

# Give your brain, not your thumb, a workout

by Sabine Eiche

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Do you suffer from thumb fatigue or chronic thumb pain? If so, you probably have a Smartphone and are prone to exercise your digits more than your brain.

Don't worry. To save your thumbs from aching and your brain from atrophying, put your Smartphone to sleep and rouse that organ nestling inside your skull. How? By indulging in some old fashioned, pre-electronic, games. Positive results are guaranteed.

What I have in mind is word play, which can be carried out anywhere and needs no special equipment other than a brain. People have been playing with words since time immemorial.

Puns, for example, can be found already in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, and they never went out of fashion. Shakespeare's works are riddled with them. There are dozens of different ways of devising puns, such as using words that sound like other words with different meanings: This fruit has *appeal* (a peel); We were *intense* (in tents) while camping; The cobbler asked who *soled* (sold) these shoes.

Another punning technique is to partner related words in an amusing way: Her knowledge of *clouds* was *hazy* at best; Taking off a *wig* is a *hair-raising* experience; He *reflected* on whether to get a *mirror*; She *leafed* through a book on *trees*; The cop *booked* the *librarian*.

Great fun can be had with puns known as Tom Swifties, named after Tom Swift, the protagonist of juvenile adventure books that started in 1910. A Tom Swifty is usually a brief quotation with a punning adverb: "Where's your hair?" she asked baldly; "Don't

fail me," he said testily; "Good point," she said sharply; "Knot two concepts together," he said, stringing her along: "I sang in the saddle," he cried hoarsely.

A more challenging form of word play is the palindrome, that is phrases or sentences that read the same forwards and backwards. Although the term was coined in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by Ben Jonson, palindromes were composed already in antiquity. The earliest example to have survived is believed to be the so-called Sator Square in Pompeii. It consists of five five-letter words written one below the other, which can be read from left to right, right to left, top to bottom and bottom to top: SATOR / AREPO / TENET / OPERA / ROTAS (translateable as Farmer Arepo works a plough).

To learn to compose palindromes, start by spelling words backwards. Many stay the same: noon, eye, Anna. Others change drastically: sleep – peels; knob – bonk; live – evil; sore – Eros.

There are lots of classic palindromes in English – Able was I ere I saw Elba (referring to Napoleon) is probably the best known. It depends on a straightforward reversal of words, while in other palindromes letters are detached and re-attached, but kept in the proper sequence. This happens with: Madam, I'm Adam; Norma is as selfless as I am, Ron. The catch is that, although the palindromic phrase can be ridiculous, it has to make sense.

I'm still learning. My best effort to date: Tooter trams on time emit no smart re-toot. Now, let's see you beat me in the palindrome race.