

William Safire: "What's So Funny About Bananas?"  
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1. The word banana makes people smile; why?
2. Maybe it's the spelling. Hubert Horatio Humphrey, who knew he had a tendency to speechify at great length, liked to say, "I'm like the little boy who knew how to spell banana, but never knew when to stop."
3. Perhaps it's the sound that gives the word a comical air. "You say ba-NAA-nuh, I say ba-NAH-nuh," goes the lyric to the Gershwin song "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off"; it could be the *NAA* pronunciation that triggers the amusement.
4. Or it could be the fruit itself, a sunny yellow curved in the shape of a smile, as if to say, "Have a Nice Day." Denuded of its skin, the fruit offers us a banana peel, on which one slips to the great hilarity of onlookers.
5. In old American slang, banana oil means "nonsense" (its humorous connotation far different from snake oil, meaning "fraudulent"). A top banana is a leading comedian. To go bananas is to go crazy, and the nonsensical meaning is reflected in the verse of another 1930's song, "But Not for Me," from the Gershwins' "Girl Crazy": "I never want to hear/From any cheerful Pollyannas/Who tell you fate/Supplies a mate;/It's all bananas!"
6. A banana republic was not just a country that produced profits for the United Fruit Company; it was a country with a rinky-dink government, having "backwardness" as its hallmark (until the name was adopted by an American retailer; now it has a yuppie connotation). A banana boat is a very slow boat.
7. Economists know it's funny, too. When Alfred Kahn, Jimmy Carter's anti-inflation czar, was told by his political superiors never to use the word recession, he agreed to substitute the word banana; he was soon heard muttering about "the worst banana you ever saw."
8. Perhaps it is the context that gives the word its humor. Let's deal with the word in a serious vein and see if a context of gravity wipes the smile off our face.
9. A recent front-page article in *The New York Times*, headlined "A Forbidden Fruit in Europe: Latin Bananas Face Hurdles," dealt with the crisis being felt by banana growers in the face of new quotas and tariffs by the European Community protectionists. That's surely serious, affecting profits, jobs, international relations, calling for all due solemnity.
10. In a letter to *The Times*, Daniel R. Katz, executive director of the Rainforest Alliance, swamped the banana growers with additional charges of using pesticides and fertilizers and converting rain forests into "monocultures" (evidently the bugaboo of multiculturalists). He wrote: "My organization has begun a voluntary program called the

Smart Banana Project, to work with banana producers in improving their environmental standards without affecting productivity."

11. This line caused me to fall out of my chair. Why? Surely Mr. Katz's point—"we support reform of the banana industry, rather than a boycott"—is a serious one, not funny in the least. Then why do we smile at the prospect of the need for banana reform, and double up in consideration of the Smart Banana Project? If health reform is important, why is not banana reform? If smart bombs are not funny, why are smart bananas? (Just envision those smart bananas, dropped from a banana plane, zeroing in on the banana boycotters in the rain forest; oh, what a lovely war.)
12. Straighten those faces; let's try again. In the current issue of *The International Economy*, an article by Klaus C. Engelen, an editor of *Handelsblatt* in Dusseldorf, is headed "Is Helmut Kohl Cracking Up?" The piece discusses the pervasive *Endzeitstimmung*, the mood that the regime is coming to an end, and gives five reasons why Chancellor Kohl, though often highly regarded abroad, is so resented at home.
13. These reasons for the potential downfall of a Western leader range from "For not shutting the borders sooner on floods of asylum seekers" to "For letting bureaucrats from Brussels cause mass layoffs in Germany's steel plants."
14. Then comes the crusher: "For standing by as the French protect bananas from their former colonies, forcing the Germans to eat expensive, puny, shabby bananas."
15. Does Kohl realize he is about to be done in by the fallout from puny bananas? Is there a word in the German language for "shabby bananas," and does Helmut Kohl know it?
16. I rest my case: there is no way of dealing seriously with the Banana Question. Nobody with a straight face is going to fight for banana reform because bananas, smart or shabby, are inherently funny. ("When you get to my age," says octogenarian Milton Berle, "you don't buy green bananas.")

<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/09/magazine/on-language-what-s-so-funny-about-bananas.html?pagewanted=print&src=pm>