

Going beyond “The Lighter Side” Puzzles for English Language Practice

by TOM GLASS

“The Lighter Side” has been a feature of *English Teaching Forum* since 1976. It has given teachers a chance to laugh, think, and solve puzzles related to English. That by itself makes The Lighter Side invaluable and helps explain why it has been included in the journal for so long.

The fact is, though, that English teachers can use many of The Lighter Side puzzles—and in some cases, adapt them—to give their learners opportunities to practice English in unique, creative ways.

Solving the puzzles can be satisfying and fun for teachers and often for students as well. This article demonstrates ways to take the puzzles further. Using three puzzles as examples, the article identifies specific language skills that the puzzles target and gives suggestions for adapting the puzzles for additional practice.

The puzzles highlighted below are Vanilla Rice Stream, Moving Around, and Place Out of Words.

VANILLA RICE STREAM (Volume 60, Number 3; 2022)

The concept of this puzzle is fairly simple: Each sentence contains two words that do not make sense—but those two words rhyme with two other words that *do* make sense

in the context of the sentence. To solve the puzzle, you must figure out which two words you need to replace, and then find the two rhyming words you can use in their place.

For example, the sentence that gives this puzzle its name is, “My favorite dessert is vanilla rice stream.” In that sentence, the pair of words *rice stream* does not make sense—but you can replace *rice stream* with *ice cream* to create a meaningful (and very common) sentence: “My favorite dessert is vanilla ice cream.”

This puzzle forces solvers to use the sound of the words in the sentence *and* the meaning of the words in context. Solvers use meaning to determine which two words need to be replaced, and then they have to use sound (and more meaning) to find words that fit—and that rhyme with the two words being removed.

Also, because the two nonsensical words are consecutive, this puzzle can help learners recognize and use collocations—two or more words that are frequently used together in a specific order. In our example, the words *ice cream* occur to most people as a single thought. That is, people do not first think about ice, then think about cream; instead, the idea of “ice cream” pops up in their minds as a specific kind of dessert that happens to be written as two separate words.

English teachers can use many of The Lighter Side puzzles—and in some cases, adapt them—to give their learners opportunities to practice English in unique, creative ways.

Figure 1 gives more examples from the Vanilla Rice Stream puzzle (answers to these are provided later, in Figure 6). If you do not have a paper copy of Volume 60, Number 3, you can find the entire puzzle, with 12 sentences, online at the American English website (go to americanenglish.state.gov/forum and search for “Vanilla Rice Stream”).

Suggestions for classroom use: Obviously, you can ask your learners to solve the puzzle. Go over at least one example sentence, or perhaps two, so that learners understand what they need to do in order to “correct” each sentence. Then you can let them solve a few more sentences on their own—preferably in pairs or small groups.

I like to start out by giving learners only three or four sentences at a time, going over them as a whole class, and then giving more sentences to solve. This approach has at least two advantages. First, it makes the activity flexible, so that you can stop after one or two

rounds if you need to (for example, if you are running out of time in the class). Second, it gives students who might not fully grasp the concept at first a chance to work on and see a few more sentences, better preparing them to be able to solve the next set of sentences when you reveal them.

When learners have worked on all the sentences in the puzzle, and the whole class has gone over the solutions and discussed them, it is helpful to talk about why the “incorrect” words in the original sentences don’t make sense—and, in some cases, how silly they are. Then you can follow up by asking students to work in groups to create similar sentences of their own.

This may be harder than it seems, partly because not all collocations have words that rhyme. You can make the task easier by having students create sentences in which only *one* word (instead of two) needs to be replaced.

Vanilla Rice Stream

1. My favorite dessert is vanilla rice stream.
Change _____ to _____
2. Wow! She just jumped into the dimming school!
Change _____ to _____
3. For lunch they had hamburgers and bench flies.
Change _____ to _____
4. Everyone should be able to drink safe water and breathe green hair.
Change _____ to _____
5. She told me that Moon thirst is her birthday.
Change _____ to _____

Figure 1. Sample items from Vanilla Rice Stream (adapted from the original puzzle)

[The Vanilla Rice Stream] puzzle forces solvers to use the sound of the words in the sentence and the meaning of the words in context.

Lower-level students might come up with a sentence such as, “It is pot today” or “It is not today” (which is an interesting sentence, if you think about it) for “It is hot today.” The more advanced the students are, the more complex the sentences might be.

Then it would be a great idea for groups to exchange or share their sentences with other groups, who try to solve them. Or groups can write their favorite sentences on the board for the whole class to solve. Either way, make sure to save your students’ sentences so you can use them with future classes. You might even end your class by saying, “See you tomorrow—wood pie!” (which can be “corrected” to “See you tomorrow—good-bye!”).

MOVING AROUND (Volume 56, Number 1; 2018)

This puzzle, which was written to accompany an article on the importance of incorporating movement into classes (McCaughey 2018), features letters that are placed in a grid. The idea is to move from one letter to another letter—horizontally, vertically, or diagonally—in order to spell a word, a phrase, or an entire sentence.

Solvers can move only one letter at a time; that is, they can move one letter to the right or to the left, one letter above or below, or

one letter in any direction diagonally. They cannot jump over a letter, and they cannot use a letter more than one time (unless the letter appears more than once in the grid). To complete the puzzle, they must use every letter in the grid one time, and one time only.

Figure 2 shows an example. Perhaps your class has been learning vocabulary related to weather, and you want to give your learners a way to review the spelling of certain words. In this grid, learners can start at the letter C, move down to the L, over to the O and the U, up to the D, and then sideways to the Y in order to spell *cloudy*.

Note that there are other ways that these letters could be arranged in the grid; Figure 3 shows two options that require learners to move diagonally, which can be more challenging than moving horizontally or vertically.

Figure 4 shows a more challenging example. In this case, a command is spelled out in the grid. Below the grid, the meaning of the command is given; in addition, blanks show learners how many words are in the answer and how many letters each word has. The puzzle might be difficult to solve, but if the clue and blanks are not given, the puzzle becomes harder to solve, or even impossible. (You can find the solution in Figure 6.)

Teachers can choose whether to tell learners the starting point (that is, the first letter in the answer) for the puzzle, depending on their learners’ ability. Providing the starting point makes solving the puzzle a bit easier.

Suggestions for classroom use: This type of puzzle supports practice with spelling and with collocations; as learners move through the

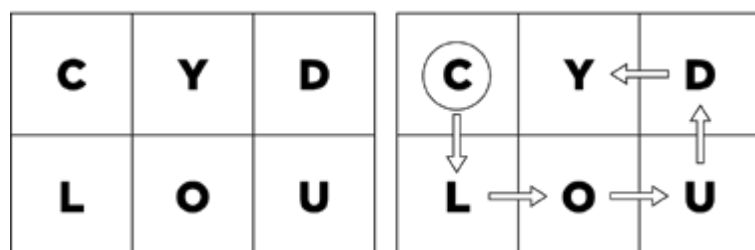


Figure 2. A Moving Around grid for the word *cloudy*, with answer

As learners move through the grid, they have to anticipate what might come next—in terms of spelling and/or idiomatically—and then find the letter that continues to lead them in a fruitful and meaningful direction.

grid, they have to anticipate what might come next—in terms of spelling and/or idiomatically—and then find the letter that continues to lead them in a fruitful and meaningful direction.

Teachers can create their own grids for learners, perhaps as a review. Don't worry if your grid is not a perfect square or rectangle; it is fine to have a few letters sticking out. Figure 5 gives an example of an oddly shaped grid (the solution is in Figure 6).

As with the Vanilla Rice Stream puzzle, you can ask your learners to make their own grids. This is another chance for learners to work in pairs or groups, then share their created puzzles with other groups or with the class. This is also another opportunity for you to save the newly created puzzles and use them with lucky students in the future.

PLACE OUT OF WORDS (Volume 56, Number 3; 2018)

Like Vanilla Rice Stream, this puzzle involves words that do not make sense in the context they are in. However, there are two important differences. One is that Place Out of Words features questions rather than statements. The other difference is that in this puzzle, the word that can “correct” each question and make it meaningful can be found in another one of the questions in the puzzle.

We can see this demonstrated in a set of only two questions (which don't make sense):

- *What's your sea?*
- *Do you live near the name?*

To clear up the confusion, we can exchange the word *sea* from the first sentence with the word *name* from the second sentence. We end up with two meaningful questions:

- *What's your name?*
- *Do you live near the sea?*

Note that all of the words you need to complete the puzzle appear in the questions; it's just that in each case, one of the words appears in the “wrong” question and must be moved to the “right” question.

The puzzle becomes more challenging when the set has more than two questions. Sets can have a large number of questions, but even for fairly advanced learners,

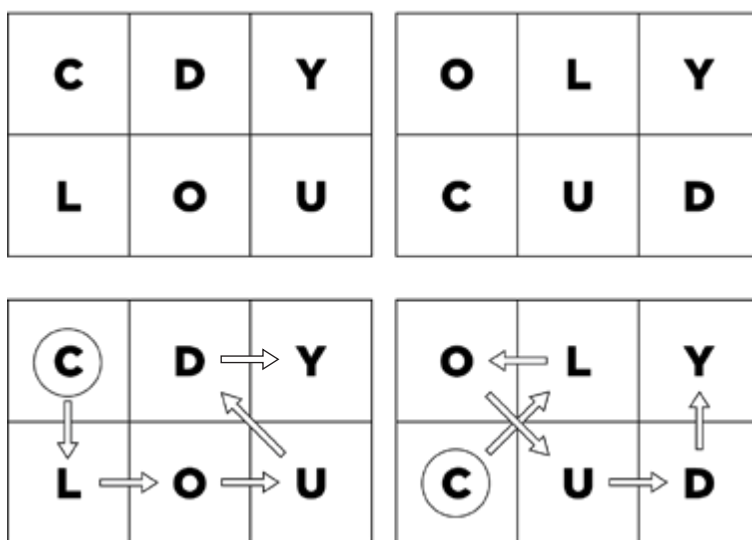


Figure 3. Two options for placing the word *cloudy* in a grid, with answers

One result of having students create their own puzzles is that they might come up with nonsense sentences or hilarious mismatched meanings—and that is great!

trying to mix and match words among more than four or five questions can become difficult.

Suggestions for classroom use: Teachers can make the puzzle easier—and enable more students to solve it—by underlining the word in each question that needs to be changed:

- *What's your sea?*
- *Do you live by the name?*

And you don't have to use only questions; statements are fine, too.

No matter how many questions or statements are in each set, the puzzle can support learners' recognition of overall context and meanings of individual words. In each case, they have to determine which word doesn't fit—identifying the problem—and then they have to hunt for the word that *does* fit. Again, every word they need is already in the puzzle; they just need to find the misplaced words and move them to the place where they belong.

After learners have solved the puzzle, they can ask one another the new, meaningful questions and take turns answering them.

As with the other puzzles described in this article, you can ask your learners to create their own. Lower-level students might create short sentences—which is fine—and it's best to have them start by creating sets of only two; again, having more than two sentences in a set makes the exercise more challenging.

One result of having students create their own puzzles is that they might come up with nonsense sentences or hilarious mismatched meanings—and that is great! Many students feel proud of the crazy questions and statements they have produced and eagerly share them with classmates. Once again, you can feel free to save their creations and use them with future students.

(Note that the name of this puzzle actually includes two words that can replace each other, so that the name becomes Words Out of Place.)

N	D	M	O
A	P	T	V
G	E	U	E

Clue: *A command telling someone to be active*

_____!

Figure 4. A Moving Around grid for a command, with clue and blanks

**I mention the idea of a puzzle mindset because I have seen ...
teachers with a similar mindset find or create things
they can use in class with their students.
That is, they have a “teaching mindset.”**

THE PUZZLE MINDSET—AND THE TEACHING MINDSET

There is at least one way (and maybe many others) that the creation of these puzzles relates to innovative teaching. Once again, I will use Vanilla Rice Stream as an example. That is partly because the example fits here, and partly because I have found that this puzzle—or samples of items taken from it—is one of the easier puzzles to explain and to use at workshops.

Also, I use Vanilla Rice Stream as an example here because it reminds me of how the idea for this puzzle originated. I was having dinner with my family, and rice was part of the meal. I was looking at the rice when I tried to say something about vanilla ice cream, but instead I said, “Vanilla rice cream.” I got the words I wanted to say mixed up with the food I was looking at.

It was good for a chuckle—and that might have been the end of it, except for one key

detail: At the time, I was working on ideas for a new Lighter Side puzzle, so puzzle creation was on my mind. You might say that I had a “puzzle mindset.” After I said, “Vanilla rice cream,” instead of forgetting about it and letting it go, I thought about how I could apply that unintentional, rhyming mix-up to a puzzle. Soon afterward, the Vanilla Rice Stream puzzle was born.

I mention the idea of a puzzle mindset because I have seen, over and over, teachers with a similar mindset find or create things they can use in class with their students. That is, they have a “teaching mindset.” No matter where they are, they are always on the lookout for fresh teaching material. It can be anything: a slip of the tongue, as I have just mentioned. A newspaper headline. A song. A joke. A menu item. A line in a story or poem. A picture. A game. An advertisement. Part of a conversation. Whatever “it” is, teachers with the teaching mindset see it (or hear it), and that sparks a connection to a lesson or concept that

T	H	T	A	S	
I	S	O	Q	U	
I	S	N	A	R	E

Clue: A sentence that describes the shape of this grid

Figure 5. A Moving Around grid with an “imperfect” shape that is still fine to use

Notes about The Lighter Side Puzzles

- ➞ The puzzles appear on the inside of the back cover of each issue. They are also available on the American English website (americanenglish.state.gov/forum takes you to the *English Teaching Forum* web page). There, you can find dozens of puzzles by searching for “The Lighter Side.”
- ➞ The difficulty of the puzzles varies. Some are set at a relatively basic level, while others are more challenging. Some puzzles combine easier items with more-challenging items; the easier items usually appear near the beginning of the puzzle. (The online version of Volume 54, Number 4, published in 2016, features a bonus: three puzzles of varying difficulty. All three have the same format, and all are based on synonyms and/or antonyms, but with different levels of difficulty.)
- ➞ Because the level of difficulty varies, teachers should try to solve the puzzles themselves before asking students to solve them. The puzzles should be fun as well as educational; it’s fine if students find a puzzle challenging, but you don’t want to give your students a puzzle that they are unable to solve. Solving the puzzle yourself first also gives you an idea of clues you might want to give your students to help them find the solution(s) to the puzzle.
- ➞ Using a puzzle in class is an ideal opportunity for pair work and group work. Students can have fun working through a puzzle together and possibly creating new puzzle items to share with classmates.
- ➞ This article focuses on three specific puzzles, but The Lighter Side also offers crosswords, word searches, logic puzzles, and many other kinds. You can find them on the American English website.
- ➞ Not all puzzles are easily adapted; some puzzles were created for a specific purpose, such as celebrating *Forum*’s 60th anniversary. While many of the puzzles can be used with learners, teachers—again—should solve the puzzle first before deciding whether to ask learners to create their own items for that type of puzzle.
- ➞ The puzzles are original and unique. If you see the same puzzle somewhere else—online or in a print publication—you will know that the puzzle appeared in *Forum* first.

they want their students to learn—and soon a new teaching idea is formed.

Without the teaching mindset, though, the connection might have been missed, and with it, a golden opportunity.

That is similar to the way that many of The Lighter Side puzzles are generated—and frankly, a similar mindset is behind quite a few *Forum* articles.

Finally, I hope you will remember this: “Using puzzles is just one way for English teachers to make burning run!” (If this sentence does not make sense to you, please see the “sentence translation” below.)

SENTENCE TRANSLATION

Change *burning run* to *learning fun*; the new sentence is, “Using puzzles is just one way for English teachers to make learning fun!”

REFERENCE

McCaughey, K. 2018. The movable class: How to class-manage for more active and healthful lessons. *English Teaching Forum* 56 (1): 2–13.

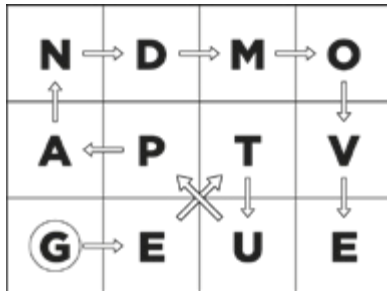
Tom Glass is the editor in chief of *English Teaching Forum* and has created many puzzles for The Lighter Side.

Vanilla Rice Stream: Figure 1

Change *rice stream* to *ice cream*
Change *dimming school* to *swimming pool*
Change *bench files* to *french fries*
Change *green hair* to *clean air*
Change *Moon thirst* to *June first*

Moving Around: Figure 4

Get up and move!

**Moving Around: Figure 5**

This is not a square.

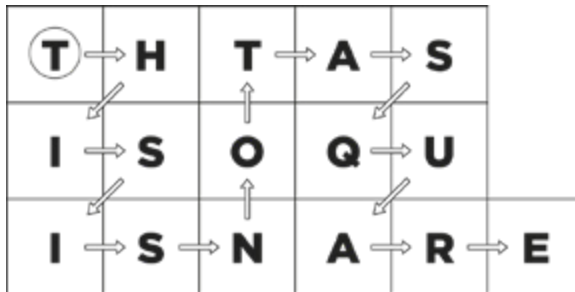


Figure 6. Answers to puzzle examples in this article