

Nelson English Usage

Digital resources for the Australian Curriculum

Worksheet - Deciphering Jabberwocky

A portmanteau (plural: *portmanteaux*) or blend is a word created by combining two or more other words, usually in terms of meaning as well as sound. Some examples of portmanteaux are smog (combining smoke and fog) and spork (combining spoon and fork).

In *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1871), Lewis Carroll wrote:

‘You see it’s like a portmanteau – there are two meanings packed into one word.’

The most famous example of portmanteaux is also in *Through the Looking-Glass*, in a nonsense poem called *Jabberwocky*, which contains many of them.

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

’Beware the Jabberwock, my son!
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!
Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun
The frumious Bandersnatch!’

He took his vorpal sword in hand:
Long time the manxome foe he sought –
So rested he by the Tumtum tree,
And stood awhile in thought.

And, as in uffish thought he stood,
The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame,

Came whiffing through the tulgey wood,
And burbled as it came!

One, two! One, two! And through and through
The vorpal blade went snicker-snack!
He left it dead, and with its head
He went galumphing back.

’And, has thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!
O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay!’
He chortled in his joy.

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

In groups of two or three, read *Jabberwocky* aloud and then decipher its meaning. You should try to identify some of the portmanteaux in each stanza as well. For example, in the sixth stanza, 'chortled' is a portmanteau of 'chuckled' and 'snorted'. As the first and last stanzas are the same, only analyse them once.

Stanzas	Meaning
<p>'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe; All mimsy were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe.</p>	
<p>'Beware the Jabberwock, my son! The jaws that bite, the claws that catch! Beware the Jubjub bird, and shun The frumious Bandersnatch!'</p>	
<p>He took his vorpal sword in hand: Long time the manxome foe he sought – So rested he by the Tumtum tree, And stood awhile in thought.</p>	
<p>And, as in uffish thought he stood, The Jabberwock, with eyes of flame, Came whiffling through the tulgey wood, And burbled as it came!</p>	
<p>One, two! One, two! And through and through The vorpal blade went snicker-snack! He left it dead, and with its head He went galumphing back.</p>	
<p>'And, has thou slain the Jabberwock? Come to my arms, my beamish boy! O frabjous day! Callooh! Callay! He chortled in his joy.</p>	
<p>'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves Did gyre and gimble in the wabe; All mimsy were the borogoves, And the mome raths outgrabe.</p>	

Portmanteau	Made from ...	And ...
chortled	chuckled	snorted

Some of the words used in Jabberwocky are unfamiliar, though they are not all portmanteaux. Speculate on the meaning of the mysterious words in your groups. Propose a definition for two of them.

In your group, rewrite Jabberwocky using the vocabulary of your choice, and then perform it together.