

# Periphrasis

## Definition of Periphrasis

Periphrasis originates from the Greek word *periphrazein*, which means “talking around.” It is a stylistic device that can be defined as the use of excessive and longer words to convey a meaning which could have been conveyed with a shorter expression, or in a few words. It is an indirect or roundabout way of writing about something. For example, using the phrase “I am going to” instead of “I will” is periphrasis. This is also called “[circumlocution](#),” but there is a slight difference between circumlocution and periphrasis.

## Types of Periphrasis

Periphrasis is one type of circumlocution. There are two types of circumlocution, namely periphrasis and ambage. Periphrasis is a roundabout explanation of something, while ambage is an indirect and ambiguous way of expressing things or ideas.

## Difference Between Paraphrasis and Periphrasis

Para means “beside,” whereas peri means “around.” In paraphrasing, ambiguous statements are restated in order to enhance the meanings, while periphrasis is a measured roundabout way of expressing something.

## Examples of Periphrasis in Literature

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Example #1: *David Copperfield* (By Charles Dickens)

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“‘Under the impression,’ said Mr. Micawber, ‘that your peregrinations in this metropolis have not as yet been extensive, and that you might have some difficulty in penetrating the

arcana of the Modern Babylon in the direction of the City Road—in short,’ said Mr. Micawber, in another burst of confidence, ‘that you might lose yourself—I shall be happy to call this evening, and install you in the knowledge of the nearest way ...’”

In this excerpt, Dickens has used periphrasis to give comic effect to the text. It is used in the speech of Wilkins Micawber, who speaks in an indirect way. Also, this technique gives poetic flavor to this [prose](#).

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### **Example #2: *Sonnet 74* (By William Shakespeare)**

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“When that fell arrest  
Without all bail shall carry me away.”

In this extract, Shakespeare is explaining death and its consequences. He has used an indirect way of illustrating death as “when that fell.” Here it means, when death comes, no one would be able to save him.

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### **Example #3: *The Rape of the Lock* (By Alexander Pope)**

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“Close by those meads, forever crowned with flowers,  
Where Thames with pride surveys his rising towers,  
There stands a structure of majestic frame,  
Which for the neighb’ring Hampton takes its name.  
Here Britain’s statesmen oft the fall foredoom  
Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea. Not louder  
shrieks to pitying Heav’n are cast,  
When husbands or when lap-dogs breathe their last,  
Or when rich China vessels, fall’n from high,  
In glitt’ring dust and painted fragments lie!”

In this excerpt, Pope is employing periphrasis by criticizing the aristocratic class through the description of Hampton Court Palace. He has used this device to disclose the negative side of aristocracy.

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#### Example #4: *The Importance of Being Earnest* (By Oscar Wilde)

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“I was within a hair’s-breadth of the last opportunity for pronouncement, and I found with humiliation that probably I would have nothing to say.”

In the above passage, periphrasis is employed to describe earnestness. This idea could be understood in different ways. In the text, it is given as the opposite of pettiness, but elsewhere it is explained as the reverse of seriousness.

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#### Example #5: *Kubla Khan* (By S. T. Coleridge)

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“So twice five miles of fertile ground  
With walls and towers were girdled round:  
And there were gardens bright with sinuous rills,  
Where blossomed many an incense-bearing tree;  
And here were forests ancient as the hills,  
Enfolding sunny spots of greenery.”

Coleridge has used periphrasis to demonstrate hidden meanings and concepts. He illustrates the natural world as wild, while things are safe and calm inside the palace walls.

### **Function of Periphrasis**

From the above examples of periphrasis, one could surmise that this literary device is used to embellish sentences by creating splendid effects to draw readers’ attention. These periphrasis examples have also shown that the use of this literary device lends poetic flavor to prose. Periphrasis is a feature of analytical language that tends to shun inflection.