

Looking at Language

“It’s My Centennial!” said Tom Swiftly

by Richard Lederer, Ph.D.

Starting in 1910, boys grew up devouring the adventures of Tom Swift, a sterling hero and natural scientific genius created by Edward Stratemeyer. Many of Tom’s inventions predated technological developments in real life—electric cars, seacoasters, and houses on wheels. In fact, some say that the Tom Swift tales laid the groundwork for American science fiction.

In Stratemeyer’s stories, Tom and his friends and enemies didn’t always just say something. Occasionally they said something *excitedly*, *sadly*, *hurriedly*, or *grimly*. That was enough to inspire the game called Tom Swifties. The object is to match the adverb with the quotation to produce, in each case, a high-flying pun. Here are my favorite Tom Swifties (says Lederer puntificatingly):

“I love pancakes,” said Tom flippantly.

“My pants are wrinkled,” said Tom ironically.

“I dropped me toothpaste,” said Tom crestfallen.

“I lost my flower,” said Tom lackadaisically.

“My favorite statue is the Venus de Milo,” said Tom disarmingly.

“I love reading *Moby-Dick*,” said Tom superficially.

“My glasses are all fogged up,” said Tom optimistically.

“I’ll take the prisoner downstairs,” said Tom condescendingly.

“I’m sorry that my jet propulsion system didn’t get the rocket to the moon,” said Tom apologetically.

“The girl has been kidnapped,” said Tom mistakenly.

“My stereo is finally fixed,” said Tom ecstatically.

“My family has a great future,” said Tom clandestinely.

“I passed my electrocardiogram,” said Tom wholeheartedly.

“What I do best on camping trips is sleep,” said Tom intently.

“What did that brain surgeon do to me?” said Tom absentmindedly.

“No ellipses, parabolas, or hyperbolas,” said Tom laconically.

“I manufacture table tops,” said Tom counterproductively.

“I’m wearing my wedding ring,” said Tom with abandon.

“I ain’t talking to my mother’s mother no more,” said Tom ungrammatically.

“I’m trying to get some air to circulate under the roof,” said Tom fanatically.

“Your Honor, you must be crazy,” said Tom judgmentally.

“I’m taller than I was yesterday,” said Tom gruesomely.

“That’s a really ugly river beast,” said Tom hypocritically.

“I’ve just figured out that this is the right route to take,” said Tom pathologically.

“I won’t tell you anything about my salivary glands,” said Tom secretively.

“I have just removed the defense mechanisms from this skunk,” said Tom distinctly.

“I’m going to kill Dracula,” said Tom painstakingly.

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn,” said Tom rhetorically.

“This just doesn’t add up,” said Tom nonplussed.

“Be sure to feed kitty her cod liver oil,” said Tom catastrophically.

“I wouldn’t like to have anything but that Chinese soup,” said Tom wantonly.

“Thank you, thank you, thank you, Monsieur,” said Tom mercifully.

Tom

“In order to join the Airborne Medical Corps, I had to earn a Ph.D. and an M.D.,” said Tom paradoxically.

Now that you see how Tom Swifties work, try to come up with a punderful adverb to complete each statement below. Suggested answers appear at the end of this article.

1. “I must attend my flock,” said Tom _____.
2. “That makes 144,” said Tom _____.
3. “She tore my valentine in two,” said Tom _____.
4. “I love to play hockey,” said Tom _____.
5. “I hate pineapples,” said Tom _____.
6. “Pass me the cards,” said Tom _____.
7. “The stock market’s going up,” said Tom _____.
8. “Let’s go to McDonald’s,” said Tom _____.
9. “Look at those cute newborn kittens,” said Tom _____.
10. “Ships ahoy!” said Tom _____.

A close cousin to the Tom Swifty is the Croaker. Croakers, invented by Roy Bongartz, also involve the punderful connecting of a statement to a quotation, except that the verb, rather than the adverb, supplies the pun:

- “My pet frog died,” Tom croaked.
- “I love cats,” Tom mused.
- “I love beagles,” Tom dogmatized.
- “The male sheep was badly cut,” Tom rambled.
- “I used to be a miner,” Tom exclaimed.
- “The little demon was deceitful,” Tom implied.
- “You’re a wicked glutton,” Tom insinuated.
- “My giant sea creature died,” Tom wailed and blubbered.

Now that you know some classic Croakers, match each statement in the left-hand column with the appropriate verb in the right-hand column. Answers appear at the end of this article.

1. “We’ve taken over the government,” bawled
2. “Company’s coming,” coaxed
3. “I’ve struck oil!” cooed
4. “I’ll corroborate that again,” deduced
5. “I’m singing well these days,” explained
6. “I travel all over America,” guessed
7. “I used to be a pilot,” gushed
8. “Please take me to the dance,” intoned
9. “My ad,” reproved
10. “Have another soft drink,” stated

Finally, and most pyrotechnically of all, is the Double Croaker, in which the verb and the adverb unite to ignite the pun:

- “Where did you get that meat?” Tom bridled hoarsely.
- “This meat is hard to chew,” Tom beefed jerkily.
- “I train big felines,” Tom lionized categorically.
- “You’re a mangy cur!” Tom barked doggedly.
- “I can’t seem to draw blood from you,” Tom probed vainly.
- “The fire is going out!” Tom bellowed greatly.
- “Here’s the story of the Liberty Bell,” Tom told appealingly.
- “I hate the taste of grape beverages,” Tom whined with clarity.
- “Your embroidery is sloppy,” Tom needled cruelly.
- “I plan to work in a cemetery,” Tom plotted gravely.
- “Get me off this horse!” Tom derided woefully.
- “I’ve lost a lot of weight,” Tom expounded thinly.
- “And I’m a mathematician,” Tom added summarily.
- “My bicycle wheel is melting,” Tom spoke softly.

Happy Tom Swift Centennial to all!

1. sheepishly	2. grossly	3. halfheartedly	4. reproved	5. intoned	6. stated	7. bullishly
8. archly	9. literally	10. fleetingly	1. cooed	2. guessed	3. gushed	4. bawled
4. puckishly	5. dolefully	6. ideally	9. deduced	5. intoned	6. stated	7. explained
1. sheepishly	2. grossly	3. halfheartedly	10. coaxed	1. cooed	2. guessed	3. gushed

Answers to Tom Swifties

Answers to Croakers