



Much Ado About Nothing

Deciphering Dogberry's Malapropisms

A **malapropism** is the misuse or distortion of a word in a way that is unintentionally humorous, particularly when the word sounds similar to the real word but is ludicrous in context. In fact, the word *malapropism* derives from the French term *mal à propos*, which means "inappropriate."

The constable Dogberry exemplifies the art of malapropism in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing*. In an effort to sound smart, Dogberry uses numerous "big" words, but incorrectly. These mistakes lead to much humor as they demonstrate Dogberry's much-inflated ego, but they also lead to declarations that make no sense and reflect the exact opposite of the intended statement.

In column 1: Read the sentences from the play that contain malapropisms.

In column 2: Write the correct meaning of the word in bold. (Remember it has been used inappropriately by Dogberry.)

In column 3: Record the word that *should* have been used.

Note: You may consult the text and a dictionary or thesaurus, if necessary.

Sentence with Malapropism	Real Definition of Malapropism	Word Dogberry Should Have Used
Nay, that were a punishment too good for them, if they should have any allegiance in them, being chosen for the Prince's watch. (No Fear: 3.3.4–6)	<i>loyalty</i>	<i>disloyalty</i>
You are thought here to be the most senseless and fit man for the constable of the watch; therefore bear you the lantern." (No Fear: 3.3.19–21)		
You shall also make no noise in the streets; for, for the watch to babble and to talk is most tolerable and not to be endured. (No Fear: 3.3.31–33)		

Marry, sir, I would have some confidence with you that decerns [discerns] you nearly. (No Fear: 3.5.2–3)		
Comparisons are odorous . (No Fear: 3.5.14)		
Yea, an 'twere a thousand pound more than 'tis, for I hear as good exclamation on your Worship as of any man in the city, and though I be but a poor man, I am glad to hear it. (No Fear: 3.5.21–23)		
Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious [auspicious] persons, and we would have them this morning examined before your worship. (No Fear: 3.5.39–41)		
Only get the learned writer to set down our excommunication and meet me at the jail. (No Fear: 3.5.54–55)		
Why, this is flat perjury , to call a prince's brother villain. (No Fear: 4.2.35–36)		
Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this. (No Fear: 4.2.49–50)		
Dost thou not suspect my place? Dost thou not suspect my years? (No Fear: 4.2.66–67)		

RL.11–12.3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

RL.11–12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

L.11–12.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grades 11–12 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

L.11–12.5 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grades 11–12 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.

Answer Key

Sentence with Malapropism	Real Definition of Malapropism	Word Dogberry Should Have Used
Nay, that were a punishment too good for them, if they should have any allegiance in them, being chosen for the Prince's watch. (No Fear: 3.3.4–6)	loyalty	disloyalty
You are thought here to be the most senseless and fit man for the constable of the watch; therefore bear you the lantern." (No Fear: 3.3.19–21)	dumb	sensible
You shall also make no noise in the streets; for, for the watch to babble and to talk is most tolerable and not to be endured. (No Fear: 3.3.31–33)	bearable	intolerable
Marry, sir, I would have some confidence with you that decerns [discerns] you nearly. (No Fear: 3.5.2–3)	detects	concerns
Comparisons are odorous . (No Fear: 3.5.14)	smelly	odious
Yea, an 'twere a thousand pound more than 'tis, for I hear as good exclamation on your Worship as of any man in the city, and though I be but a poor man, I am glad to hear it. (No Fear: 3.5.21–23)	sudden cry	acclamation
Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two aspicious [auspicious] persons, and we would have them this morning examined before your worship. (No Fear: 3.5.39–41)	understood promising	apprehended suspicious
Only get the learned writer to set down our excommunication and meet me at the jail. (No Fear: 3.5.54–55)	exclusion from a Christian church	meeting (for examination)

Why, this is flat perjury , to call a prince's brother villain. (No Fear: 4.2.35–36)	<i>lying under oath</i>	<i>treachery</i>
Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting redemption for this. (No Fear: 4.2.49–50)	<i>atonement for sin</i>	<i>damnation</i>
Dost thou not suspect my place? Dost thou not suspect my years? (No Fear: 4.2.66–67)	<i>believe someone is guilty</i>	<i>respect</i>