

# Cacophony and Euphony Learning the Liquid and Sonorants

In English the *liquids* are l and r and are formed when the tongue produces a partial closure in the mouth, resulting in a resonant, vowel-like consonant

In English the *sonorants* are y, w, l, r, m, n, and ng. They are marked by a continuing and resonant sound. Sonorants have more acoustic energy than other consonants.

In English the *nasal consonants m, n, and ng* are formed when the airstream passes through the nose as a result of the lowering of the soft palate (velum) at the back of the mouth.

The result is a softening or ease in the reception of the sound as opposed to the harsh jarring reception of cacophonous sounds like b, d, p, t, k, (*hard c*), g and j. These sounds are formed when air "pops" or has a "release"—like a tiny explosion—when you say it. Other consonants that can have explosive sounds are C, CH, Q, and X.

Smooth sounds are referred to as Euphonious.

Harsh sounds are referred to as Cacophonous.

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Look for when these sounds are clustered or when they appear in key parts of a line of poetry or prose.



# Cacophony Definition

What is cacophony? Here's a quick and simple definition:

A cacophony is a combination of words that sound harsh or unpleasant together, usually because they pack a lot of percussive or "explosive" consonants (like T, P, or K) into relatively little space. For instance, the protagonist of the children's book *Tikki Tikki Tembo* has a very long, very cacophonous name: Tikki Tikki Tembo No Sarimbo Hari Kari Bushkie Perry Pem Do Hai Kai Pom Pom Nikki No Meeno Dom Barako.

Some additional key details about cacophony:

- The word cacophony comes from the Greek word meaning "bad sound."
- The word cacophony is itself slightly cacophonous because of the repetition of the "k" sound.
- Cacophony is one of the words that is used most often to speak about the *musicality* of language—how it sounds when it's spoken aloud.
- The opposite of cacophony is euphony, or the mixture of words that sound smooth or pleasant together.

To really understand what cacophony is, it's helpful to start by getting a sense of what an "explosive consonant" is:

- An explosive consonant is a consonant that "pops" or has a "release"—like a tiny explosion—when you say it. The consonants B, D, K, P, T, and G (as in Gorilla, not George) are all explosive. You can think of explosive consonants as all the letters you would want to use if you were going to try to write out the sounds a frying pan would make if you threw it down a stairwell: *ting, ping, klang, dong, bang, crash*. Other consonants that can have explosive sounds are C, CH, Q, and X.

Explosive consonants are really the key ingredient when creating cacophony. As you can hear, the word cacophony itself has two explosive consonant sounds that repeat in close succession (kuh-koff-uh-nee), making it a cacophonous word. So a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or poem is typically considered cacophonous when it contains explosive consonants in relatively close succession. But that doesn't mean that *every* consonant has to be explosive—and it also doesn't mean that the explosive sounds have to occur right next to each other. In fact, in *most* cases, cacophony is created using the help of other, non-explosive consonant sounds, since it makes the jumble of noises all the more discordant—and with cacophony, discord is the name of the game.



## The Broader Definition of Cacophony

It's worth noting that some people take a much broader view of what constitutes cacophony. These people would argue that cacophony includes any grouping of words that sound unpleasant together or are difficult to pronounce—simply by virtue of containing dissimilar sounds. This definition is much less technical, so it leaves the door wide open for lots of different phrases to be interpreted as cacophonous, which can get confusing. For this reason, we've chosen to cover the narrower definition, but you should know that there are people who think differently about what things do and do not count as cacophony. (As it happens, however, most phrases that people identify as cacophonous under this broader definition *do* contain lots of explosive consonants—for what it's worth.)

## Misconceptions About Cacophony

Some websites define cacophony as *any* word, phrase, or sentence that is difficult to pronounce. For example, one website gives the famous tongue-twister "She sells seashells by the seashore" as an example of cacophony, but this is a mistake. While cacophonous phrases often *are* tricky to pronounce, *not* every tongue-twister or phrase that is hard to pronounce is also cacophonous. The example of "She sells seashells by the seashore" is a particularly odd one to give for cacophony because it's actually an example of sibilance—or the use of hissing sounds—which is almost the exact *opposite* of cacophony.

## Cacophony in Lewis Carroll's "The Jabberwocky"

This famous poem by Lewis Carroll uses lots of made-up words to create a jumble of cacophonous sounds. When read aloud, the poem might feel like a tongue-twister, or like you have marbles in your mouth. That's often one of the effects of cacophony. In this case, it helps create a feeling of distortion and disorientation—almost as if the reader has entered another world (which is fitting because the poem itself is about a mythical monster and takes place in a fantastical world).

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



## Cacophony in Hart Crane's "To Brooklyn Bridge"

In this poem, Hart Crane uses cacophony to bring his subject to life: he's writing about one of New York's most impressive bridges, the Brooklyn Bridge—a masterwork of industry and engineering. Listening to the poem, you can almost hear the industrial sounds of the city: gears turning, subway cars careening past, electric lines buzzing.

Out of some subway scuttle, cell or loft  
A bedlamite speeds to thy parapets,  
Tilting there momentarily, shrill shirt ballooning,  
A jest falls from the speechless caravan.  
Down Wall, from girder into street noon leaks,  
A rip-tooth of the sky's acetylene;  
All afternoon the cloud-flown derricks turn . . .  
Thy cables breathe the North Atlantic still.

## Cacophony in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*

In this passage from Swift's book *Gulliver's Travels*, the narrator describes the experience of war using overwhelmingly cacophonous sounds. The effect is that his description creates a visceral image—not just imagined but *felt* through the language—of the violence of war.

I could not forbear shaking my head, and smiling a little at his ignorance. And being no stranger to the art of war, I gave him a description of cannons, culverins, muskets, carabines, pistols, bullets, powder, swords, bayonets, battles, sieges, retreats, attacks, undermines, countermines, bombardments, sea fights, ships sunk with a thousand men, twenty thousand killed on each side, dying groans, limbs flying in the air, smoke, noise, confusion, trampling to death under horses' feet, flight, pursuit, victory; fields strewed with carcasses, left for food to dogs and wolves and birds of prey; plundering, stripping, ravishing, burning, and destroying.

## Cacophony in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

In this famous passage from *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth's speech becomes cacophonous in a moment of panicked hallucination. Her guilt over the murder for which she is partly responsible comes to the surface not only through *what* she says, but through the discordant way she says it.

Out, damned spot! Out, I say!—One, two. Why, then, 'tis time to do 't. Hell is murky!



## Cacophony in Edgar Allen Poe's *The Bells*

This poem by Poe is all about making the language mimic the subject of the poem. The speaker describes the ringing of bells—four different types of bells are described throughout the poem—and by the end, the "jingling, tinkling" sound of the bells has become "throbbing and sobbing"—and has begun to torment the speaker, causing him misery and anguish. Poe makes unrelenting use of cacophony to help create the poem's maddening effect, mimicking the discordant sounds of the bells.

What a world of merriment their melody foretells!  
How they tinkle, tinkle, tinkle,  
In the icy air of night!  
While the stars that oversprinkle  
All the heavens, seem to twinkle  
With a crystalline delight;  
Keeping time, time, time,  
In a sort of Runic rhyme,  
To the tintinnabulation that so musically wells  
From the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
Bells, bells, bells--  
From the jingling and the tinkling of the bells.

## Why Do Writers Use Cacophony?

Cacophony is most often used by writers when they want to make the sound of the language itself mimic the subject they're writing about. In the examples above, you saw cacophony used as a tool for bringing a variety of different subject matters to life. Here are some of the things a writer might use cacophony to write about:

- Something noisy, like clanging bells.
- Something chaotic, like a city street or a house full of screaming children.
- Something violent, like war.
- Dark thoughts or feelings—like Lady Macbeth's overwhelming guilt about her complicity in Duncan's murder.
- A fantasy world—maybe one full of monsters, like in Lewis Carroll's poem "The Jabberwocky."



# Euphony Definition

What is **euphony**? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Euphony is the combining of words that sound pleasant together or are easy to pronounce, usually because they contain lots of consonants with soft or muffled sounds (like L, M, N, and R) instead of consonants with harsh, percussive sounds (like T, P, and K). Other factors, like rhyme and rhythm, can also be used to create euphony. An example of euphony is the end of Shakespeare's famous "Sonnet 18," which goes "So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

Some additional key details about euphony:

- The word euphony comes from the Greek word meaning "good sound."
- The word euphony is itself slightly euphonic because of its soft sounds.
- Euphony is one of the words that is used most often to speak about the *musicality* of language—how it sounds when it's spoken aloud.
- The opposite of euphony is cacophony, or the combination of words that sound harsh or unpleasant together.

## Euphony Explained

Euphony has to do with the way words sound, and it's easy to identify if you trust your own ear, and ask yourself: do the words sound pleasing together? On the other hand, "pleasing" is a subjective criterion: some combinations of words might sound pleasing to one person's ear, and not particularly pleasing to another's. So it's useful, when you're trying to identify euphony, to know what types of letters are used most often to make euphonic sounds. Generally speaking, those letters include:

- Consonants with muted or muffled sounds, like L, M, N, R, and W.
- Consonants with buzzing sounds, like V, Z, and hard Th sounds (as in "The").
- Consonants with hissing sounds, like F, H, S, and Sh.
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So a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or poem is typically considered euphonic when it contains a lot of these consonants in relatively close succession. However, these consonants *don't* have to appear right next to each other, and euphonic phrases often contain some harsher or more percussive consonants (like T, P, and K) as well. These consonants are referred to as "explosive consonants," and while they can't be avoided entirely, too many of them can make a sentence begin to sound cacophonous—the *opposite* of euphonic.



## Other Elements Used to Create Euphony

In addition to knowing what letters to look for in words, it's important to have a sense of the other tools that writers use to make their words euphonic. Those include:

- **Rhyme:** A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds in two or more words. Rhymes are widely used in poetry, songwriting, and prose because they're pleasant to the ear, making them the perfect euphonic tool.
- **Rhythm:** Rhythm is the term we use to describe how words flow—quickly or slowly, regularly or irregularly—according to the interrelation of long and short or stressed and unstressed syllables. Language that has a steady, regular rhythm is more likely to be euphonic than language with a fast, irregular, jarring rhythm.
- **Figures of speech:** There are many figures of speech in English, and not all help create euphony, but here are some of the ones that do.
  - **Assonance:** Assonance is a figure of speech in which the same vowel sound repeats within a group of words. An example of assonance is: "Who gave Newt and Scooter the blue tuna? It was too soon!"
  - **Consonance:** Consonance is a figure of speech in which the same consonant sound repeats within a group of words. An example of consonance is: "Traffic figures, on July Fourth, to be tough."
  - **Alliteration:** Alliteration is a figure of speech in which the same sound repeats in a group of words, such as the "b" sound in "Bob brought the box of bricks to the basement." The repeating sound must occur either in the first letter of each word, or in the stressed syllables of those words.
- **Repetition:** Repetition is a literary device in which a word or phrase is repeated two or more times. The repetition of words (as in the Shakespeare example above) creates a pleasing sound when used in moderation.
- **Sibilance:** Sibilance is the repetition of hissing sounds. It can be used to create various effects, but often creates a mild, soft effect that is soothing to the ear.

Now that we've covered some of the tools used to create euphony, let's revisit the Shakespearean sonnet from above. It uses a lot of these same tools to create euphony.

- It rhymes;
- It's written in iambic pentameter (rhythm);
- It makes use of *repetition*;
- It uses **assonance** in several **different places**;
- And it is even slightly **sibilant**.

See for yourself:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,  
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.



## But There Isn't a Formula

Despite everything we've just said, you can't be too technical about euphony. Some words, phrases, and sentences are beautiful to the ear, it seems, just because they *are*—and not because they use particular consonants or figures of speech. A good example of this is "cellar door," two words which, together, are often said to be the most euphonic words in the English language. The writer J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote: Most English-speaking people ... will admit that *cellar door* is 'beautiful', especially if dissociated from its sense (and from its spelling). More beautiful than, say, *sky*, and far more beautiful than *beautiful*.

But why is "cellar door" pleasing to the ear? It doesn't rhyme or use assonance. It could be attributed to the use of soft consonants like L and R, or the sibilant C. Or perhaps it's just a good reminder that you can't always explain exactly *why* something sounds beautiful—and that's fine, too. At the end of the day, whether or not something is euphonic comes down to the listener's interpretation. As if to illustrate that very point, in 1926 George Benjamin Woods and Clarence Stratton wrote "A Manual of English," in which they advise writers:

Give heed to the sound of the sentence. Euphony demands the use of words that are agreeable to the ear. Avoid, therefore, whatever would give offense, such as harsh sounds, similar word endings or beginnings, rhyming words, alliteration, and careless repetition.

In other words, they recommended *against* using the very tools that are now generally accepted as *helping* to create euphony. It just goes to show that, with euphony, it's often a matter of the listener's preference.

## Euphony Examples

The following examples of euphony have been gathered from poetry and plays, ranging from the time of the Greeks to today.

### Euphony in *The Iliad*

In these lines from Book XII of Lattimore's translation of Homer's *Iliad*, euphony helps reinforce the lulling effect of the winds dying down. Pay particular attention to the use of **assonance** and **consonance** to make the words euphonic.

"When Zeus ...  
stills the winds asleep in the solid drift ..."





## Euphony in Dorothea Grossman's "I have to tell you"

This very short poem by Dorothea Grossman, titled "I have to tell you," uses a combination of factors to achieve euphony, including **assonance**, **consonance**, and lots of euphonic letters in general (e.g., lots of R's, S's).

I have to tell you,  
there are times when  
the sun strikes me  
like a gong,  
and I remember everything,  
even your ears.

## Euphony in *Romeo and Juliet*

This example from lines 5-6 of the Prologue of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* creates euphony with two sets of alliteration, one with "F" sounds and one with "L" sounds (both of which are consonants often used to create euphony).

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes  
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;

## Why Do Writers Use Euphony?

Writers use euphony to make their language sound beautiful. It's a particularly useful device to use when writing about a subject that is supposed to be beautiful, since it makes the language itself mimic its subject. As Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors wrote in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, "the euphony and rhythm of sentences undoubtedly play a part in the communicative and persuasive process—especially in producing emotional effects" in the reader. If a writer is describing something they want to make seem attractive, pleasant, or beautiful, one of the best ways of achieving this is to make the language itself sound harmonious.

