

Riddle

Definition of Riddle

A riddle is a question, a puzzle, a phrase, or a statement devised to get unexpected or clever answers. It is a [folklore genre](#) as well as rhetorical device, often having veiled or double meanings. When someone uses it as a puzzle or a question, it could be a thought-provoking challenge for the [audience](#) to figure it out themselves, or it could be a funny comment intended to make the audience laugh.

Some riddles show the wit of protagonists in a [narrative](#), allowing them to escape a terrible situation by using their wit rather than their strength. Often times, puzzling riddles tell us that we cannot answer some questions, leading to hours of perturbed head scratching. However, they open our minds to a number of possibilities.

Common and Popular Examples of Riddle

It is so fragile that if you say its name you break it, what is it?

Answer: It is silence.

I have a head, I have a tail, but I do not have a body. I am neither a lizard nor a snake. Then, guess what am I?

Answer: I am a coin.

It can run and does not walk, has a mouth and does not talk, has a head and does not weep, has a bed and does not sleep?

Answer: It is a river.

Something that falls and never breaks, and something breaks but never falls?

Answer: Day breaks and night falls.

My father is white but I am black, I am a bird without wings, flying to the clouds. I cause tears of mourning in those who encounter me, but there is no reason for mourning because, once I am born, I am dissolved into air. Can you guess who am I?

Answer: I am smoke.

Types of Riddle

There are two main types of riddle:

Enigma – Enigmas are problems expressed in an allegorical or metaphorical language, requiring careful thinking and ingenuity to solve them.

Conundrum – Conundrums are questions that rely on punning for creating effects in a question.

Examples of Riddle in Literature

Example #1: *Oedipus Rex* (By Sophocles)

One of the most popular riddles in literature is the riddle of Sphinx, who asks questions of Oedipus.

Riddle: “What goes on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon, and on three legs in the evening?”

Answer: Oedipus solves this riddle, giving right answer: it is *man*, who can crawl on his four legs as an infant, and as an adult he walks on two legs, while he walks with a stick when he becomes old.

Example #2: *The Hobbit* (By J. R. R. Tolkien)

Bilbo and Gollum play a riddling game, as Bilbo’s life would be in danger if he cannot solve the riddle. Luckily, he answers the riddle posed by Gollum, earning an award of safe passage out of the tunnel.

Riddle: “This thing all things devours;
Birds, beasts, trees, flowers;
Gnaws iron, bites steel;
Grinds hard stones to meal;
Slays king, ruins town,
And beats mountain down.”

Answer: Time

Example #3: *The Merchant of Venice* (By William Shakespeare)

The father of Portia plans a riddle for the men who wish to marry his daughter, and whoever would solve it, would marry her. For doing this, he places three caskets of gold, silver, and lead, and asks would-be suitors to pick the one.

Riddle: The golden casket was inscribed: “Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.” The words engraved on the silver casket: “Who chooseth me shall get as much as he deserves.” The leaden casket: “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.”

Answer: The golden casket encloses a skull with a warning note that appearances are usually deceiving, human wishes can be dangerous, the silver casket symbolizes chasing intangible goals, and holds a portrait of an idiot. However, the leaden casket symbolizes modesty and inner beauty, and contains a portrait of Portia with a note saying, “You that choose not by the view, chance as fair and choose as true.”

Example #4: *Emma* (By Jane Austen)

Emma displays her wit while correctly answering Mr. Elton’s riddle.

Riddle: “My first displays the wealth and pomp of kings,
Lords of the earth! their luxury and ease.
Another view of man, my second brings,
Behold him there, the monarch of the seas!”

Answer: Courtship

Example #5: *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* (By J. K. Rowling)

During his competition in the Tri-Wizard Tournament, Harry had to answer a riddle posed by a Sphinx:

Riddle: “First think of the person who lives in disguise,
Who deals in secrets and tells naught but lies,
Next tell me what’s always the last thing to mend,
The middle of middle and end of the end?...
Which creature would you be unwilling to kiss?”

Answer: A spider.

Function of Riddle

In written literature, riddles deceive the audience with their meanings. As far as a riddle’s purpose is concerned, it explores questions with enough thoroughness to provide readers a clear view of major issues. Riddles can generally be conversation-starters, or brain busters to get readers thinking, while in oral literature, riddles serve as the competition of wits and skills and guessing games.

However, if the audience knows the answers they take pleasure in hearing them repeatedly. Gaming riddles reveal the playful side of language in a manageable form. Besides, it is usually possible to draw appropriate metaphors from good riddles.