

Epigraph

Definition of Epigraph

An epigraph is a literary device in the form of a poem, quotation, or sentence – usually placed at the beginning of a document or a simple piece – having a few sentences, but which belongs to another writer. An epigraph can serve different purposes, such as it can be used as a summary, introduction, example, or an association with some famous literary work, so as to draw a [comparison](#), or to generate a specific [context](#) for the piece.

Epigraph is a very sophisticated form of literary device that can really brush up a story very well. Nevertheless, a question that usually comes to mind about this device is why an epigraph is always used in the beginning. Sometimes, when you are done reading a book, you are so swamped by the story that it makes you want to hold the book close to your chest and transfer everything in it to your soul directly. It is because the book is so amazing that it makes us want to remember everything in it. Now, imagine how moving it would be to turn the very last page thinking you have finished the book, and right there you find an epigraph that reflects on everything you just read.

Examples of Epigraph in Literature

Example #1: *Heart of Darkness* (By Joseph Conrad)

Many famous poems provide good examples of epigraph. For instance, “Mistah Kurtz, he dead,” is a line from *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad, which was used in the famous poem *The Hollow Men* by T. S. Eliot to describe how modern people have dead souls, like the [character](#) Kurtz of *Heart of Darkness*. It is because they have taken materialism as their demigod, and accepted its domination, submitting their spirits to it like Kurtz did.

Example #2: *Life: A User's Manual* (By Georges Perec)

The epigraphs used in the preface of Georges Perec's *Life: A User's Manual* (*La Vie mode d'emploi*) notify the reader in advance that everything is not what it seems, and that tricks are going to be played.

Example #3: *The Brothers Karamazov* (By Fyodor Dostoevsky)

Epigraph examples are also found in philosophical novels. The epigraph used by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov* is from the Holy Bible, specifically *John 12:24*. It says:

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it dies, it bringeth forth much fruit.”

Example #4: *The Sun Also Rises* (By Ernest Hemingway)

Ernest Hemingway used Gertrude Stein's famous quotation, “You are all a lost generation,” in the beginning of his book *The Sun Also Rises*. Through this epigraph, Hemingway shows us the entire period in which they were forced to live. The lost generation phrase as coined by Steinbeck was truly reflected by Hemingway in his other pieces as well, but this novel proved to be a mouthpiece for the lost generation.

Example #5: *The Godfather* (By Mario Puzo)

“Behind every great fortune there is a crime.”

This is a translated quotation from Honoré de Balzac given in *The Godfather*, a famous novel by Mario Puzo. The epigraph given in this novel presents the true picture of a gangster who earns a lot of wealth, and wields much control over the lives of others. *The Godfather* is a true reflection of what its epigraph suggests.

Function of Epigraph

The use of epigraph in an original work can create something very intriguing. It can be used as a thematic gatekeeper, by taking excerpts from influential authors to introduce people to your own ideas. It can be used in the form of quotations, proverbs, lyrics, lines, or verses, or even parts of a conversation. It can also be used to set the mood of the readers in the very beginning, for the [prose](#) they are to read next.

A writer can also give readers a preview of his notions and inspirations through an epigraph. Although the role of an epigraph in a work may seem very insignificant, it can be very instructive, if used cleverly. An epigraph deepens the readers' interest in the [narrative](#) just like an appetizer increases your appetite for a meal. It can also be used in places where the writer wants to highlight a particular point with the help of an already existing concept.