

Have Fun with Oxymorons

VOCABULARY WORDS

1. Contradict /ˌkɒntrəˈdɪkt/ (Verb) to be in conflict or disagreement with
Example: She doesn't appreciate people who contradict her.
2. Irony /ˈaɪrəni/ (noun) the use of words that are the opposite of what one means, often for humor or emphasis
Example: "You're always so helpful, Mark," she replied with heavy irony.
3. Confusion /kənˈfjuːʒən/ (Noun) the state of not understanding something
Example: The explanation just caused her confusion.
4. Mess /mes/ (Noun) a situation that is unorganized and full of problems
Example: John's life was a mess when he became an alcoholic.
5. Sorrow /ˈsɔːrou/ (Noun) a feeling of being very sad
Example: I can feel her sorrow when her boyfriend left her for another woman.



An oxymoron brings together words that may have contradicting meanings, but together make sense in the right context. Take the phrase "awfully good" as an example. "Awful" alone is usually negative, while "good" is positive. But together they mean "very good." The word "oxymoron" is itself an oxymoron. It comes from the Greek oxys, meaning "sharp," and moros, which means "dull" — or "stupid." Some oxymorons are created by accident because words have more than one meaning — like how "awfully" above can mean "badly," but it can also

mean "very." Similarly, "seriously" can also mean "very" — so we can even say that a good joke is "seriously funny," which sounds an awful lot like an oxymoron!

When used on purpose, oxymorons are often used for humor and irony. For example, in their 1885 comedy opera *The Mikado*, Gilbert and Sullivan describe a bad situation as a "nice mess" the characters have gotten into. In the early 20th century, "Well, here's another nice mess you've gotten me into" even became a common phrase for the seriously popular comedy team Laurel and Hardy.

Shakespeare also had an awful love of oxymorons, often using them to show confusion, strangeness or mixed emotions. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo says things like "loving hate," "cold fire" and "sick health" to show how his love for Rosaline, which should make him happy, actually makes him feel terrible. And of course, Juliet later tells Romeo, "Parting is such sweet sorrow." The word "bittersweet" — which is even older than Shakespeare — can describe food that tastes both bitter and sweet, like dark chocolate. But when used for talking about how something feels, it describes how it could be both sad and happy at the same time — like when Romeo and Juliet part after meeting on her balcony.

DISCUSSION

1. Have you come across any oxymorons in English before?
2. Are oxymorons commonly used in your language?
3. What English-language classics would you like to read someday?
4. Who are your country's greatest writers? What language techniques are they known for using?
5. Do you know anyone who you'd say has a way with words?