

Exercises in Wile: A Workshop on Teaching Wordplay

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At Princeton University, where I am a professor of Classics and Linguistics, I have for the past seven years occasionally taught a course — a so-called Freshman Seminar — on the history and practice of wordplay: “Wordplay: A Wry Plod from Babel to Scrabble.” (The most recent description may be found here: <https://www.princeton.edu/pub/frs/ay201516/fall-courses/index.xml - compfrs123>). Both rigorous and popular, the class gives students with interests that range from anthropology to mathematics the opportunity to explore the ludic side of language through a combination of three sorts of activities: the reading of primary literature (e.g. poems, stories, and novels by Raymond Queneau, Vladimir Nabokov, Georges Perec, Christian Bök, and Mark Dunn); the consideration of secondary scholarship on topics that range from the art of the crossword to the wonders of Zipf’s Law; and — perhaps most interesting of all — the regular and active creation by all participants, and subsequent group discussion, of new instances of wordplay. With all respect to colleagues who study “core” phenomena, it is my contention that mapping what one might call the edges of language is an under-utilized but effective way to study linguistics. In the workshop, I will demonstrate this offbeat approach by taking the audience through a series of exercises designed to highlight some of the more simultaneously interesting and easily exploitable orthographic, phonological, and lexical peculiarities of English (and, by extension, of other languages, including French). My goal is to contribute to what the call for papers for the conference refers to as “systematic and analytical approaches to wordplay, its forms and functions.”