

# Lesson 33: Common Euphemisms

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Today's lesson is about **euphemisms**. Euphemisms are indirect or vague expressions that are often used instead of words or phrases that are thought to be offensive or too direct.

Most euphemisms are in topic areas that could be offensive if talked about too directly, such as love and sex, bodily functions, death, and mental capacity. These expressions are common in spoken English, so here are a number of euphemisms organized by category.

## Love & Sex

### **bat for the other team = to be homosexual**

Let's say you have a coworker who you've known for 5 years, but you've never seen him with a girlfriend, and you suspect he might be homosexual. To express this, you can say, "I'm wondering if he bats for the other team."

### **is in the family way / has a bun in the oven / is expecting = pregnant**

The first two expressions are usually used about other people – for example, "It looks like Christina has a bun in the oven." The third expression, "expecting," can be used about other people or about yourself – for example, "My husband and I are expecting our third child this October."

### **hook up with / sleep with / make love = have sex with**

In these expressions, "hook up with" is the most casual. "Sleep with" is neutral, and "make love" usually implies romance or a committed relationship. "Hooking up with someone" is what you do after a party or a night out at the club, whereas "making love" is what you do with your husband or wife. The expression "**sleep around**" means that someone has sex with many different people.

### **adult entertainment / gentlemen's club**

"Adult entertainment" or an "adult movie" is a form of entertainment that involves nudity or sex. A "gentleman's club" is a euphemism for a "strip club" – this is a nightclub or bar where women dance in a sensual way and take off their clothes. The

women in these clubs are often called “**exotic dancers**” instead of the more direct word (“strippers”).

## **Body & Bodily Functions**

### **has a face only a mother could love = ugly**

Mothers are known for loving their children regardless of their physical appearance – so “a face only a mother could love” is a face that is so ugly that nobody (except the person’s mother) would think it beautiful. This phrase is pretty strong, and it’s not appropriate to say it about yourself or a friend!

### **big-boned / full-figured / husky / chubby = fat**

Usually, “full-figured” is used for women and “husky” is used for men. “Big-boned” can be used for either women or men, and “chubby” is typically used for children. You can also say that someone “**has a few extra pounds.**” Clothing for fat people is often called “**plus-sized**” clothing.

### **getting a little thin on top = losing your hair, becoming bald**

We use this expression to describe when someone begins to lose their hair due to the natural process of getting older (it is not used when a person cuts all their hair off or loses it because of a disease). We can also say someone’s hair is “**going gray**” as it begins to change color to gray as they age.

### **break wind / cut the cheese / let one rip = pass gas (fart)**

For example, if you walk into a room and it smells terrible, like someone recently released intestinal gas, you could say, “Ugh, it stinks in here! Who cut the cheese?”

### **call of nature / use the restroom = go to the bathroom**

“Call of nature” is more informal, and “use the restroom” is more formal. Among friends, you could say, “Excuse me for a minute – call of nature.” In a more professional context, it would be better to say, “Excuse me for a minute – I need to use the restroom.”

### **throw up / lose your lunch / toss your cookies = vomit**

There are many, many euphemisms for vomiting, but the most common is “throw up.” For example, “I felt sick on the plane and threw up all over the person sitting next to me.”

## **Work, Finance, & Law**

### **low-income = poor**

This euphemism aims to give more dignity to people who don't have much money, because being “poor” is considered very bad. “Low-income” sounds more respectful. For example, “The government is providing some benefits for low-income families.”

### **stretch the truth / economical with the truth = exaggerating / lying**

These phrases are diplomatic ways to say that somebody exaggerates or lies. For example, “I wouldn't go into business with John. He tends to be economical with the truth.”

### **downsize / let go / lay off = fire (make an employee lose his/her job)**

To “downsize” is to reduce the size of something – so if a company is “downsizing,” it means that it is reducing the number of employees. The phrases “let go” and “lay off” are often used in the passive voice to talk about the employee who lost his/her job – for example, “I was laid off six months ago,” or “I heard that 30 people are going to be let go in the near future.” One euphemism for being unemployed is to say that a person is currently “**between jobs**.”

### **doing time = spending time in prison**

We often say “doing time for \_\_\_\_\_” and then add the name of the crime, for example, “doing time for theft” or “doing time for murder.” There is also a euphemism for prisons or jails – they are called “**correctional facilities**.”

## **Mental Capacity**

**slow / not the sharpest tool in the shed / not the sharpest knife in the drawer  
/ not the brightest crayon in the box / a few bricks short of a load / a few cards  
short of a deck**

All of these euphemisms mean that somebody is stupid. For example, “I had to explain the problem three times before he finally understood – he’s not exactly the sharpest tool in the shed.”

### **lost his marbles / has a few screws loose = crazy, insane**

If a machine has a few screws loose, then it doesn’t function correctly. In the same way, the euphemism “has a few screws loose” is used to describe a person whose mind isn’t functioning correctly. For example, “My aunt believes her children are all aliens – she has a few screws loose.”

***Note:** These phrases are only to be used when you are talking about someone of normal mental capacity, but who you want to insult. To talk about a person with a real mental disability, it’s common to say “He/she has a mental disorder” or to say the name of the disorder – “He has Down Syndrome” or “She has autism.”*

## **Aging & Death**

### **senior citizens / elderly people = old people**

In English, it’s much more common to say “senior citizen” instead of “old person.” For example, “My grandmother lives in an apartment complex for senior citizens.”

### **put (an animal) to sleep / put (an animal) down**

These euphemisms are used to describe the act of killing an old or sick animal with an injection, so that it dies quickly and does not suffer. For example, “Our cat was 14 years old, and when she got cancer, we decided to put her to sleep.”

### **pass away = die**

The expression “pass away” is a sensitive way to talk about death. For example, “My uncle passed away last year.” The verb “lost” is also used to refer to someone dying: “My co-worker just lost her grandmother.” The adjective “late” can be used to describe someone who is dead: “The late Michael Jackson was one of the most famous singers of all time.”

“Pass away” is the most common euphemism for death that is respectful. There are a number of euphemisms about death that are more flippant (that is, NOT respectful)

– these are usually used when talking about death in general, or in the context of humor – do NOT use them when there is someone who is sad about a death.

These lighter, more humorous idioms for death include:

- **meet your maker / kick the bucket / bite the dust = die**
- **six feet under / pushing up daisies = dead**

You've finished Lesson 33! It's important to put these euphemisms in context, so definitely take the quiz to make sure you can use each phrase in the correct sentence. There's also a list of additional euphemisms at the end of this lesson, for study and reference.

# Quiz – Lesson 33

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- 1) "Sheila is a good friend, but she's \_\_\_\_\_, if you know what I mean."  
A not the brightest crayon in the box  
B pushing up daisies  
C having a call of nature
- 2) "All of the actor's female fans were disappointed when they found out he \_\_\_\_\_."  
A bats for the other team  
B was in the family way  
C let one rip
- 3) "Looks like Janet's gained some weight recently. Do you think she might be \_\_\_\_\_?"  
A husky  
B expecting  
C doing time
- 4) "He was fired when the company found out he had \_\_\_\_\_ on his resume."  
A a few cards short of a deck  
B made love  
C stretched the truth
- 5) "My kids cried for a week after we \_\_\_\_\_."  
A met our dog's maker  
B passed our dog away  
C put our dog down
- 6) "Someone \_\_\_\_\_ in the elevator at work today. It was disgusting!"  
A let one rip  
B kicked the bucket  
C had a few screws loose
- 7) "At the interview, they asked why I was \_\_\_\_\_ from my previous job."  
A let go

- B     batting for the other team
- C     put down

**8)** "She got a divorce after finding out that her husband had been \_\_\_\_\_ his secretary for the past year."

- A     laying off
- B     breaking the wind
- C     sleeping with

**9)** "I need to \_\_\_\_\_. I'll be right back."

- A     hook up
- B     use the restroom
- C     toss my cookies

**10)** "I'm sorry, I can't make it to the retreat. I'm going to the funeral of a friend who \_\_\_\_\_ unexpectedly."

- A     did time
- B     lost her marbles
- C     passed away

*Answers are at the end of this lesson text*

# Additional Euphemisms

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Word	Euphemism
accident, crisis, disaster	incident
addict; addiction	substance abuser; substance abuse, chemical dependency
adulterous	extramarital
arrest (v)	apprehend
beggar	panhandler, homeless person
break-in	security breach
cheap	frugal, thrifty, economical
coffin	casket
criminal (young)	juvenile delinquent
crippled	disabled, physically challenged
death penalty	capital punishment
drugs	illegal substances
drunk (adj)	intoxicated, inebriated, tipsy
fail (in the case of a business)	fizzle out, fall short, go out of business
false teeth	dentures
fat	overweight, chubby, portly, stout, plump
garbage dump	landfill
genocide	ethnic cleansing
illegal worker	undocumented worker
imprisoned	incarcerated
jail	correctional facility
mortuary	funeral home, funeral parlor
multi-racial	diverse
murder	hit, kill, do someone in, finish off someone
old age	golden years
old person	senior citizen, pensioner
old persons' home	retirement home, rest home, nursing home



one-room apartment	studio apartment, efficiency apartment
poor children	at-risk children
poor nation	emerging nation, developing nation, third-world nation
poor student	underachiever, underperformer
poor	low-income, working class, modest, underprivileged
prison	correctional facility
prisoner	inmate, convict, detainee
problem	issue, challenge, complication
rain, snow, hail	precipitation
retarded	special, slow, mentally challenged
sick	ill, under the weather
spying	surveillance
steal	appropriate, salvage, lift, borrow
stupid	slow
surprise attack	preemptive strike
tip (n)	gratuity
bathroom	john, WC, men's room, ladies' room, restroom, washroom, lavatory
ugly	unattractive, plain
unemployed	between jobs, taking time off
unreserved seating	general admission, festival seating
used	previously owned, pre-owned, refurbished, second-hand
vagrant	homeless person
venereal disease	sexually transmitted disease
victim	casualty
wrong	improper, questionable, impropriety (n)

### Lesson 33 Quiz – Answers

1) A; 2) A; 3) B; 4) C; 5) C; 6) A; 7) A; 8) C; 9) B; 10) C