

# 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.

## How to Pronounce Cacophony

Here's how to pronounce cacophony: Kuh-**koff**-uh-nee

## Cacophony in Depth

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.



## EXAMPLES

These examples of cacophony are taken from poems, plays, and novels.

## 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 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 WRITERS USE IT

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."



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Phonaesthetics](#): This page has a brief section on cacophony that covers the basics.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Cacophony](#): A simple definition, with a section on the etymology of the word (it comes from Greek and means "bad sound").

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

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### Chicago Manual

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