

# Reductio ad Absurdum

## Definition of Reductio ad Absurdum

*Reductio ad absurdum* is a Latin term that means “to reduce something to absurdity.” It is a [figure of speech](#) that is defined as a manner of arguing something for one’s own position by showing the absurdity of the position of his opponent. In simple words, it means to reduce an [argument](#) to absurdity, by drawing conclusions with logical limits, or by showing ridiculous consequences. *Reductio ad absurdum* in satires breaks down an idea to the point of absurdity.

## Difference Between Reductio ad Absurdum and Appeal to Ridicule

*Reductio ad absurdum* examples cannot be used as an appeal to ridicule. Though both devices are extensively used in [satire](#), an appeal to ridicule is the use of ridiculing a situation without arguing or explanation; while, *reductio ad absurdum* pursues arguments and logical consequences.

## Examples of Reductio ad Absurdum in Literature

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### Example #1: *The Ladies’ Dressing Room* (By Jonathan Swift)

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“Five hours, (and who can do it less in?)  
By haughty Celia spent in dressing;  
The goddess from her chamber issues,  
Arrayed in lace, brocades and tissues...

Her ointments, daubs, and paints and creams,  
Her washes, slops, and every clout  
Such order from confusion sprung,  
Such gaudy tulips raised from dung.”

Swift uses *reductio ad absurdum* as a satirizing technique here. In this case, the purpose is to ridicule the duality of individuals in their private and public spheres.

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### **Example #2: *A Modest Proposal* (By Jonathan Swift)**

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“I think it is agreed by all parties, that this prodigious number of children in the arms, or on the backs, or at the heels of their mothers, and frequently of their fathers, is in the present deplorable state of the kingdom ... cheap and easy method of making these children sound and useful members of the common-wealth, would deserve so well of the publick, as to have his statue set up for a preserver of the nation.”

This is one of the more famous examples of *reductio ad absurdum* in English literature. Here, Swift uses *reductio ad absurdum* by arguing about social conditions to ridiculous lengths. This highlights a horrific situation of children.

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### **Example #3: *Waiting for Godot* (By Samuel Beckett)**

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ESTRAGON: “That’s the idea, let’s [ask](#) each other questions ...”  
“Nothing happens, nobody comes ... nobody goes, it’s awful ...”  
ESTRAGON: “What did we do yesterday?”  
VLADIMIR: “What did we do yesterday?”  
ESTRAGON: “Yes.”  
VLADIMIR: “Why ... (Angrily.) Nothing is certain when you’re about ...”  
ESTRAGON: “**In my opinion we were here.**”

Estragon and Vladimir indulge themselves in useless and aimless [activities](#). They talk, joke, rebuke, question, and argue about the reason of their existence. This excerpt is full of *reductio ad absurdum* because characters push the conversation to extreme ridicule with argumentations.

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Polemarchus: “The physician.”

Socrates: “Or when they are on a voyage, amid the perils of the sea?”

Polemarchus: “The pilot.”

Socrates: “And in what sort of actions or with a view to what result is the just man most able to do harm to his enemy and good to his friends?”

Socrates: “But when a man is well, my dear Polemarchus, there is no need of a physician?

“No.”

Socrates: “Then in time of peace, justice will be of no use?”

Polemarchus: “I am very far from thinking so ...”

Adeimantus: “The strongest point of all has not been even mentioned, he replied.”

Socrates: “Well, then, according to the [proverb](#), ‘Let brother help brother’”

Adeimantus: “Nonsense, he replied...”

In this extract, Plato argues for justice – that men should be just. By using this technique, he ridicules the questions of other speakers. Adeimantus disagrees to the extreme of absurdity against Glaucon’s claims regarding people wanting to be unjust rather than just.

## **Function of Reductio ad Absurdum**

*Reductio ad absurdum* makes a situation ridiculous or extremely absurd. Often, it is used to point out the flaws of an original [claim](#) that is untenable or false. It was exclusively employed in Greek philosophy. However, later on it was introduced in [prose](#), as well as philosophical and formal mathematical reasoning.

Today, it is used mostly in informal debates. The purpose of using this technique is to expose the foolishness and ridiculous attitudes of certain assumptions and behaviors. However, there is a great danger that readers might fail to recognize the objectives clearly.