

# Parenthesis

## Definition of Parenthesis

Parenthesis is a stylistic device that comes from the Greek word meaning “*to place*,” or “*alongside*.” Parenthesis is a qualifying or explanatory sentence, clause, or word that writers insert into a paragraph or passage. However, if they leave it out, even then it does not grammatically affect the text, which is correct without it.

Writers mark these explanatory clauses off by round or square brackets, or by commas, dashes, or little lines. As far as its purpose is concerned, this verbal unit provides extra information, interrupts the syntactic flow of words, and allows readers to pay attention to the explanation. However, the overuse of parenthesis may make sentences look ambiguous and poorly structured.

## Examples of Parenthesis in Literature

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### Example #1: *One Art* (By Elizabeth Bishop)

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“—Even losing you (the joking [voice](#), a gesture  
I love) I shan’t have lied. It’s evident  
the art of losing’s not too hard to master  
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.”

Bishop uses an abrupt, excruciating parenthesis towards the end of the poem. For this, she uses brackets, for expressing [understatement](#), and for suggesting how to cope with losses through art by using the phrase “write it.”

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### Example #2: *The Elements of Style* (By William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White)

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“It is now necessary to warn you that your concern for the reader must be pure: you must sympathize with the reader’s plight (most readers are in trouble about half the time) but never seek to know the reader’s wants. Your whole duty as a writer is to please and satisfy yourself...”

The [style](#) guidebook provides parenthetical information several times. Here, you can see how the authors have explained the reader’s plight by giving descriptive sentence in brackets, showing how readers are in trouble.

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### **Example #3: *The Dogwood Tree: A Boyhood* (By John Updike)**

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“A little gravel alley, too small to be marked with a street sign but known in the neighborhood as Shilling Alley, wound hazardingly around our property and on down, past an untidy sequence of back buildings (chicken houses, barns out of plumb, a gun shop, a small lumber mill, a shack where a blind man lived, and the enchanted grotto of a garage whose cement floors had been waxed to the luster of ebony by oil drippings ... silver water so cold it made your front teeth throb) on down to Lancaster Avenue, the main street, where the trolley cars ran.”

Look, the author has employed a detailed descriptive parenthesis in this passage. He explains in detail a sequence of untidy back buildings, and why they give such a miserable look.

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### **Example #4: *The Horse and His Boy* (By C. S. Lewis)**

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“[I]n Calormen, story-telling (whether the stories are true or made up) is a thing you’re taught, just as English boys and girls are taught [essay](#)-writing. The difference is that people want to hear the stories, whereas I never heard of anyone who wanted to read the essays.”

Here, Lewis uses round brackets to describe the story, specifying whether

story, which are not taught as are essays. Hence, essays seem boring.

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#### **Example #5: *Lights Out for the Territory* (By Iain Sinclair)**

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” ‘Black dog’ is the mood of bottomless, suicidal despair suffered, most notoriously, by Winston Churchill (himself a kind of bulldog in nappies, a logo for Empire; growling and dribbling, wheezing smoke, swollen veins fired with brandy).”

In this essay, Sinclair gives the readers a unique, enlightened, provocative, disturbing, and utterly daring picture of modern city life in London, and of its people. In the process, he reveals a dark underbelly of London, as you can see his provocative understatement and parenthetical information about Winston Churchill.

#### **Function of Parenthesis**

Parenthesis makes the statements more convincing, as it puts the readers in a right form from the very beginning where they read it as an explanation. However, its main function is to give more explanation and add emphasis, while its repeated use can cause focus and thus makes parenthetical insertions a dominant feature of a sentence.

Parenthesis also offers readers an insight into true feelings and opinions of characters and narrators, while they might tend to evade parenthetical information as unimportant. Doing this, parenthesis could leave them clueless to the actual purpose of a sentence. In addition, it often creates humorous effect by using [hyperbole](#) and understatements.