

Antithesis

Antithesis Definition

Antithesis, which literally means “opposite,” is a rhetorical device in which two opposite ideas are put together in a sentence to achieve a contrasting effect.

Antithesis emphasizes the idea of [contrast](#) by parallel structures of the contrasted phrases or clauses. The structures of phrases and clauses are similar, in order to draw the attention of the listeners or readers. For example:

“[Setting](#) foot on the moon may be a small step for a man but a giant step for mankind.”

The use of contrasting ideas, “a small step” and “a giant step,” in the sentence above emphasizes the significance of one of the biggest landmarks of human history.

Common Antithesis Examples

Some famous antithetical statements have become part of our everyday speech, and are frequently used in arguments and discussions. Below is a list of some common antithetical statements:

Give every man thy ear, but few thy [voice](#).
Man proposes, God disposes.
Love is an ideal thing, marriage a real thing.
Speech is silver, but silence is gold.
Patience is bitter, but it has a sweet fruit.
Money is the root of all evil: poverty is the fruit of all goodness.
You are easy on the eyes, but hard on the heart.

Examples of Antithesis in Literature

In literature, writers employ antithesis not only in sentences, but also in characters and events. Thus, its use is extensive. Below are a few examples of antithesis in literature:

Example #1: *A Tale of Two Cities* (By Charles Dickens)

The opening lines of Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities* provides an unforgettable antithesis example:

“It was the **best** of times, it was the **worst** of times, it was the age of **wisdom**, it was the age of **foolishness**, it was the epoch of **belief**, it was the epoch of **incredulity**, it was the season of **Light**, it was the season of **Darkness**, it was the spring of **hope**, it was the winter of **despair**, we had **everything** before us, we had **nothing** before us, we were all going direct to **Heaven**, we were all going direct **the other way**.”

The contrasting ideas, set in parallel structures, markedly highlight the [conflict](#) that existed in the time discussed in the novel.

Example #2: *Julius Caesar* (By William Shakespeare)

In William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, we notice antithesis in the characters of Mark Antony and Marcus Brutus. Brutus is portrayed as the “noblest of Romans,” close to Caesar, and a person who loved Rome and Caesar. Antony, on the contrary, is shown as a man with the evil intentions of harming Caesar, and taking charge of Rome. These antithetical characters highlight the conflict in the play.

Example #3: *An Essay on Criticism* (By Alexander Pope)

Alexander Pope, in his *An [Essay](#) on Criticism*, says:

“To err is human; to forgive divine.”

Fallibility is a trait of humans, and God – the Creator – is most forgiving. Through these antithetical ideas, Pope reveals the basic nature of human beings. He wants to say that God is forgiving because his creation is erring.

Example #4: *Community* (By John Donne)

We find antithesis in John Donne's poem [*Community*](#):

“Good we must love, and must hate ill,
For ill is ill, and good good still;
But there are things indifferent,
Which we may neither hate, nor love,
But one, and then another prove,
As we shall find our fancy bent.”

Two contrasting words “love” and “hate” are combined in the above lines. It emphasizes that we love good because it is always good, and we hate bad because it is always bad. It is a matter of choice to love or hate things which are neither good nor bad.

Example #5: *Paradise Lost* (By John Milton)

John Milton, in *Paradise Lost*, says:

“Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav’n.”

The contrasting ideas of *reign/serve*, and *Hell/Heav’n* are placed in this sentence to achieve an antithetical effect.

Function of Antithesis

A literary device, like antithesis, uses words to convey ideas in different ways from the common words and expressions of daily life. Thus, it conveys meaning more vividly than ordinary speech. When contrasting ideas are brought together, the idea is expressed more emphatically.

As a literary device, antithesis makes contrasts in order to examine pros and cons of a subject under discussion, and helps to bring forth judgment

on that particular subject.