

# Oxymorons

Ever noticed that it's **simply impossible** to find **seriously funny** oxymorons online? The **only choice** is to ask one of those **paid volunteers** at the library – the ones in the **long-sleeved T-shirts** – for an **original copy** of some **obviously obscure** documents that were **found missing** amongst some paperwork **almost exactly** one hundred years ago.

Notice anything strange about the paragraph above? It makes some sort of sense, yet it's riddled with contradictions. These are **oxymorons**. Here are some more:

- **Jumbo Shrimp**
- **Same Difference**
- **Pretty Ugly**
- **Definite Maybe**

open secret

act naturally

found missing

deafening silence

Microsoft Works

Advanced BASIC

virtual reality

pretty ugly

almost exactly

minor crisis

exact estimate

free love

†††JMJ†††

Great Depression

sweet tart

butt head

silent scream

good grief

near miss

hot chilli

†††JMJ†††

industrial park

sight unseen

idiot savant

original copy

random order

negative growth

build-down

mobile home

larger half

alone together

liquid gas

seriously funny

military intelligence

tragic comedy

definite maybe

same difference

constant variable

extinct life

only choice

working holiday

free trade

crash landing

sweet sorrow

taped live

tight slacks

light tanks

criminal justice

open secret

loyal opposition

light heavyweight

final draft

freezer burn

standard deviation

elevated subway

benign neglect

clearly confused

Hell's Angels

civil engineer

living dead

jumbo shrimp

unbiased opinion

original copies

plastic glasses

even odds

genuine imitation

freezer burn

rolling stop

peacekeeper missile

now then

student teacher

alone together

living dead

old news

peace force

**fresh frozen**  
**benevolent despot**  
**one-man band**  
**living end...**

**deliberate speed**  
**recorded live**  
**old boy**

†††JMJ†††

Punning can lurk even in single-word oxymora such as **wholesome**.

†††JMJ†††

### Conversion Puns

Closely related to the above is a group of oxymoronic pairs that rely on the coexistence of two parts of speech for the same word. Some of my favorites in this small cluster are **press release**, **kickstand**, **divorce court**, **building wrecking** and **White Rose** in which the oxymora emerge only with the interpretation of the two words in each pair as verbs.

†††JMJ†††

### Dead Metaphors

Over time a word may become emptied of its original meaning. **Fabulous**, for example, no longer denotes "based on a fable," and **awful**, for another example, no longer means "awe-inspiring." But enough of the primordial meaning may respose in a word that it becomes oxymoronic when set along another word that collides with its earlier signification:

**awful(ly) good**  
**damned good**  
**barely clothed**  
**clearly**  
**obfuscating**  
**kind of cruel**  
**a little big**

**terribly good**  
**many fewer**  
**exactly wrong**  
**far nearer**  
**hardly easy**  
**growing small**

†††JMJ†††

Close kin to the first two is **wicked good**. A product of American slang, in which **bad** has come to mean "good" and **cool** mean "hot," *wicked good* clearly empties the old meaning from wicked. But the draining is so contrived that *wicked good* should perhaps be assigned to the next category.

### Crafted Oxymora

Some compact paradoxes have about them a sense of consciousness contrivance and crafting, as when Stephen Douglas was dubbed the **Little Giant** and Tom Landry approached a Super Bowl saying that his team was **confidently scared**. When we say **same difference**, **global village**, **accidentally on purpose**, "it went over like a **lead balloon**," and "keep it down to a **dull roar**," we are likely to be more aware of the collision of opposites than when we say **old news**, **indoor bleachers** and **death benefit**.

### Literary Oxymora

Brightly crystallized forms of oxymoronic language become art in literature created by our greatest writers:

|                               |           |
|-------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>hateful good</b>           | (Chaucer) |
| <b>proud humility</b>         | (Spenser) |
| <b>darkness visible</b>       | (Milton)  |
| <b>damn with faint praise</b> | (Pope)    |
| <b>expressive silence</b>     | (Thomson) |
| <b>melancholy merriment</b>   | (Byron)   |

|                                     |               |
|-------------------------------------|---------------|
| <b>falsely true</b>                 | (Tennyson)    |
| <b>parting is such sweet sorrow</b> | (Shakespeare) |
| <b>scalding coolness</b>            | (Hemingway)   |

### Doublespeak Oxymora

When people consciously fabricate oxymoronic combinations with the purpose of confusing us, we enter the world of doublespeak, defined by William Lutz in *Doublespeak* as "language that pretends to communicate but really doesn't. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable... It is language that conceals or prevents thought." Oxymora like:

|                                  |                           |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>genuine imitation</b>         | <b>virtually spotless</b> |
| <b>real counterfeit diamonds</b> | <b>mandatory option</b>   |
| <b>new and improved</b>          | <b>terminal living</b>    |

constitute language that, according to Lutz, "avoids or shifts responsibility... is at variance with its real or purported meaning."

### Opinion Oxymora

When we inject our personal values and editorialize unabashedly, we expand our oxymoronic repertoire considerably. Those of us who spout oxymora to entertain others quickly learn that opinion (or editorial) oxymora ordinarily evoke the roundest laughs from an audience:

|                               |                                   |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| <b>military intelligence</b>  | <b>non-working mother</b>         |
| <b>young Republican</b>       | <b>war games</b>                  |
| <b>peacekeeper missile</b>    | <b>business ethics</b>            |
| <b>student athlete</b>        | <b>Iranian moderate</b>           |
| <b>designer jeans</b>         | <b>rock music</b>                 |
| <b>postal service</b>         | <b>Amtrak schedule</b>            |
| <b>airline food</b>           | <b>Greater (fill in a city)</b>   |
| <b>educational television</b> | <b>President (your scapegoat)</b> |

I make no pretensions of having forever clarified the discipline of oxymoronology or of having presented in my disquisition a complete taxonomy. First, I know that in some Platonic realm float oxymoronic forms that I have not yet made fixed and concrete. Should a special category be assigned to oxymora generated by emerging technologies? Some examples of these are:

|                          |                           |
|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| <b>paper tablecloths</b> | <b>green blackboards</b>  |
| <b>metal wood</b>        | <b>plastic silverware</b> |
| <b>plastic glasses</b>   | <b>plastic wood</b>       |

What about evolving oxymora, word pairs that were once pleonasms but have, of late, trans-mogrified into oxymora: **healthy tan** or **Soviet Union**? Or oxymora such as **criminal lawyer** (in a time of lawyer-bashing) that have traveled in the opposite direction and become pleonasms? Let us hope that **United Nations**, once an oxymoron, may soon complete its journey to pleonasm. And, speaking of *Soviet Union*, should place names be given a special place? A few examples of these are **Little Big Horn**, **Old New York**, and **Fork Union**.