

# Circumlocution

## Definition of Circumlocution

Circumlocution is a rhetorical device that can be defined as an ambiguous or paradoxical way of expressing things, ideas, or views. In fact, when somebody wants to remain ambiguous about something, and he does not want to say a thing directly, it means he is using circumlocution.

## Common Features

Examining all the examples of circumlocution, one would find that they share the following features:

It is used when the [speaker](#) is unable to choose the right words to express or say something.

It is used for social purposes in order to avoid using offensive words.

It is used in politics and law, and sometimes it becomes difficult to judge which [perspective](#) of a politician or a lawyer should be supported.

In poetry and [verse](#), it is used to create a regular [meter](#).

## Examples of Circumlocution in Literature

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### Example #1: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)

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**LAERTES:**

“Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain  
If with too credent ear you list his songs,  
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open  
To his unmast’red importunity.”

Laertes gives his domineering suggestion genuinely here, but his tone seemed to be of a prepared speech. He neither shows real awareness of, nor

consideration for, Ophelia's feelings. By using circumlocution, he underscores her feminine inferiority.

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**Example #2: *The Rape of the Lock* (By Alexander Pope)**

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“Close by those meads, forever crowned with flowers,  
Where Thames with pride surveys his rising towers,  
There stands a structure of majestic frame,  
Which for the neighb’ring Hampton takes its name.  
Here Britain’s statesmen oft the fall foredoom  
Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea.

Not louder shrieks to pitying Heav’n are cast,  
When husbands or when lap-dogs breathe their last,  
Or when rich China vessels, fall’n from high,  
In glitt’ring dust and painted fragments lie!”

In the preceding excerpt, Pope criticizes the aristocracy by describing Hampton Court Palace. Circumlocution is employed to reveal the harsh realities, apart from the amusement of court. Pope points out both serious matters and trivial occasions happening in royal houses.

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**Example #3: *Kubla Khan* (By S. T. Coleridge)**

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“So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round:  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.”

Here, Coleridge uses circumlocution to illustrate the underlying concepts. He describes the outside natural world, which is wild, and the things that are protected and peaceful within the palace walls.

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“The edge of a colossal jungle, so dark green as to be almost black, fringed with white surf, ran straight, like a ruled line, far, far away along a blue sea whose glitter was blurred by a creeping mist. The sun was fierce, the land seemed to glisten and drip with steam...”

Conrad is intentionally presenting ambiguous descriptions of the nature of morality and truth, which forces readers to take part in comprehending the [novella](#). Here, the depiction of nature – of forests, and sea, of sun and mist – represents racial, political, psychoanalytical, and feminist perspectives.

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#### **Example #5: *The Importance of Being Earnest* (By Oscar Wilde)**

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“I was within a hair’s breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say...”

In this excerpt, the idea of earnestness has appeared in various forms. It can be understood by its opposites. Here, it is offered as the reverse of triviality, and elsewhere as the opposite of seriousness. Though ostensibly it is a quality of candor, the exact meanings are still vague.

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#### **Example #6: *Holy Sonnet 14* (By John Donne)**

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“Divorce me, untie or break that knot again;  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.”

Donne talks about the [conflict](#) that rages within himself, which he expresses through circumlocution. He says a man cannot avoid Satan’s influence, but he must rely on God to get freedom spiritually from Satan.

### **Function of Circumlocution**

Circumlocution is extensively used in poetry, music, and rhetorical speech. It is, in fact, the embellishment of putting different words together so as not to say what a person wants not to say. Circumlocution makes the verses soft and beautiful, since it is a way to set [aside](#) harsh speech, and make words sound sweeter. However, the major use of circumlocution is to express something ambiguously, and often in poetry to create regular [rhyme](#). Also, it is employed to give different ideas to readers.