

Say What?

Learn about a quirky type of humor and try writing some comical sentences.

Props & Preparations

Have paper and pens or pencils on hand for participants. After reading the activity, people can try a quick writing exercise.

Say What?

Paraproisdokians

Paraproisdokians (*pair-uh-prohz-DOH-kee-uhns*) have long been used in writing and speech, but you won't find this unusual word in the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary. The exact origins of the oddball word are unknown, but it likely derives from the Greek words *para*, meaning "beyond," and *prosdokia*, or "expectation." And that's exactly what it is: a phrase or sentence that unexpectedly goes beyond your expectations.

One of the reasons paraproisdokians can be so effective is that they rely on our natural tendency to think we know how a familiar sentence will end. (That's why we find ourselves finishing other people's sentences.) When a sentence ends differently than we infer, possibly changing the meaning radically, the result can be confusion or humor. Either way, paraproisdokians catch us off guard and are a good reminder to keep our brains flexible—and to not interrupt people!



Paraproisdokians are often used by comedians and other public figures. Enjoy reading these out loud.

- "I saw a bank that said '24-Hour Banking,' but I don't have that much time." ~ *Steven Wright*
- "When I was a kid my parents moved a lot, but I always found them." ~ *Rodney Dangerfield*
- "I've had a perfectly lovely evening, but this wasn't it." ~ *Groucho Marx*
- "He taught me housekeeping; when I divorce, I keep the house." ~ *Zsa Zsa Gabor*
- "Half of marriages end in divorce; then there are the really unhappy ones." ~ *Joan Rivers*
- "I have the heart of a small boy—in a glass jar on my desk." ~ *Stephen King*
- "If I could say a few words, I would be a better public speaker." ~ *Homer Simpson*
- "Outside of a dog, a book is a man's best friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read."
~ *Groucho Marx*
- "When I was growing up, I always wanted to be someone. Now I realize I should have been more specific." ~ *Lily Tomlin*

- “When my kids become wild and unruly, I use a nice, safe playpen. When they’re finished, I climb out.” ~ *Erma Bombeck*
- “On the other hand, you have different fingers.” ~ *Steven Wright*
- “Blessed are the young, for they shall inherit the national debt.” ~ *Herbert Hoover*
- “People say I’m indecisive, but I don’t know about that.” ~ *George H. W. Bush*

More Examples of Paraprosdokians

- Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana.
- Take my advice; I’m not using it.
- Where there’s a will, I want to be in it.
- I didn’t say it was your fault; I said I was blaming you.
- You do not need a parachute to jump out of a plane. You only need a parachute to jump out of a plane twice.
- Change is inevitable, except from a vending machine.
- If you fear change, leave it in the tip jar.
- There are three kinds of people in the world—those who can count and those who can’t.
- I’m supposed to respect my elders, but it’s getting harder and harder for me to find one.
- The last thing I’d want to do is hurt you, but it’s on my list.
- Silence is golden, but duct tape is silver.

Try It Out

Write some paraprosdokians of your own. You can use the prompts below to get started. We added our own endings in the parentheses to get your creative juices flowing.

- I’ve had great dates... (though I prefer raisins).
- You’re never too old to... (get older).
- At the casino, I tried to draw a good hand,... (but I’m not a great artist).
- It’s like learning to ride a bicycle;... (you fall a lot).
- I’ve got a leg up... (because my doctor said to keep it elevated).
- You can’t teach an old dog... (how to speak French).
- I’d like to go to school... (but I have to go to work instead).
- It’s great being a parent... (according to my mother).
- Life is funny... (but I don’t have a sense of humor).