LANGUAGE GAMES

Garden paths galore

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A **garden path sentence** is a sentence that is grammatically correct but whose structure is not obvious. A garden path sentence usually forces the reader to backtrack and re-parse it in order to arrive at the correct interpretation.

A celebrated example is 'The horse raced past the barn fell': on first reading, the word 'raced' seems to be the sentence's main verb, luring the reader into thinking that the horse is the **agent** (the cause or initiator) of the action. But when the reader gets to 'fell', it becomes clear that something is awry. Is this the past tense of the verb 'fall'? If so, what is it that fell down – the barn, or the horse that raced? Either way, the word does not seem to fit in syntactically. The reader might go on to wonder whether 'fell' is actually a noun used in some obscure sense; perhaps there is some sort of rustic structure known as a 'barn fell' that the horse raced past? Only after repeated analysis might the reader arrive at the sentence's true structure: the main verb of the sentence is actually 'fell', and the word 'raced' is actually the passive participle of a subordinate clause. That is, someone else caused the horse to race past the barn, and this 'horse [that was] raced past the barn' is what fell.

The table below contains twelve further garden path sentences, each of which has been split into two parts. In the left column are the beginnings of the sentences, and in the right column, in random order, are the endings. Your job is to match up each beginning to its proper ending, and then to interpret the whole sentence.

The woman whistling tunes	**pottery awaiting reconstruction.**
My colleague who hunts ducks	**bit a bandage.**
The prime number	**annoys me to no end.**
The girl sent the flowers	**the battlements.**
I convinced her children	**pianos.**
The cotton shirts are made	**few.**
The complex houses shattered	**eat accumulates.**
Fat people	**was pleased.**
While John hunted the deer	**out on weekends.**
Only the strongest man	**are noisy.**
That Jill is never here on time	**of grows in Mississippi.**
Mary gave the child the dog	**ran into the woods.**

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