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Oxymoron and Paradox

Definitions

Oxymoron: A two- or three-word phrase that contains opposite words or ideas. *Wise fool* is an oxymoron.

Paradox: An extended oxymoron. A paradox pits contradictory ideas against one another so that a statement appears to be untrue. However, when a reader evaluates a paradox in context, he or she discovers the paradox to hold a profound truth.

Examples from Literature

Shakespeare uses an oxymoron in act 2 of *Romeo and Juliet*: “Good night, good night! Parting is such *sweet sorrow*.”

John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* demonstrates an oxymoron: “Yet from those flames no light, but rather *darkness visible*.”

Emily Dickinson’s poem “There is a Solitude of Space” ends with an oxymoron: “*Finite Infinity*.”

Notice the paradox in these two Emily Dickinson poem titles: “Much Madness is Divinest Sense” and “My Life Closed Twice Before Its Close.”

In an essay on government, Ralph Waldo Emerson made his point with a paradoxical statement: “Good men must not obey the laws too well.”

In “Death Be Not Proud” John Donne uses a paradoxical statement at the end of his poem to illustrate his belief in an afterlife:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; *Death, thou shalt die*.

Defining Oxymorons

The complete meaning of an oxymoron is compacted into two or three words. On another piece of paper, write a full sentence explaining each of the following oxymorons.

1. working vacation
2. act normally
3. definite maybe
4. plastic glasses
5. found missing
6. small crowd

Interpreting Paradoxes

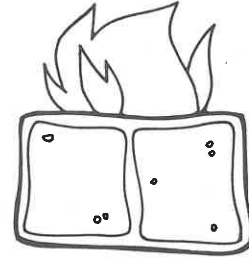
Many famous quotations contain paradoxes that state surprising truths. In two or three sentences, explain each of the following quotations.

1. Failure, in a sense, is the highway to success, inasmuch as every discovery of what is false leads us to seek earnestly after what is true.
—John Keats
2. A lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes.
—Mark Twain
3. A lifetime of happiness! No man alive could bear it....
—George Bernard Shaw, *Man and Superman* (1903), act 1
4. The wisest mind has something yet to learn.
—George Santayana
5. I must be cruel only to be kind.
—William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3 scene 4
6. What a pity that youth must be wasted on the young.
—George Bernard Shaw

Creating Oxymorons

A. Match words from the first column with words from the second to create common oxymorons.

- | | |
|----------------------|-------------|
| _____ 1. icy | a. estimate |
| _____ 2. bitter | b. sweet |
| _____ 3. jumbo | c. memory |
| _____ 4. exact | d. hot |
| _____ 5. forgettable | e. shrimp |



B. Now create oxymorons of your own by adding opposite words or ideas to those presented here. For example: respectfully *disobedient*

- | | |
|---------------|-------|
| 1. bright | _____ |
| 2. truly | _____ |
| 3. completely | _____ |
| 4. large | _____ |
| 5. pretty | _____ |

Creating Paradoxes

Write paradoxical statements of your own to describe the nature of the following:

1. school _____
2. friendship _____
3. pets _____
4. family _____
5. movies _____

Reading Tip

Look for extended paradoxes in short stories and novels.