

# Just for Laughs™

## Understanding Multiple Meanings in Jokes

Grades 3 & Up • Ages 8 & Up

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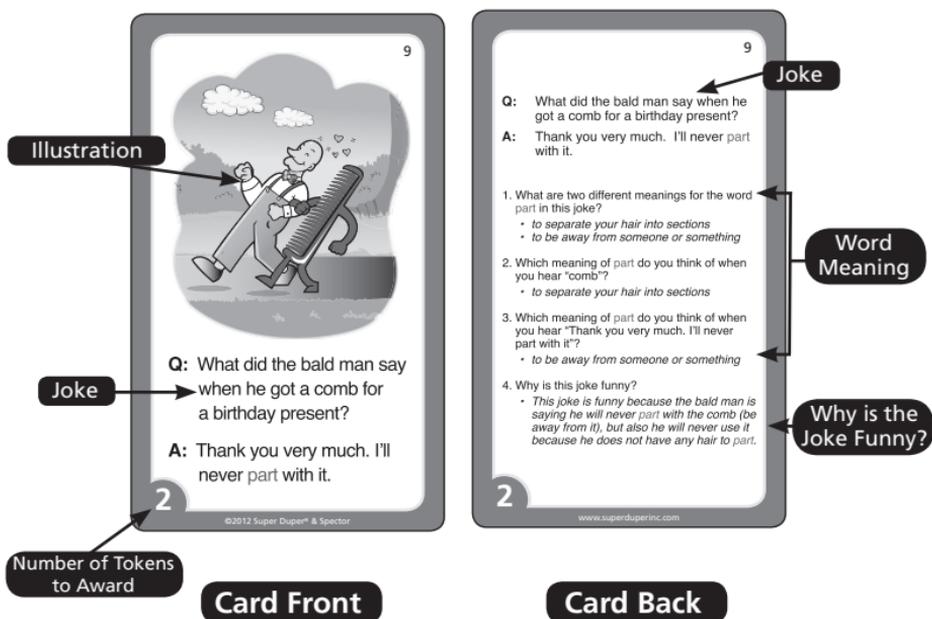
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## Introduction

One of the most difficult things to accomplish in learning a language is understanding jokes in that language — what they mean and why they are funny. The reason for this is because humor often relies on particular words and phrases that have more than one meaning in that language. *Just for Laughs* addresses this issue by giving students 100 jokes that include multiple meaning words, phrases, and sentences in them.

The front side of each *Just for Laughs*™ card includes a silly joke, plus a goofy picture illustrating the joke. (For fun, players can try to guess the answers to the jokes before moving on to the lesson on the back of the card.) The back of the card has a four-part lesson that will help the players understand why the joke is funny. The deck includes 40 jokes with multiple meaning words, 30 with multiple meaning phrases, and 30 with multiple meaning sentences. Students earn “smile” tokens as they play. Cards are 3” x 5”.



## Materials

- 100 Illustrated Cards (3" x 5")
- 100 Smile Tokens
- Information Booklet

## How to Play

Choose one or more sets of multiple meaning joke cards – words, phrases, and/or sentences. Shuffle the cards and place them face up on the table. Choose a card. Then show the illustration and read the joke to the player. Have the player try to guess why the joke is funny. Then read the lesson to the student, and have him/her answer the four questions. There is a number one or two in the bottom left corner of each card. This tells you how many “smile” tokens the student earns. Student with the most tokens at the end of the game wins!

## Research and Theory

Children and adolescents with impaired language abilities, in general, have been found to have significantly poorer comprehension of humor than their typically developing peers. Their comprehension of humor is impeded by limited vocabularies and world knowledge, difficulty treating language metalinguistically, and difficulty handling figurative language (Blue, 1981; Donahue & Bryan, 1984; Milosky, 1990; Nippold, 2007; Nippold, Allen, & Kirsch 2001; Spector, 1992, 1996, 1997, 2009). The extent to which any one of these factors affects the comprehension of humor is not clear. It is likely that they interact with each other. Another possible source of difficulty may be that individuals with impaired language skills simply lack experience with the humor used by their typically achieving peers.

Humor occurs frequently in spontaneous conversation, in media, and in academic settings. Not only do humorous comments find their way into classroom lectures and discussions, but in many instances they find their way into school texts as well. The ability to understand humor gives an individual a feeling of power in coping with social and school situations. The inability to express or understand humor may cause a feeling of social isolation and also may affect literacy (Donahue & Bryan, 1984; van Kleeck, 1987; Wiig, 1984; Secord & Wiig, 1993; Spector, 1997, 2009).

In addition to humorous comments found in everyday conversation, humor is frequently found in the media to capture attention. A magazine advertisement for a carpet cleaning product shows a piece of chocolate cake that has fallen and stained a carpet. The advertisement states, "To us this is a piece of cake." A newspaper headline proclaims, "Shipbuilders launch contract talks." On a bumper sticker we see, "I owe, I owe, so off to work I go." The pervasiveness of humor items in everyday life emphasizes the need for individuals to develop the ability to interpret such items.

## What is Humor?

According to the incongruity-resolution theory (Jones, 1970; Schultz, 1972; Suls, 1972), humor results when the incongruous is resolved (the punchline is seen to make sense at some level in terms of the information given earlier in the joke). Lacking a resolution, an individual does not "get" the joke and is puzzled or even frustrated. The resolution phase is a form of problem solving, an attempt to draw inferences that allow one to form a link between the initial body of the joke, cartoon, etc., and its ending. Both incongruity and resolution are necessary for humor to occur.

*Just for Laughs™* teaches individuals to identify and resolve incongruity in humor items, to recognize and explain particular

elements of humor, and to recognize humor cues. Developed for individuals from age eight through adulthood, this game uses a cognitive strategies approach to address deficits in the comprehension of linguistic-based humor. The goals are as follows:

- a. To improve an individual's awareness of the demands of a task.
- b. To help the individual find the relevant strategy.
- c. To describe the strategy to the individual.
- d. To apply the strategy in controlled practice materials.

*Just for Laughs™* contains humor items that are grouped according to the following linguistic elements.

1. *Multiple-Meaning Words*, in which the humor results from the ambiguity of a word.

*Example:* The first horse motel was opened to provide animals with a stable environment.

2. Syntactic elements, which generate humor.

- a. *Multiple-Meaning Phrases* (idiomatic expressions generally fall into this category).

*Example:* Allie: "Whenever I'm down in the dumps I buy myself a pair of shoes."

Chloe: "So that's where you get them!"

- b. *Multiple-Meaning Sentences*

*Example:* Sign at the zoo: "Please do not feed the animals. If you have any suitable food, give it to the guard on duty."

## **Populations Who Can Benefit**

### **Individuals With Language and Learning Disabilities**

Individuals who have a language disorder, language-based learning disability, or reading disability generally have poor metalinguistic skills (i.e., the ability to reflect on language as an entity and the ability to analyze the linguistic components of language [van Kleeck, 1984; 1987]). As a result, they frequently have difficulties dealing with ambiguous material and humor.

### **Individuals With Traumatic Brain Injury and Other Neurological Impairments**

In addition to children and adolescents with impaired language abilities, *Just for Laughs*<sup>™</sup> also can be beneficial to individuals who have sustained damage in either hemisphere of the brain. Simultaneous processing, associated primarily with the right hemisphere, is crucial to achieve humorous insights. Sequential processing, associated with the left hemisphere, is involved in providing the information necessary to achieve such insights. Thus, appreciation of humor requires that an individual be capable of holistic cognitive processing (McGhee, 1983; Ylvisaker, Kolpan, & Rosenthal, 1994).

Many cognitive deficits that are noted in non-humor contexts also interfere with the comprehension of humor. Individuals with brain injuries have difficulty grasping humor because of their reduced ability to consider connotations of words, interpret simple metaphors, organize information into coherent sequences, detect bizarre or incongruous elements, integrate details into a broad whole, judge the plausibility of an event relative to a particular context, consider interrelationships between parts, and go beyond specific details to “get the point” of a message (Springer & Deutsch, 1981).

Many individuals with brain injuries are hospital patients who can greatly benefit from a “dose of humor.” The items in this game provide many opportunities for humorous moments in remediation designed to deal with cognitive and linguistic deficits. Humor helps to reduce anger, fear, and depression. As Norman Cousins observed, “Laughter is healing.”

### **Individuals Learning English as a Second Language**

Individuals who are learning English as a second language, or are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, have great difficulty understanding jokes, puns, and riddles in English. Although they may have mastered the more concrete aspects of morphology, phonology, and syntax, the abstract elements of the English language, such as words with multiple meanings or idiomatic expressions, are far more elusive (Spector, 1997). Given that *Just for Laughs™* focuses upon developing awareness and understanding of the linguistic manipulations that are the basis for humor, it certainly is appropriate for bilingual populations.

### **Individuals Who Want to Improve Their Ability to Understand Ambiguous Language and Humor**

At one time or another, most of us have experienced confusion when trying to grasp the meaning of an ambiguous word or phrase. For some of us this happens more often than we would care to admit. For example, how often do we think “I don’t get it” when someone tells a joke, makes a pun, or makes a comment based on “double entendre.” The development of metalinguistic skills needed to understand humor continues until 13 or 14 years of age (Nippold 1985; 2007; Wallach & Miller 1988). In fact, when comparing language impaired adolescents with typically developing adolescents, Nippold, Martin, and Erskine (1988) and Spector (1990, 1996) found that even typically

developing adolescents did not completely understand the abstract, figurative language upon which humor is based.

An inability to understand ambiguous words, phrases, or sentences in books can impair literacy and, in general, can cause a loss of the pleasure given by the many forms of humor and word play based on linguistic ambiguity.

## **How *Just for Laughs* Can Help**

Metalinguistic awareness, as described by van Kleeck (1987), is the ability to reflect on language as an entity and the ability to analyze language into its linguistic units. The development of metalinguistic skills generally occurs between seven and twelve years of age with the advent of concrete operational thinking (Piaget, 1954). However, many children and adolescents with impaired language abilities have not adequately developed these skills, and in individuals who have sustained head trauma, cerebrovascular accidents, or other neurological impairments these skills may become impaired.

The humor items that comprise the card decks of *Just for Laughs*<sup>™</sup> foster the development of metalinguistic skills such as evoking new and different meanings of words and phrases, and interpreting words and phrases literally and figuratively.