

# Ambiguity

## Ambiguity Definition

Ambiguity, or [fallacy](#) of ambiguity, is a word, phrase, or statement which contains more than one meaning. Ambiguous words or statements lead to vagueness and confusion, and shape the basis for instances of unintentional [humor](#).

For instance, it is ambiguous to say “I rode a black horse in red pajamas,” because it may lead us to think the horse was wearing red pajamas. The sentence becomes clear when it is restructured as, “Wearing red pajamas, I rode a black horse.”

Similarly, same words with different meanings can cause ambiguity, such as in, “John took off his trousers by the bank.” It is funny if we confuse one meaning of “bank,” which is a building, to another meaning, which is “an edge of a river.” [Context](#) usually resolves any ambiguity in such cases.

## Common Ambiguity Examples

Below are some common examples of ambiguity:

**A good life depends on a liver** – Liver may be an organ or simply a living person.

**Foreigners are hunting dogs** – It is unclear whether dogs were being hunted, or foreigners are being spoken of as dogs.

**Each of us saw her duck** – It is not clear whether the word “duck” refers to an action of ducking, or a duck that is a bird.

**The passerby helped dog bite victim** – Is the passerby helping a dog bite someone? Or is he helping a person who has been bitten by a dog? It's not clear.

## Examples of Ambiguity in Literature

Although ambiguity is considered a flaw in writing, many writers use this technique to allow readers to understand their works in a variety of ways, giving them depth and complexity. Let us analyze some ambiguity examples in literature.

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### Example #1: *The Catcher in the Rye* (By J. D. Salinger)

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Read the following excerpt from *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger:

“I ran all the way to the main gate, and then I waited a second till I got my breath. I have no wind, if you want to know the truth. I’m quite a heavy smoker, for one thing—that is, I used to be. **They** made me cut it out. Another thing, I grew six and a half inches last year. That’s also how I practically got t.b. and came out **here** for all these goddam checkups and stuff. I’m pretty healthy though.”

The words “they” and “here” used by the [speaker](#) are ambiguous. But the readers are allowed to presume from the context that “they” might be the professionals helping out Holden, and “here” might be a rehabilitation center.

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### Example #2: *The Sick Rose* (By William Blake)

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*The Sick Rose*, a short [lyric](#) written by William Blake, is full of ambiguities:

“O Rose thou art sick.  
The invisible worm,  
That flies in the night  
In the howling storm:  
Has found out thy **bed**  
**Of crimson joy**;  
And his **dark secret love**  
Does thy life destroy”

Many of the words in the above lines show ambiguity. We cannot say for

interpretation of “dark secret love.” The ambiguous nature of such phrases allows readers to explore for deeper meanings of the poem.

Some of those who have analyzed this poem believe that “Has found out thy bed / Of crimson joy” refers to making love.

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### **Example #3: *Hamlet* (By William Shakespeare)**

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On a larger scale, ambiguity may develop in a [character](#), or in an entire story. For instance, Hamlet is a morally ambiguous character.

He kills to avenge his father’s murder  
He is good because he wants to protect his mother  
He is bad because he is willing to kill whom he must to achieve this end

The ambiguity in Hamlet’s character is seen when he is hurt by the death of Ophelia, which is his personal loss, but he does not appreciate the effect that his actions are going to have on others.

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### **Example #4: *Ode to a Grecian Urn* (By John Keats)**

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We find ambiguity in the first line of Keats’ *Ode to a Grecian Urn*:

“Thou **still** unravish’d bride of quietness...”

The use of the word “still” is ambiguous in nature. Here, it may mean “an unmoving object,” or it may be interpreted as “yet unchanged.”

## **Function of Ambiguity**

Ambiguity in literature serves the purpose of lending a deeper meaning to a literary work. By introducing ambiguity in their works, writers give liberty to readers to use their imagination to explore meanings. This active participation of the readers involves them in the [prose](#) or poetry they read.