



Benjamin Franklin's Sense of Humor



Benjamin Franklin, one of America's Founding Fathers, is known as a statesman, politician, inventor, writer, printer, diplomat. Last, but not least he earned himself a reputation as the first American humorist; the one who set example for followers like Mark Twain.

His wit and sense of humor is perhaps most visible on the pages of "Poor Richard's Almanac," a series that he started in 1732 and continued for over 25 years and which brought him fame and wealth. The book sparkles with witty sayings and proverbs, which Franklin meticulously noted, jotted down and supplemented with his own.

On the left is another type of writing that Franklin used: a rebus [a representation of words in the form of pictures or symbols] entitled "The Art of Making Money Plenty." Try your hand at solving the rebus. You can also look at a simplified modern version of it on page 2. When you are done, you can check with the complete text below to see if you were right. **Enjoy!**

Image Library of Congress

How to Become Rich?

"At this  w  the general complaint is t  money is so

scarce it must be an act of kindness to inform the moneyless how they can rein-
force their  

 will acquaint all with the true secret of money catching, the certain

way to fill empty   and how to keep them always 

Two simple   will do the business: 1st Let honesty and labor be thy

constant comp  2nd Spend one penny every day less than thy
clear gains. Then shall thy  soon begin to thr  ve, thy creditors will
never insult thee nor want oppress nor hunger neither bite, nor naked freeze thee,
the whole  will shine brighter, and pleasure spring up in every corner of

thy  Now thereby embrace these   and be happy."

Now check yourself with the complete text below:

"At this time when the general complaint is that money is so scarce it must be an act of kindness to inform the moneyless how they can reinforce their purses. I will acquaint all with the true secret of money catching, the certain way to fill empty purses and how to keep them always full. Two simple rules will do the business: 1st Let honesty and labor be thy constant companions; 2nd Spend one penny every day less than thy clear gains. Then shall thy purse soon begin to thrive, thy creditors will never insult thee nor want oppress nor hunger neither bite, nor naked freeze thee, the whole hemisphere will shine brighter, and pleasure spring up in every corner of thy heart. Now thereby embrace these rules and be happy."

Words of Wisdom

Who doesn't know these sayings: "Never leave that till tomorrow which you can do today," "Haste makes waste," "Well done is better than well said," or "But in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." The man who invented or, in some cases, just wrote down the sayings of his contemporaries was Benjamin Franklin. Countless such short and witty maxims were reproduced in the pages of his "Poor Richard Almanac" for over 25 years. The style Franklin used in his series was entertaining, but it also carried a message. The writer believed that in addition to entertaining his large audiences, he should also educate them.

Sometimes he played with the words and the language itself. Consider these: "I am in the prime of senility," "An old young man will be a young old man," "Beware of the young Doctor and the old Barber," "Three may keep a secret if two of them are dead," "You may delay, but time will not." "If you would not be forgotten as soon as you are dead and rotten, either write something worth reading or do things worth the writing." "He that scatters Thorns, let him not go barefoot."

His favorite theme was to give his contemporaries advice on how to be successful and wealthy: "Hide not your talents, they for use were made. What's a sun dial in the shade?" "If you know how to spend less than you get, you have the philosopher's stone," "Who's rich? He that is content. Who is that? Nobody." "Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy wealthy and wise," "Creditors have better memories than debtors."

Taking a Laugh at Himself.)))

If the ability to laugh at oneself is a real test of our sense of humor then Ben Franklin passed it with flying colors. Here is an example. For much of his life he suffered from gout, an illness which caused pain in his legs. At one time of particular suffering from this ailment he wrote a humorous "Dialogue Between Franklin and the Gout." This is how it starts:

FRANKLIN. Eh! Oh! eh! What have I done to merit these cruel sufferings?

GOUT. Many things; you have ate and drank too freely, and too much indulged those legs of yours in their indolence.

FRANKLIN. Who is it that accuses me?

GOUT. It is I, even I, the Gout.

FRANKLIN. What! My enemy in person?

GOUT. No, not your enemy.

FRANKLIN. I repeat it, my enemy; for you would not only torment my body to death, but ruin my good name; you reproach me as a glutton and a tippler [*tippler means a drunk*]; now all the world, that knows me, will allow that I am neither the one nor the other.

GOUT. The world may think as it pleases; it is always very complaisant to itself, and sometimes to its friends; but I very well know that the quantity of meat and drink proper for a man, who takes a reasonable degree of exercise, would be too much for another, who never takes any.

FRANKLIN. I take—eh! oh!—as much exercise—eh!—as I can, Madam Gout. You know my sedentary state, and on that account, it would seem, Madam Gout, as if you might spare me a little, seeing it is not altogether my own fault. (...)

The Gout then proceeds to tell Franklin that he should be active. Instead, he reads books, pamphlets, and newspapers, eats unhealthy breakfast, then sits at his desk to write, all without any kind of bodily exercise. After dinner, he plays chess instead of walking in the beautiful gardens of the friends with whom he had dined. In this way he ruins his health. Franklin gets tired of Madam Gout's reproaches and wants to dismiss her, but soon learns that if she goes, it will be to torment him more, and so he prays her to stay and talk.

FRANKLIN. Your reasonings grow very tiresome.

GOUT. I stand corrected. I will be silent and continue my office; take that, and that.

FRANKLIN. Oh! Oh! Talk on, I pray you.

GOUT. No, no; I have a good number of twinges for you to-night, and you may be sure of some more tomorrow.

FRANKLIN. What, with such a fever! I shall go distracted. Oh! eh! Can no one bear it for me?

GOUT. Ask that of your horses; they have served you faithfully.

FRANKLIN. How can you so cruelly sport with my torments.

GOUT. Sport! I am very serious. I have here a list of offenses against your own health distinctly written, and can justify every stroke inflicted on you.

FRANKLIN. Read it then.

GOUT. It is too long a detail; but I will briefly mention some particulars.

FRANKLIN. Proceed. I am all attention.

GOUT. Do you remember how often you have promised yourself, the following morning, a walk in the grove of Boulogne, in the garden de la Muette, or in your own garden, and have violated your promise, alleging, at one time, it was too cold, at another too warm, too windy, too moist, or what else you pleased; when in truth it was too nothing, but your insuperable love of ease?

FRANKLIN. That I confess may have happened occasionally, probably ten times in a year.

cont. on p. 4

Activity Page

GOUT. Your confession is very far short of the truth; the gross amount is one hundred and ninety-nine times. (...)

After some time, Franklin gets tired of her again, but before she leaves him till the next time, he learns that she is his physician, and his ... true friend.

FRANKLIN. Ah! how tiresome you are!

GOUT. Well, then, to my office; it should not be forgotten that I am your physician. There.

FRANKLIN. Ohhh! What a devil of a physician!

GOUT. How ungrateful you are to say so! Is it not I who, in the character of your physician, have saved you from the palsy, dropsy, and apoplexy? One or other of which would have done for you long ago, but for me. (...)

FRANKLIN. Oh! Oh!—For Heaven’s sake leave me! And I promise faithfully never more to play at chess, but to take exercise daily, and live temperately.

GOUT. I know you too well. You promise fair; but, after a few months of good health, you will return to your old habits; your fine promises will be forgotten like the forms of the last year’s clouds. Let us then finish the account, and I will go. But I leave you with an assurance of visiting you again at a proper time and place; for my object is your good, and you are sensible now that I am your real friend. (...)

Madam Gout takes her leave of him at last, but she knows, as well as he, that if he feels well for a few days, he will forget about his promise and return to chess, teas and sedentary life.

■ Exercise 1 In the text below, which is another story by Benjamin Franklin entitled “The Whistle” put the verbs in brackets in the correct tense:

When I was a child of seven years old, my friends, on a holiday, (fill) my pocket with coppers. I (go) directly to a shop where they (sell) toys for children; and being charmed with the sound of a whistle, that I met by the way in the hands of another boy, I voluntarily (offer) and (give) all my money for one. I then (come) home, and (go) whistling all over the house, much pleased with my whistle, but disturbing all the family. My brothers, and sisters, and cousins, understanding the bargain I (make), told me I (give) four times as much for it as it was worth; put me in mind what good things I (might buy) with the rest of the money; and (laugh) at me so much for my folly, that I (cry) with vexation; and the reflection (give) me more chagrin than the whistle (give) me pleasure.

This, however, was afterwards of use to me, the impression continuing on my mind; so that often, when I was tempted to buy some unnecessary thing, I said to myself, Don’t give too much for the whistle; and I saved my money.

As I grew up, came into the world, and observed the actions of men, I thought I met with many, very many, who gave too much for the whistle.

■ Exercise 2 Study the words:

Design your own rebus illustrating Franklin’s “Art of Making Money Plenty.” Use your own photos or drawings to represent some of the words.

■ Exercise 3 Study the words:

Choose one of the sayings on p. 2 and tell the other students if you think it gives useful advice.

ZOOM
in on america

About ZOOM

Contact us at
arc@usembassy.at

American Reference Center
U.S. Embassy Vienna
Boltzmannngasse 16
1090 Vienna