

# Oxymoron, what is it

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 2 min read

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Oxymoron: what is it?

A dictionary definition: "A rhetorical figure in which an epigrammatic effect is created by the conjunction of incongruous or contradictory terms"

The conjunction of words which, at first view, seem to be contradictory or incongruous, but whose surprising juxtaposition expresses a truth or dramatic effect, such as, "cool fire", "deafening silence", "wise folly", "sweet sorrow", "bitter sweet" or "original copy" and so forth. An oxymoron is similar to a paradox, but more compact, usually consisting of just two successive words.

There is a class of expressions that are often labeled oxymorons (or more correctly, oxymora) but are not. Rather, the speaker retrofits the concept of the oxymoron onto the term, often intending humour from the resulting observation. Usually such perceived oxymora depend on substitution of an alternate meaning for the noun in the phrase (e.g. "old news", where the word "news" is interpreted as "new" rather than "information").

## Further examples:

- extensive briefings
- random order
- detailed summary
- jumbo shrimp
- government initiative
- neutral point of view

Some humorists create jokes around such perceived oxymora. Some examples:

- military intelligence
- female rationality
- male sensitivity
- corporate ethics

Indeed, in recent usage it has become fashionable to refer to any contradiction at all as an "oxymoron", especially in this facetious sense. For example, if someone refers to "an honest politician", someone else might respond, "Now there's an oxymoron!"

This used to be referred to as a "contradiction in terms". The fashion may have arisen because "oxymoron" sounded more exotic or learned than "contradiction", but its widespread use in this sense is based on a misunderstanding of the original, literary meaning of "oxymoron" which implies an artful use of a contradiction for effect. At present, current dictionaries appear to mention only the original sense of "oxymoron", but it is possible that in future the distinction will be blurred, and the original meaning of "oxymoron" will be lost.

## **Oxymorons**

acute dullness

act naturally

## **Advanced BASIC**

airline food

almost exactly

alone together

## **British fashion**

business ethics

butthead

cafeteria food

calm wind

cardinal sin

civil engineer

clean coal

coal mine safety

computer security

clearly ambiguous

clearly confused

clearly misunderstood

constant variable

corporate conscience

a definite maybe

deliberately thoughtless

diet ice cream

domestic bliss

educational television

exact estimate

extensive briefing

extinct life

federal budget

flexible ethics

found missing

friendly fire

genuine imitation

government organization

guest host

healthy chocolate

holy war

ill health

industrial park

instant classic

intense apathy

jumbo shrimp

larger half

liquid gas

living dead

## **Microsoft Works**

military intelligence

minor miracle

new classic

## **New York culture**

non-alcoholic beer

non-working mother

normal deviation

old news

only choice

on-time airliner

on-time train

open secret

original copies

paid volunteer

peacekeeper missile

plastic glasses

plastic silverware

postal service

pretty ugly

private citizen

qualified success

rap music

religious tolerance

resident alien

same difference

scheduled spontaneity

scientific belief

second best

seriously funny

silent scream

small crowd

standard deviation

synthetic natural gas  
taped live  
temporary tax increase  
terribly enjoyable  
terribly pleased  
tight slacks  
tragic comedy  
train schedule  
unbiased opinion  
uncrowned king  
unsellable stock  
unsung hero  
vaguely aware  
virtual reality  
war games  
working vacation

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