

Zeugma

Zeugma Definition

Zeugma, from Greek meaning “yoking” or “bonding,” is a [figure of speech](#) in which a word, usually a verb or an adjective, applies to more than one noun, blending together grammatically and logically different ideas.

For instance, in the sentence, “John lost his coat and his temper,” the verb “lost” applies to both the nouns “coat” and “temper.” Losing a coat and losing temper are logically and grammatically different ideas, which are brought together in this sentence. Zeugma, when used skillfully, produces a unique artistic effect, making the literary works more interesting and effective as it serves to adorn expressions, and to add emphasis to ideas in impressive [style](#).

Zeugma and Syllepsis

Zeugma is sometimes differentiated from “syllepsis.” Like zeugma, syllepsis also employs the technique of using a single verb for more than one part in a sentence, but where that single verb applies grammatically and logically to only one. For example, in the sentence, “They saw lots of thunder and lightning,” the verb “saw” is logically correct only for the lightning, as thunder is “heard.”

Similarly, Tennyson’s line from *Ulysses*, “He works his work, I mine” is an example of syllepsis, as the verb “works” is grammatically correct with the first person pronoun “he,” but it is incorrect grammar to say “I works mine.” Despite this distinction, syllepsis is often considered a kind of zeugma. Bryan A. Garner gives his views about the distinction between zeugma and syllepsis in *The Oxford Dictionary of American Usage and Style*:

“Although commentators have historically tried to distinguish between zeugma and syllepsis, the distinctions have been confusing and

contradictory. We're better off using *zeugma* in its broadest sense and not confusing matters by introducing *sylllepsis*, a little-known term the meaning of which even the experts can't agree on."

Zeugma Examples from Literature

Example #1: *The Holy Bible*, Exodus 20:18 (By the Prophet Moses)

"And all the people saw the thundering, and the lightning, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off."

Example #2: *Julius Caesar* (By William Shakespeare)

"Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears."

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

"Histories make men wise; poets, witty; the mathematics, subtle; natural philosophy, deep; [moral](#), grave; logic and [rhetoric](#), able to contend."

Example #4: *The Rape of the Lock*, Canto III (By Alexander Pope)

"Here Thou, great Anna! whom three Realms obey,
Dost sometimes Counsel take – and sometimes Tea."

Example #5: *The Rape of the Lock* (By Alexander Pope)

"Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,

Or stain her honour, or her new brocade.”

Example #6: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (By Mark Twain)

“[They] covered themselves with dust and glory.”

Example #7: *The Pickwick Papers* (By Charles Dickens)

“Miss Bolo [...] went straight home, in a flood of tears and a sedan-chair.”

Example #8: *Oliver Twist* (By Charles Dickens)

“[H]e was alternately cudgelling his brains and his donkey when, passing the workhouse, his eyes encountered the bill on the gate.”

Example #9: *Essay on Man* (By Alexander Pope)

“Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall,
Atoms or systems into ruin hurled,
And now a bubble burst, and now a world.”

Example #10: *The Hundred Secret Senses* (By Amy Tan)

“We were partners, not soul mates, two separate people who happened to be sharing a menu and a life.”

Example #11: *Have Some Madeira, M'Dear* (By Flanders and Swann)

“She lowered her standards by raising her glass,
Her courage, her eyes and his hopes.”

Example #12: *The Things They Carried* (By Tim O’Brien)

“But Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried 34 rounds when he was shot and killed outside Than Khe, and he went down under an exceptional burden, more than 20 pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers and all the rest, plus an unweighed fear.”

Function of Zeugma

The above examples of Zeugma show that this literary device may create confusing or dangling sentences. However, if used correctly, it adds flavor to literary texts as it helps produce a dramatic effect, which could possibly be shocking in its result. Zeugma examples are also found in literary works of famous writers and poets from several centuries ago, to add vividness and conciseness to their texts.