

# Eristic

## Definition of Eristic

Eristic is a derivative of the Greek word *eris*, which means “to create strife,” or “to wrangle.” It is defined as a literary device in which the writers and speakers engage in a heated argumentation without reaching a conclusion or solving a particular issue. Also, this device has been used as a manner of argumentation in classical texts, which are usually based on specious reasoning and poor conclusions. It is also known as “*discordia*.”

## Difference Between Eristic and Dialectic

According to Plato, there is a slight difference between eristic and dialectic. Dialecticians apply proper divisions and distinctions to the subject being argued, while eristics do not apply such distinctions, since they follow verbal oppositions.

## Examples of Eristic in Literature

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### Example #1: *Macbeth* (By William Shakespeare)

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**Lady Macbeth:**

“How now, my lord, why do you keep alone,  
Of sorriest fancies your companions making,  
Using those thoughts which should indeed have died  
With them they think on? Things without all remedy  
Should be without regard: *what’s done, is done* ...

To bed, to bed! There’s knocking at the gate:  
come, come, come, come, give me your hand. *What’s  
done cannot be undone*.—To bed, to bed, to bed!”

Lady Macbeth uses eristic arguments in these lines. In her arguments with her husband, she states that what has been done is done and cannot be undone.

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### **Example #2: *Why I am Not a Christian* (By Bertrand Russell)**

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“It is an easy [argument](#) to [parody](#). You all know Voltaire’s remark, that obviously the nose was designed to be such as to fit spectacles. That sort of parody has turned out to be not nearly so wide of the mark as it might have seemed in the eighteenth century, because since the time of Darwin we understand much better why living creatures are adapted to their environment ... but that they grew to be suitable to it, and that is the basis of adaptation. There is no [evidence](#) of design about it ...”

Russell explains why he does not believe in God, and his doubt over Jesus’ existence. He argues *ad absurdum*, and aims at winning the argument.

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### **Example #3: *Of Truth* (By Francis Bacon)**

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“... men’s minds, vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations ... and the like ... it would leave the minds, of a number of men ... full of melancholy and indisposition, and displeasing to themselves ...”

In the above passage, Bacon tries to give possible reasons why men prefer to tell lies than tell the truth. There are so many causes, and not a single or a particular cause can resolve this issue.

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### **Example #4: *Waiting for Godot* (By Samuel Beckett)**

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**POZZO:**

“No no, he does well to [ask](#). Do I need the bones? (*He turns them over with the end of his whip.*) No, personally I do not need them

any more. (*Estragon takes a step towards the bones.*) But ... but in theory the bones go to the carrier ...”

**ESTRAGON:**

“Mister ... excuse me, Mister ...”

**POZZO:**

“You’re being spoken to, pig! Reply! (*To Estragon.*) Try him again.”

**ESTRAGON:**

“Excuse me, Mister, the bones, you won’t be wanting the bones?”

**POZZO:**

Mister! (*Lucky bows his head.*) Reply! Do you want them or don’t you? They’re yours ... I don’t like it. I’ve never known him to refuse a bone before ... Nice business it’d be if he fell sick on me!”  
(*He puffs at his pipe.*)

This is one of the great examples of eristic argument. The characters are discussing bones and their functions for human survival. All of them make different arguments, but find no solution in this discussion.

## **Function of Eristic**

A close look at the above eristic examples would lead one to correctly to assume that the main purpose of eristic argumentation is to prolong a [conflict](#), rather than resolve it. Though it was started by Sophists, it is now used in modern literary texts, speeches, and contentious topics of political debate. The purpose is to confuse the opponent. Hence, it is employed for the sake of conflict, and might involve comic effect and conspiracy theory. Besides, by searching eristic argumentation, critiques discover literary weaknesses. As a result, critics have a tendency to distort the writers’ intentions. The aim is to win arguments, and a clear answer is often not provided.