem.

■ TELEGRAPHIC MESSAGES

Players make up a situation in which a message would need to be worded as economically as possible. This might be a message they would leave on a telephone answering machine to give crucial information during the minute before the final beep. Or a person in an emergency has to write a message of fifteen or fewer words on a paper no more than two inches square to be sent by carrier pigeon or inside a floating bottle. Or a nineteenth century explorer or pioneer needs to send a

⁶ See *Silly Syntax*, a computer game developed by Betty Jane Wagner to build an awareness of the logic of word order, the functions of various sentence elements, clause embedding, and terms for parts of speech and other grammatical elements.

message by telegraph but can afford to pay for only a few words. Or a TV program needs a short written message to flash onscreen to highlight a visual.

Students may want to stage contests to see who can get a particular message into the fewest words. This challenge is never outgrown, although the process can begin in the primary grades. At first children might write a message limited to fifteen, twenty, or twenty-five words, depending both on their ability and on the complexity of the story situation surrounding the short message. They might enjoy writing Terse Verse, poems that express some sort of action or idea in only two or three words that rhyme. Then add a title, which in most cases will be longer than the poem, as in:

WARNING TO FELLOW CIA AGENT

Fly,
Spy

Concise writing is really a sentence-reduction activity that shows which parts of speech and grammatical elements are most redundant and hence more dispensable. Do different people interpret these telegraphic sentences in the same way, or are they ambiguous? The requirement that a minimum of words should convey a maximum of meaning is a valuable pressure for any writer. This activity results in fragments rather than whole sentences, as in taking notes, where word economy is also a crucial issue.

As youngsters see which words are essential, they intuitively separate content words from function words that merely show relationships within sentences. If alternate versions of the same message are compared, the youngsters can see how their peers dealt with the problem of balancing information versus economy. They will learn the risks as well as the advantages of reducing sentences. See also discussion of "Single Statements" on page 401 and *LABELS AND CAPTIONS*, both of which put a premium on economy of language.

PLAYING FOR LAUGHS

A great many gags focus on misunderstandings of word usage, such as those in the familiar teacher-pupil dialogues.

TEACHER: Make up a sentence using the word 'notwithstanding'.

PUPIL: His trousers were worn thin at the seat, but not with standing.

Dialogue gags are good for partner reading and for preparation for taking part in script performing. Other gags arise from the ambiguity of misplaced modifiers, such as in the remark the mother made on Thanksgiving: "You know, we ate an awful lot, even the children." Students can watch for and collect "found gags," ambiguities in want ads or signs such as:

Boy wanted to deliver pizzas, about 16 yrs. old.

Buy your videotapes here. Do not go elsewhere to be cheated.

■ INSULTS

One of the ever-present trials of a teacher is taunting, teasing, and fighting among students. Any way that this urge to put one another down can be converted into

playful sparring is all to the good. The key is *playful*. To substitute wit for war is to move a long way toward maturity.

Many animals swell up, “display,” bark, or substitute other harmless behavior for fighting in potentially hostile confrontations. In a similar attempt to defuse or forestall conflict, people will shout, brandish fists and weapons, beat their chests, boast, jeer, “jaw” at one another, and insult, as facing armies do in Homeric and other epics. Such behavior becomes ritualized or stylized into a kind of game, as it has in the African-American tradition of “dozens,” or “signifying,” which is a contest to top each other in witty or outrageous insults. An art form frequently arises out of just such a serious function.

Once students have established insults as a game and art form that they can create within, this has the effect of objectifying name-calling so that the aim shifts. The insults regarded as best are not those that hurt, or that aim at a particular person, but those that entertain.

Connoisseurs can write down ones they have heard and post them or collect them into books. Like jump-rope jingles, game rhymes, limericks, jokes, riddles, tall tales, tongue twisters, and ghost stories, insults are a part of an oral culture waiting to become high-interest reading matter that is then exchanged and fed back into the oral culture. Thinking up good insults frequently produces comparisons, as does making up riddles and proverbs.

Epithets are popular among elementary children. These are words, phrases, sentences, or short verses that describe some quality or attribute that the speaker considers characteristic of a person. They are typically insulting in the “Roses are red, violets are blue. . . .” tradition of autograph books. Here’s an epithet:

Ho Hum Harry,
Lovesick and too young to marry.

If your class is not ready to sling insults about and still stay friendly, they can write verbal characterizations of famous people and see if the rest of the group can guess who is the subject of each epithet.

■ PARODIES

Parody is exaggerated imitation to make fun of someone or something. Improvised impersonations of TV advertisers, entertainers, teachers, and other figures are part of the oral culture of schoolchildren. *MAD Magazine* runs rife with parodies that kids love and that can inspire them to write their own. Good written parody of style is a sophisticated art, because it calls for isolating the *manner* of writing from the *content* and deliberately making fun of it. See page 298 for satiric cartoons.

Mature students can make up new nursery rhymes based on the rhythmical patterns of traditional verses, using rhyming dictionaries or thesauruses. Some will be satirical; most will be humorous. Writers can retell traditional rhymes in deliberately untraditional language—scholarly, elevated, slang, and so on—to create humorous parodies. For example,

Diminutive Miss Muffett
Positioned herself on a hassock
Consuming her clabber.
Forthwith ventured an arachnid
And established himself adjacent to her
And petrified Miss Muffett into evanescence.

Rhyme scheme, stanzaic pattern, and even some phrasing, can be playfully imitated, as in this parody of a well-known poem:

THE EAGLE

He clasps the crag with crooked hands
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ringed with the azure world, he stands.

The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

by Alfred, Lord Tennyson

FROM "THE EAGLE"

She clasps the Tide with piles of clothes.
High in the hamper the soiled laundry rose.
It's Monday, a day in the basement, she knows.

The wrinkled wear inside now whirls.
She watches the water that grays and swirls
And wonders why she had boys, not girls.

by Jane Hunt⁷

Other short poems that work especially well for imitation are Judith Viorst's "If I Were in Charge of the World," and for older students, William Carlos Williams's "This Is Just to Say."

FORMULAIC VERSE

Even the most cerebral or lyrical of poetry has its playful elements, its deliberate contrivance to make us wonder at its form. Because words have sounds, shapes, rhythms, and ambiguous meanings, they can be juxtaposed in ways that not only tease thought but also create something new—to be looked at, toyed with, and responded to on its own terms.⁸ Formulaic verses may be less poetic, in the sense of striking deep at feelings or putting experience into lasting and noteworthy artistic form, but they are nonetheless entertaining word play.

■ ACROSTICS

One of the easiest beginnings for children is the acrostic. Simply write a word down the side of a page, with one letter on each line. Then fill in a word on each line that begins with the letter on that line.

⁷ A teacher at the Baker Demonstration School of National College of Education, now National-Louis University.

⁸ See the computer software Compupoem, developed by Stephen Marcus and available from the South Coast Writing Project, University of California, Santa Barbara, 93106 for a program that stimulates students to play around with the ordering of the lines of a poem.

■ LIMERICKS

Limericks are highly regular, strongly rhythmical, rhymed verses, popular with many students. Some limericks are nursery rhymes, like “Hickory Dickory Dock,” some are tongue twisters, and others play on puns. The absurdities created by trying to make the matter fit the rhyme are part of the humor of limericks. As youngsters become saturated with this form, they will want to perform and compose their own verses.

The form need not be described or analyzed. As students become familiar through reading and listening to limericks with the rigorous constraints of their rhyme, meter, and number of lines, they will begin to use their wit to invent imaginative proper names, wild action, and hilarious images to fit the model. Limericks can be sung to a tune such as the example in Figure 11.5. In fact, trying to sing one’s limerick to this tune tests out its form and meter and may lead to revision.

Limericks are actually a kind of joke; they or other forms of light verse might become a kind of classroom fad that will be of great value in developing word choice, sentence structure, fanciful invention, stylistics, and verse techniques.

Limericks have a two-part thought form, subtler than their meter and rhyme patterns but related to them. In this respect they are like haiku (see page 396). Students might work in pairs, one composing the first two lines of a limerick and

FIGURE 11.5 LIMERICK TUNE

There Was an Old Man with a Beard

Edward Lear

There was an old man with a beard, _____ Who

said, “It is just as I feared. _____ Two

owls and a hen, four larks and a wren Have

all built their nests in my beard.” _____

the other finishing it. As students work with limericks, they sooner or later discover this thought form. This teaches some the use of the semicolon as nothing else ever would. It also gives students a legitimate one- or two-sentence discourse within which to work closely on word choice and sentence structure.

■ CHAIN VERSE

Like terza rima, where stanzas of three lines each rhyme aba, bcb, cdc, and ded, any repetition of a rhyme, word, phrase, line, or group of lines to link a section of a poem with the succeeding section constitutes chain verse. Students can take turns making up four lines of rhyming verse in an abab pattern. The last line of the first person's ditty has to become the first line of the next person's.

■ PANTOUMS

Like chain verse, this Malayan form is written in stanzas that interlock through repetition; the second and fourth lines of each four-line stanza become the first and third of the succeeding stanza. In the last stanza, the second and fourth lines are the third and first of the first stanza, so the opening and closing lines of the pantoum are identical. Here's part of one written by Brander Matthews:

EN ROUTE

Here we are riding the rail,
Gliding from out of the station;
Man though I am, I am pale,
Certain of heat and vexation.

Gliding from out of the station,
Out from the city we thrust;
Certain of heat and vexation,
Sure to be covered with dust.

.

Ears are on edge at the rattle,
Man though I am, I am pale,
Sounds like the noise of a battle,
Here we are riding the rail.⁹

■ COUPLET COMPLETION

Another way to play with verse linkage is to take the first line of a famous poem or couplet and write a second line that's in the same meter, that rhymes, and that continues or deliberately contrasts with the thought of the first line. The result will be a couplet with potential for humor. For example, if you start with Robert Frost's line, here's what you might get:

⁹ Clement Wood, ed., *The Complete Rhyming Dictionary and Poet's Craft Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984).

Whose woods these are I think I know,¹⁰
His putter's in the bag below.

■ TRIOLETS

Lighthearted rhyming in some of the French forms with their stipulated rhyme, meter, and repetition patterns might appeal to advanced players with words.

The *triolet* is an eight-line poem that uses two rhymes, abaaabab. Lines one, four, and seven are identical, as are lines two and eight. It's almost impossible to repeat so much in such a short poem without seeming playful; for example:

A TRIOLET

A triolet fits on a postal card.
The triolet's for me.
Ballades spin on for many a yard
(A triolet fits on a postal card.!)
To France With Love From Indolent Bard—
Hail, Gallic brevity!
A triolet fits on a postal card.
The triolet's for me.¹¹

■ RONDELS

A *rondel* usually has fourteen lines and two rhymes; the first two lines are exactly repeated as lines seven and eight and again as lines thirteen and fourteen. Here's one by Austin Dobson:

Too hard it is to sing
In these untuneful times,
When only coin can ring,
And no one cares for rhymes.
Alas for him who climbs
to Aganippe's Spring:
Too hard it is to sing
In these untuneful times.

His kindred clip his wing,
His feet the critic limes;
If fame her laurel bring,
Old age his forehead rimes:
Too hard it is to sing
In these untuneful times.¹²

¹⁰ From *The Poetry of Robert Frost*, edited by Edward Connery Lathem. Copyright 1923, © 1969 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Copyright 1951 by Robert Frost. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

¹¹ Howard Cushman wrote this to a friend traveling in France; it is from an unpublished manuscript: Howard Cushman, "Poems for All Occasions," July 1973, p. 6. Used by permission of Peggy Ledbetter.

¹² Austin Dobson, *The Complete Poetical Works of Austin Dobson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1923).

■ RONDEAUS

A *rondeau* is typically fifteen lines with only two rhymes. The first word or opening phrase of the first line is repeated as a refrain as the ninth and fifteenth lines. Here's one with a play on words at the end:

RUSS TO KATE

"Love—Russ to Kate" the legend ran;
And that is how the thing began.
Not half a dozen words, but four,
That morning in the flower store . . .
Or was it with the book or fan?
And who will say it was your plan
To terminate the long, sweet span
Of bachelorhood, that time you swore
Love, Russ, to Kate?

But such the frailty of man,
Fate sends him sprawling if it can . . .
The denouement? Ah, that's a bore!
You'll write—or try a teaching chore—
To eat—and let from Feb. to Jan.
Love rusticate.¹³

■ VILLANELLES

Like the rondel and rondeau, the villanelle has only two rhymes and typically nineteen lines, but some villanelles are longer or shorter. The first line is repeated as the ninth and fifteenth, and both the first and third lines are in the final four lines. Villanelles are always divided into tercets, or three-line stanzas of interlocking rhyme: aba, aba, aba, aba, aba, abab. The final four lines are a quatrain. One of the best known poems in this form is Dylan Thomas's "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night," which, unlike most villanelles, has a serious subject.

■ BALLADES

A ballade consists of three eight-line stanzas rhyming ababbcbc, and a four-line envoi, which is a conclusion or dedicatory stanza. The last line of the first stanza is used as the last line of the other two stanzas and of the envoi. For example:

BALLADE OF WINTER TEDIUM

This time each year I get out of sorts
With the joys of my fellow man at play,
Pursuing their so-called winter sports
In a spiritless, sweaty sort of way.

¹³ Howard Cushman. Originally published in a house organ of the Buffalo Athletic Club, 1926. Used by permission of Peggy Ledbetter.

"Are hockey and basketball here to stay?"
 I wail in a manner bereft of reason.
 "How long must we wait a happier day?"
 "How many weeks to the baseball season?"

I've put up with football at far resorts:
 Rose Bowl, Cotton Bowl; Blue and Gray.
 For soccer players in frozen shorts
 I've shouted a feeble hip-hooray.
 But one thing now I'm impelled to say,
 Though voicing it be akin to treason.
 We've suffered enough! Let us be gay!
 How many weeks to the baseball season?

Let squash and racquets on snooty courts
 In properly social strife hold sway.
 Bowling or billiards? Excuse these snorts!
 Who could consider such stuff au fait?
 "Ah well," say I, "and lackaday.
 Enough of these games when the weather's
 freezin'!
 "I sing of Spring with a too-ra-lay!
 "How many weeks to the baseball season?"

Envoi

Coach, watch that runner on third, he may
 Try stealing home if they've got the squeeze on!
 This is the crucial year, Ole!
 How many weeks to the baseball season?¹⁴

Cyrano delivers a classic ballade as he duels in the first act of *Cyrano De Bergerac* by Edmond Rostand.

A simpler form for the envoi is a solo line followed by a single response or refrain, such as "With a hey down, down, derry down," repeated after each solo line, as in the old folk ballads, (see "Ballad" on page 342).

For another sort of formulaic verse see the cinquain on page 417.

Granted, formulaic verse is not for everyone, but compulsive puzzlers gravitate toward this sort of thing. They can do more to interest the rest of the class in verse forms than all the best books on prosody. Students who construct verses as word play become interested in the technicalities of poetry. Try to make available rhyming dictionaries and other books that spell out various stanzaic and rhyme-scheme options. Versifiers need to know how many feet are in each line and what the regular beat of a poem is. To scan poetry before they have enough experience with it to be curious about its form has turned many students away from a mode of expression that is more to be played with than studied. Such play will lead easily into appreciation of the many serious uses and variations of the sonnet form.

Encourage students to versify as an appropriate way to mark a significant event. Students who write what has been termed *occasional verse*, composed for a specific event in a social group—birthday, holiday, special achievement, and so on—are following a venerable tradition that dates back many centuries.

¹⁴ Howard Cushman, p. 14. Used by permission of Peggy Ledbetter and the Philadelphia Bulletin.

COMPARISONS

At the heart of poetry-making is metaphor. Making up one's own comparisons builds poetry appreciation and rebuilds the world.

■ METAPHOR GAME

One person goes out of the room, and the class decides on a famous person whom "It" is to be, a person known to everyone in the group. Then "It" returns and asks questions, each question calling for a metaphorical answer. For example, the questioning might go like this:

It: If I were an animal, what would I be?

CLASS MEMBER: Giraffe

It: If I were a brand name, what would I be?

C.M.: Honor (a harmonica brand name)

It: If I were a shoe, what would I be?

C.M.: A hush puppy

It: If I were a food, what would I be?

C.M.: Coconut

It: If I were a place, where would I be?

C.M.: The Grand Hotel

It: If I were a historical figure, who would I be?

C.M.: Helen Keller

The game continues until "It" either guesses who she is or gives up. In this case, the famous person is Harpo Marx.

See also the activity in "Making It Strange" on page 396.

■ COMPARISON POEMS

Collections of short poems that feature comparison provide evocative reading matter and a stimulus for composition. This likeness may be expressed as simile: "The binocular owl, fastened to a limb *like* a lantern all night long";¹⁵ or as metaphor: "Morning is a new sheet of paper for you to write on."¹⁶ A single original *like* these picks out something and compares it so it can be experienced in a fresh way.

The best way for students to appreciate comparisons and feel comfortable using them is to become steeped in the figures of poetry. Instead of belaboring the difference between similes and metaphors, you would do better to present many poems based on a central comparison and let the class try writing similar poems. In "The Country Bedroom," for example, Frances Cornford begins, "My room's a square and candle-lighted boat," and continues the comparison for the rest of the poem's

¹⁵ Quotation from "The Woods at Night" by May Swenson. © 1963 by May Swenson and renewed © 1991. Used with the permission of the literary estate of May Swenson.

¹⁶ From "Metaphor" in *It Doesn't Always Have to Rhyme* by Eve Merriam. Copyright © 1964 by Eve Merriam. Reprinted by permission of Marian Reiner for the author.

eight lines.¹⁷ When a student sets up a single comparison as the frame of her poem, she *magnifies* the analogizing process that underlies both the conventional figures of speech embedded in language and the novel metaphors of creative thought.

So-called literal-mindedness does exist, but we believe it is due either to unfamiliarity with the figurative use of language or to an emotional defense against ambiguity.¹⁸ In any case, teaching comparison as a *concept*, explaining it, serves nothing except to make analogy seem falsely esoteric. Actually, nothing is more common and automatic than making analogies, since all of concept formation and generalizing depends on perceiving likeness in discriminably different things. One learns metaphor out of the need to make the unknown known or to make the familiar strange, as in "The Country Bedroom."

Mature students with much experience with comparison may be ready to experiment with metaphysical conceits—a form of word play in which one not only extends a metaphor but makes an unusual, even far-fetched comparison. Through profundity and absurdity, results bend the mind and are often funny, as John Donne well knew back in the seventeenth century.

SONGS

Poems and songs are closely allied, for to sing is to internalize metrical patterns as well as tunes, (see "Music" on page 212). Pauses, staccatos, the steep intervals between notes, lengths of phrasing—all suggest feelings, images and ideas of actions, and the words to express them. A small group can make up new words for a familiar tune and write them on a transparency, which can then be projected while the group reads or sings it and others follow the written words. Then the whole class sings the new lyrics.

Making up new words for a tune provides a lure to parody. If students deliberately choose words that do not fit the mood of the tune, they have a satire in song like the lively-tuned disaster ditties that Tom Lehrer sings.

Songs can be occasional verse composed to mark important events and holidays. The performance of this original material then is part of the celebration.

Song lyrics printed either in booklets or on the covers of record albums provide high-interest reading matter in any classroom. Recordings can be used for learning the tunes, for sing-along sessions, and as models for composition and performance. Some song lyrics like "A Modern Major General" of Gilbert and Sullivan are verbal patter. Others like "Van Lingle Mungo," a catalogue of names of real baseball players, are also a kind of word play students would enjoy imitating with their own material.

The African-American rapping is another musical or rhythmic form that students can invent in and that's definitely meant to be chanted or sung. Usually it consists of rhymed couplets like this sample:

¹⁷ Frances Cornford, "The Country Bedroom," in *Cavalcade of Poems*, ed. George Bennett and Paul Molloy (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1968). From *Collected Poems* by Frances Cornford, permission granted by Barrie & Jenkins Limited.

¹⁸ Peggy Parish's tale, *Amelia Bedelia* (New York: Harper & Row Junior Books, 1963, 1983) shows a housemaid who interprets everything literally; it is a good introduction to figures of speech. See also Fred Gwynne, *A Chocolate Moose for Dinner* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1976, 1988).

SCHOOL RAP

*Don't think that you're too cool
To listen to the beat of the rap about school.
Well, I'm talking to you people who go to school
Trying to learn the golden rule
About science, mathematics, and history
Working towards a G.E.D.
But you hate it when your teacher, she goes berzerk
She gives you hundred rounds of that homework.
Three thousand pages you'll have to read.
It puts a strain to your brain that makes your eyes bleed.
The math is kind of silly working down to your nose,
You bring a calculator, use your fingers and your toes.¹⁹*

From (1) writing new words to an old tune, (2) setting a poem to music of their own, and (3) plugging their own material into a borrowed form, some students can go on to making up both tunes and lyrics—to writing original songs. It's an excellent way to write and appreciate both light verse and serious poetry as well. Many American youngsters live in a musically sophisticated subculture and this can be tapped for language development.

Word play is fun, but we include it as a significant part of this curriculum because at its best it is also a creative response to experience. When words are the playthings, language power cannot help but increase.

¹⁹ Thanks to Dee Oglesby who teaches at the Detention School of the Cook County Court in Chicago.