

“DID YOU JUST MAKE THAT UP?” Puns in Everyday Conversation

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The hallmark of the compleat punster is the ability to work puns into real-life situations—and to do so in an appropriate, natural and spontaneous way. Unless one is skilled at ad-libbing, it's best to have a repertoire of material to draw upon. Your objective is to be regarded as clever and witty rather than irritating. But opinions may differ.

Here are some of my adventures in this curious endeavor. I can't guarantee that everything is original, but I independently created all the items that follow—and have used them for years without challenge.

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One evening, a friend and I attended a concert, followed by a party that we were not aware had been planned. We wandered into the festivities but we knew no one and were quickly bored. Looking around idly, my companion asked, "Why are we here?" I replied, "Well, some say it's because of evolution, while others favor a creationist explanation."

At a business lunch, I happened to be carrying a magazine clipping that described a dieting trick. Instead of pouring the dressing on your salad, the article advised, dip your fork into it, thus cutting calories. "Do you know the name of this technique?" I queried. "Tine Daily."

A while ago, my neighborhood health club replaced all the towels with new ones of inferior quality, causing much grumbling among members. The replacements, I suggested, must be Shakespearean towels. They should be thick and thirsty, but instead they're lean and hungry.

At a conference, I unexpectedly encountered the wife of a former client, whom I hadn't seen in 20 or more years. "You haven't changed!" she exclaimed. "There's plenty of time for that," I replied. "The dinner isn't until this evening."

Recently, I met a friend who was engaged in a spirited discussion of tax policy. He concluded with the comment that "God is in the details," then called upon me for confirmation of that maxim. I declined to participate in the debate, but couldn't resist an observation. "For religious fundamentalists," I countered, "The details are in the God."

During an argument with my wife (now ex-, perhaps not surprisingly), she said reprovingly, "I expected more of you." "Well," I riposted, "There's no one else in the room."

And now, here's a compilation of "Puns and Wordplay for All Occasions"—pithy remarks that you can deploy in a variety of situations. Like the ones above, all have been field-tested. This list may be clipped or photocopied to create a handy wallet-size reference. Use at your own risk.

- When a problem or dilemma arises: "As plumbers say, it's not drain surgery."
- Of someone mistakenly assumed to be deceased: "He's still alive and ticking."
- To a person who is attentive to details: "You're certainly observant, even if you're not religious."
- Confronted with an oversized edible item: "To quote Mr. Keebler, it's a meal in its elf."
- While attempting to decipher complicated technical instructions: "It's all Geek to me."
- In anticipation of bad news: "As they say at the Mount Olympus charity bachelor auctions: God for bid!"
- To emphasize that someone is a stranger: "As we used to say in the cheese industry, I don't know him from Edam."
- Deciding whether to purchase yet another new book or video: "It's always the Einstein problem: space-time."
- On being served an extravagant dessert: "So rich, it has its own tax shelters."
- Admitting a mistake: "Like the orthopedist's patient, I stand corrected."
- Hearing a surprising revelation: "You could have knocked me over with a father!"

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Though some disparage punning, it should be obvious by now that I am not among those curmudgeons. Rather, I share the view of British scholar Walter Redfern. In his superb book titled simply *Puns* (Blackwell, 1984 and Penguin, 2000), he observes, "Puns keep us on the alert, and responding to them reveals that we are alert. . . . They make us stretch our minds and double our attention."

So I encourage you to engage in this mind-bending activity as frequently as possible. Not only is it good for you, but an appreciative listener may respond, "Good for you!"