

Antimetabole

Antimetabole Definition

Antimetabole is derived from a Greek word which means “turning about.” It is a literary term or device that involves repeating a phrase in reverse order. For example:

“You like it; it likes you.”

“Fair is foul and foul is fair.”

[Chiasmus](#) and antimetabole are usually expected to be overlapped in usage, and this overlap is also often used as a synonym for epanados (the repeating of a phrase or sentence in reverse order) in modern day books. However, the writer would make them distinct through his use.

Famous Antimetabole Examples

Just see these examples of how antimetabole has been used since the time of Socrates:

“Eat to live, not live to eat.” – Socrates

“I go where I please, and I please where I go.” – Attributed to Duke Nukem

“In America, you can always find a party. In Soviet Russia, Party always finds you!” – Yakov Smirnoff

“If you fail to plan, you plan to fail.”

“[Ask](#) not what *your country* can do for *you*; ask what *you* can do for *your country*.” – John F. Kennedy, *Inaugural Address*, January 20, 1961.

“He who questions training only trains himself at asking questions.” – The Sphinx, *Mystery Men* (1999)

“The great object of [Hamlet’s] life is defeated by continually resolving to do, yet doing nothing but resolve.” – Samuel Taylor Coleridge on Shakespeare’s Hamlet

“We do what we like and we like what we do.” – Andrew W.K., “Party Hard”

“We didn’t land on Plymouth Rock. Plymouth Rock landed on us.”

Malcolm X, “Malcolm X”

“If you can’t be with the one you love, love the one you’re with.” –

Billy Preston

“You stood up for America, now America must stand up for you.” –

Barack Obama, December 14, 2011.

Difference Between Chiasmus and Antimetabole

Antimetabole and chiasmus are very closely related, and some experts even use them interchangeably. However, both the terms still exist to refer to two distinct [literary devices](#). According to scholars, when a sentence is repeated by reversing it, so as to convey an idea or stress a point, it is called chiasmus. Antimetabole is not very much different from chiasmus, only that in an antimetabole the words and grammatical structure is also reversed, because just reversing the meaning is not enough. So in the light of these facts, it can be deduced that all the antimetaboles are chiasmus, but not all instances of chiasmus are antimetaboles.

A chiasmus is a sentence repeated inversely and the only condition of a chiasmic sentence is that the two clauses in the phrase are opposite in meaning. For example, the popular saying by Havelock Ellis: “Charm is a woman’s strength, strength is a man’s charm,” the sentence is an example of chiasmus, but is not an antimetabole. This is because the two clauses have opposite meanings, but the words and the grammatical makeup are dissimilar.

In an antimetabole the word order in a sentence is reversed to [contrast](#) the meanings. One very good example is Mae West’s catchphrase, “It’s not the men in my life; it’s the life in my men.” As you can see, in this sentence the words, [rhythm](#), and grammatical structure used in the second phrase are exactly similar to the first one, but the meaning is opposite. Many experts refer to antimetabole as a subtype of chiasmus.

Functions and Effectiveness of Antimetabole

For antimetabole to be effective, it does not only have to be grammatically correct, but should also be logical. People, after studying literature for a while, start thinking that they can churn out antimetaboles with a snap of a finger. They fail to understand the fact that a sentence cannot be called an

Antimetaboles are popular and effective solely because they appeal to reason and are easy to remember. If the first half is relatable, then the reader or listener will automatically make sense of the second half. For example: "It is not about the years in your life, but about the life in your years." A sentence like this can be called an antimetabole because it is appealing, correct (logically and grammatically) and has a message to convey to the readers.