ENGLISH, LITERACY, AND COMMUNICATION

Irony

Difficulty level: Intermediate

English, Literacy, and Communication

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Overview of the concept

This is how you spot when words or events mean the opposite of what you would expect, like a fire station burning down, so you catch the joke or the point. Irony is the gap between what you expect and what actually happens, and writers use it to make a point, get a laugh, or show that something has gone wrong. Knowing how to spot it helps you read stories, poems, and news properly, and it keeps you from missing the joke or taking a sarcastic comment at face value.



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Rule

Irony: irony is the gap between what you expect and what actually happens. Situational irony is an event that is the opposite of what you would expect, such as a fire station burning down.

Verbal irony is saying the opposite of what you mean, such as 'Lovely weather' when rain is pouring down. Ask: what would you expect, and is what happened the opposite?

Worked examples

EXAMPLE 1

Q **Identify the irony: A fire station burns down.**

SOLUTION

Ask: what would you expect? A fire station should be safe from fire.

What happened is the opposite of that expectation.

So it is situational irony.

EXAMPLE 2

Q **Identify the irony: 'Lovely weather,' said Tom, as rain poured down.**

SOLUTION

Ask: does Tom mean his words literally? No, it is raining.

He says the opposite of what he means.

So it is verbal irony.

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Practice questions

1

Irony type: A lifeguard drowns at a pool. Situational or verbal?

A Situational

B Verbal

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2

Irony type: 'Great, another flat tire,' said Ana, annoyed. Situational or verbal?

A Situational

B Verbal

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3 A dentist gets a cavity. What would you expect instead?

- **A** A dentist to have healthy teeth, since dentists know how to prevent cavities
- **B** A dentist to never visit a dentist
- **C** A dentist to give cavities to patients
- **D** A dentist to enjoy having cavities

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4 'Oh, fantastic,' he said, seeing his failed test. What does he really mean?

- **A** He is delighted with his mark
- **B** He is upset about failing
- **C** He thinks the test was fair
- **D** He wants to retake the test right away

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5 The police station is robbed. What makes this ironic?

- **A** The police station is the place that stops robberies, yet it was robbed
- **B** Police stations are never robbed
- **C** Robbers like police stations
- **D** The police were not there that day

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6 'I just love homework,' she groaned. What tells you she does not mean it literally?

- **A** The word 'groaned'
- **B** The word 'homework'
- **C** The word 'love'
- **D** The word 'just'

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7 **Which of these is an example of situational irony?**

A A pilot is afraid of heights

B A pilot flies a plane safely

C A pilot wears a uniform

D A pilot likes travelling

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8 **'Wonderful,' said Ben, as his bike broke. Which word is the opposite of what Ben means?**

A Wonderful

B Ben

C bike

D broke

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9

Which of these is NOT situational irony?

A. A spelling teacher misspells a word on the board

B. A fire station burns down

C. A student studies hard and passes the test

D. A lifeguard drowns at a pool

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10

Why is 'Perfect timing,' she said, as the bus left without her, verbal irony rather than situational irony?

A. Because the irony is in what she says, not in the event itself

B. Because buses are always late

C. Because she missed the bus

D. Because timing is important

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ANSWER KEY

1. Situational

2. Verbal

3. A dentist to have healthy teeth, since dentists know how to prevent cavities

4. He is upset about failing

5. The police station is the place that stops robberies, yet it was robbed

6. The word 'groaned'

7. A pilot is afraid of heights

8. Wonderful

9. A student studies hard and passes the test

10. Because the irony is in what she says, not in the event itself

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