

English: Ambiguous Sentences

Many linguistic phrases can be interpreted in more than one way. For example, the phrase “**Time flies like an arrow**” seems to be clear, but an analysis by a computerized algorithm discovered 7 possible interpretations! Newspaper headlines are famously ambiguous, because journalists try to minimize the number of words to give more impact. Here are some examples:

1. KIDS MAKE NUTRITIOUS SNACKS

Intended meaning: Some children have made some snacks which are nutritious.

Unintended meaning: You should eat children, because they are nutritious.

2. STOLEN PAINTING FOUND BY TREE

Intended meaning: A stolen painting has been found near a tree.

Unintended meaning: A tree has found a stolen painting.

3. MINERS REFUSE TO WORK AFTER DEATH

Intended meaning: Some miners have refused to work after a colleague died.

Unintended meaning: Some miners refuse to work after they die.

4. SCHOOL BUS PASSENGERS SHOULD BE BELTED

Intended meaning: School bus passengers should wear seat-belts.

Unintended meaning: School bus passengers should be physically punished.

5. INCLUDE YOUR CHILDREN WHEN BAKING COOKIES

Intended meaning: When you bake cookies, you should involve your children.

Unintended meaning: When you bake cookies, you should use your children as ingredients.

Exercise Make the following ambiguous sentences unambiguous:

1. Eric enjoys painting his models nude.

2. My son has grown another foot.

3. Visiting relatives can be boring.

4. I saw the man with the binoculars.

5. Dr. Brown gives talk on the moon.

More examples of ambiguous sentences

1) Newspaper Headlines:

1. Queen Mary Having Bottom Scraped
2. Milk Drinkers are Turning to Powder
3. Drunk Gets Nine Months in Violin Case
4. Complaints About Referees Growing Ugly
5. Two Sisters Reunited after 18 Years at Checkout Counter
6. Mother of Eight Makes Hole in One
7. Hospitals are Sued by 7 Foot Doctors
8. Two Soviet Ships Collide, One Dies
9. Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Ax
10. Blast Attributed to Build-up of Gas by Town Official.

2) Examples of writing taken from letters received by the Welfare Department in Application for Support (USA).

1. I cannot get sick pay. I have six children. Can you tell me why?
2. This is my eighth child. What are you going to do about it?
3. I am very much annoyed that you have said that my son is illiterate. This is a lie, because I was married a week before he was born.
4. I am forwarding my marriage certificate and my three children; one of which is a mistake as you can see.
5. Unless I get my husband's money pretty soon, I will be forced to lead an immortal life.
6. You have changed my little boy into a girl. Will this make any difference?

7. I have no children as my husband is a truck driver and works night and day.
8. In accordance with your instructions, I have given birth to twins in the enclosed envelope.
9. I need money as quick as possible, so I have been in bed with my doctor for two weeks and he doesn't do me any good. If things don't improve I will have to ask for another doctor.
10. Bill Smith worked for us for six months and when he left we were happy. We hope this helps.

3) Signs around the world

1. On the grounds of a school in England:

NO TRESPASSING WITHOUT PERMISSION.

2. In a cemetery, London:

PERSONS ARE PROHIBITED FROM PICKING FLOWERS FROM ANY BUT THEIR OWN GRAVES.

3. Dry cleaner, Manchester:

DROP YOUR TROUSERS HERE FOR THE BEST RESULT.

4. Hotel elevator, Paris:

PLEASE LEAVE YOUR VALUES AT THE FRONT DESK.

5. A laundry in Rome:

LADIES, LEAVE YOUR CLOTHES HERE AND SPEND THE AFTERNOON HAVING A GOOD TIME.

6. Cocktail lounge, Norway:

LADIES ARE REQUESTED NOT TO HAVE CHILDREN IN THE BAR.

7. At a Budapest zoo:

PLEASE DO NOT FEED THE ANIMALS. IF YOU HAVE ANY SUITABLE FOOD, GIVE IT TO THE GUARD.

8. In a Nairobi restaurant:

CUSTOMERS WHO FIND OUR WAITRESSES RUDE OUGHT TO SEE THE MANAGER.

9. On an African highway:

TAKE NOTICE: WHEN THIS SIGN IS UNDER WATER, THIS ROAD IS IMPASSABLE.

10. On a poster in Washington, USA:

ARE YOU AN ADULT THAT CANNOT READ? IF SO, WE CAN HELP.

11. In a New York restaurant:

OPEN SEVEN DAYS A WEEK AND WEEKENDS.

12. A sign on a bathroom hand dryer in Ireland:

DO NOT ACTIVATE WITH WET HANDS.

13. Hotel rules in Tokyo:

GUESTS ARE REQUESTED NOT TO SMOKE OR DO OTHER DISGUSTING THINGS IN BED.

14. Hotel lobby, Bucharest:

THE LIFT IS BEING FIXED FOR THE NEXT DAY. DURING THAT TIME WE REGRET THAT YOU WILL BE UNBEARABLE.

15. Hotel, Vienna:

IN CASE OF FIRE, DO YOUR BEST TO ALARM THE HOTEL PORTER.

16. An advertisement by a Hong Kong dentist:

TEETH EXTRACTED BY THE LATEST METHODISTS.

17. In a Swiss mountain inn:

SPECIAL TODAY - NO ICE-CREAM.

18. Airline ticket office, Copenhagen:

WE TAKE YOUR BAGS AND SEND THEM IN ALL DIRECTIONS.

4) Confucius said (or not)

- Man who wants pretty nurse must be patient.
- Passionate kiss, like spider web, leads to undoing of fly.
- Man who runs in front of car gets tired, but man who runs behind car gets exhausted.
- Lady who goes camping with man must beware of evil intent.
- Man who eats many prunes get good run for money.
- Squirrel who runs up woman's leg will not find nuts.
- War does not determine who is right; it determines who is left.
- Man who fights with wife all day get no peace at night.
- Man who stands on toilet is high on pot.

5) Different interpretations

A. "Call me a taxi".

B. "OK, you're a taxi".

A. "We don't serve negros".

B. "That's OK, I don't eat negros. I'd like a chicken".