

The Alice Sound



PORTMANTEAUX WORDS

WRITING RESOURCE



PORTMANTEAUX WORDS

A portmanteau is where two words are combined to make a new one.

Humpty Dumpty explains it to Alice, to help her understand the poem she has read on first entering Looking-Glass land:

“You seem very clever at explaining words, Sir,” said Alice. “Would you kindly tell me the meaning of the poem called ‘Jabberwocky’?”

“Let’s hear it,” said Humpty Dumpty. “I can explain all the poems that were ever invented—and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet.”

This sounded very hopeful, so Alice repeated the first verse:

’Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe.

“That’s enough to begin with,” Humpty Dumpty interrupted: “there are plenty of hard words there. ‘Brillig’ means four o’clock in the afternoon—the time when you begin broiling things for dinner.”

“That’ll do very well,” said Alice: “and ‘slithy’?”

“Well, ‘slithy’ means ‘lithe and slimy.’ ‘Lithe’ is the same as ‘active.’ You see it’s like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word.”

“I see it now,” Alice remarked thoughtfully: “and what are ‘toves’?”

“Well, ‘toves’ are something like badgers—they’re something like lizards—and they’re something like corkscrews.”

“They must be very curious looking creatures.”

“They are that,” said Humpty Dumpty: “also they make their nests under sun-dials—also they live on cheese.”

“And what’s the ‘gyre’ and to ‘gimble’?”

“To ‘gyre’ is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To ‘gimble’ is to make holes like a gimlet.”

“And ‘the wabe’ is the grass-plot round a sun-dial, I suppose?” said Alice, surprised at her own ingenuity.

“Of course it is. It’s called ‘wabe,’ you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it—”

“And a long way beyond it on each side,” Alice added.

“Exactly so. Well, then, ‘mimsy’ is ‘flimsy and miserable’ (there’s another portmanteau for you). And a ‘borogove’ is a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round—something like a live mop.”

“And then ‘mome raths’?” said Alice. “I’m afraid I’m giving you a great deal of trouble.

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LSO London Symphony Orchestra

Queen Mary University of London

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“Well, a ‘rath’ is a sort of green pig: but ‘mome’ I’m not certain about. I think it’s short for ‘from home’—meaning that they’d lost their way, you know.”

“And what does ‘outgrabe’ mean?”

“Well, ‘outgrabing’ is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle: however, you’ll hear it done, maybe—down in the wood yonder—and when you’ve once heard it you’ll be quite content. Who’s been repeating all that hard stuff to you?”

“I read it in a book,” said Alice. (*Looking-Glass*, chapter 6)

Can you spot a tove in the illustration? And a borogrove?



Why are these words called **portmanteaux words**? In Victorian times, a portmanteau was a suitcase that opened into two equal sections. What might we call this kind of word now? Laptop words?!

TASK:

Here are some portmanteaux words that we use a lot today. Can you work out which two words they are made from?

Smoke

+

Fog

=

Smog

+

=

Cockapoo

+

=

Brunch

+

=

Brexit

Now create your own! You could use the following words to help you get started:

Fantastic, Splendid, Peach, Spade, Bucket.

Spade

+

Bucket

=

Spucket

+

=

+

=

+

=