

# syncope

## Definition of Syncope

Syncope is a literary device that can be defined as the contraction or the shortening of a word by omitting sounds, syllables or letters from the middle of the word, such as *bos'n* for the word “boatswain.” Similarly, *ne'er* for the word “never,” and *fo'c'sle'* for the word “forecastle” are also used. From these examples, syncope can also be defined as the dropping of the unstressed vowels, letters, or syllables, or dropping the consonants from the middle of a word. It can be found in synchronic analysis and diachronic analysis of languages.

## Uses of Syncope

### 1. As a Poetic Device

Syncope is mainly used in poetry, when poets desperately want to avoid a single syllable from a word to harmonize the [meter](#) in each line. However, syncope can be found in [drama](#) and in [prose](#) as well.

### 2. Used in Informal Speech

Syncope is also used in informal speech. For instance, different kinds of colloquial contractions may also be called syncope.

## Examples of Syncope in Literature

Poetic contractions are often found in English [verse](#), from the Restoration period to the end of the 18th century. Poets and writers use syncope to produce rhetorical effects in literature. Let's take a look at some examples from literary texts to understand syncope.

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**Example #1: *The Deserted Village* (By Oliver Goldsmith)**

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In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, contractions were signified typographically by using apostrophes, such as in this example:

“For talking age and **whisp’ring** lovers made!  
Ill fares the land, to **hast’ning** ill a prey,  
And his last **falt’ring** accents **whisper’d** praise.”

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**Example #2: *The World Is Too Much with Us* (By William Wordsworth)**

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“The road extended **o’er** the heath  
Weary and bleak: no cottager had there  
Won from the waste a rood of ground, no hearth  
Of Traveller’s half-way house with its turf smoke  
Scented the air through which the plover wings  
His solitary flight.”

Here, Wordsworth necessarily contracts the word *over* into “o’er,” for the sake of [rhyme](#), and to give the lines a colloquial feel.

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**Example #3: *A Lover’s Complaint* (By William Shakespeare)**

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“This said, his **wat’ry** eyes he did dismount,  
Whose sights till then were **levell’d** on my face,  
Each cheek a river running from a fount,  
With brinish current downward **flowe’d** a pace...”

The best examples of syncope can be seen in Shakespeare’s poetry. Here, Shakespeare made use of syncope in these words: **wat’ry** for “watery,” **levell’d** for “levelled,” and **flowe’d** for “flowered.” The contractions have been used to keep the metrical [rhythm](#) the same in each line.

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**Example #4: *Cymbeline* (By William Shakespeare)**

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“...Thou thy worldly task hast done,  
Home art gone and **ta'en** thy wages...”

Further he says,

“I would thou **grew'st** unto the shores o' the haven,  
And **question'dst** every sail: if he should write  
And not have it, 'twere a paper lost,  
As **offer'd** mercy is. What was the last  
That he spake to thee?”

The words *ta'en* for “taken,” *grew'st*, *question'dst*, and *offer'd* have been used as syncope to rhyme the poem.

## Function of Syncope

The syllables or letters are mostly deleted from the center of words in speech to speed up the conversation, or to balance the rhythmical pattern of the poetic verse. The purpose is to create a rhetorical effect for embellishment and meter. However, in poetry and stylized prose it is generally used to modify the word sound.

Either single letters or complete syllables are removed from a word with the insertion of an [apostrophe](#) – this makes it easy to read, and perfects the metrical rhythm. Generally, it was a fashion during the Chaucerian age, and more so during the Elizabeth age, when erudite people used it in their writings to embellish the piece, and to create artistic effect in the readers' minds. However, sometimes it comes into view as a rustic [style](#), and is therefore used as a literary device to differentiate simple country folk. Some dialects and languages make more use of syncope than others, such as the Scots.