

Chiasmus

Chiasmus Definition

Chiasmus is a rhetorical device in which two or more clauses are balanced against each other by the reversal of their structures in order to produce an artistic effect.

Let us try to understand chiasmus with the help of an example:

“Never let a Fool Kiss You or a Kiss Fool You.”

Notice that the second half of this sentence is an inverted form of the first half, both grammatically and logically. In the simplest sense, the term chiasmus applies to almost all “criss-cross” structures, and this is a concept that is common these days. In its strict classical sense, however, the function of chiasmus is to reverse grammatical structure or ideas of sentences, given that the same words and phrases are not repeated.

The Difference Between Chiasmus and Antimetabole

Chiasmus is different from [antimetabole](#). An antimetabole is the [repetition](#) of words in consecutive clauses, but in an inverted or transposed order. For example:

“You forget what you want to remember, and you remember what you want to forget.”

Antimetabole examples resemble chiasmus, as they are marked by the [inversion](#) of structure. In examples of chiasmus, however, the words and phrases are not repeated. Generally, chiasmus and antimetabole are regarded by many critics as similar tools of [rhetoric](#).

Examples of Chiasmus from Greek Sages

The use of chiasmus as a rhetorical device dates back to the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations. Its traces have been found in the ancient texts of Sanskrit, and also in ancient Chinese writings. Greeks, however, developed an unmatched inclination for this device, and made it an essential part of the art of oration.

Example #1: Aeschylus, 5th Century B.C.

“It is not the oath that makes us believe the man,
but the man the oath.”

Example #2: Bias, 6th Century B.C.

“Love as if you would one day hate,
and hate as if you would one day love.”

Example #3: Socrates, 5th Century B.C.

“Bad men live that they may eat and drink,
whereas good men eat and drink that they may live.”

Examples of Chiasmus from Literature

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

“But O, what damned minutes tells he o’er
Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves.”

Example #2: *Essay on Man* (By Alexander Pope)

“His **time** a **moment**, and a **point** his **space**.”

Example #3: *Do I Love You Because You're Beautiful?* (By Oscar Hammerstein)

“Do I love you because you're beautiful?
Or are you beautiful because I love you?”

Example #4: *Paradise Lost* (By John Milton)

“...in his face
Divine compassion visibly appeared,
Love without end, and without measure Grace...”

Example #5: *Quote* (By Judith Viorst)

“Lust is what makes you keep wanting to do it, Even when you
have no desire to be with each other. Love is what makes you
keep wanting to be with each other, Even when you have no
desire to do it.”

Example #6: *Quote* (By John Marshall)

“In the blue grass region,
A [paradox](#) was born:
The **corn** was full of **kernels**
And the **colonels** full of **corn**.”

Example #7: *Quote* (By Alfred P. Solan)

“Some have an idea that the reason we in this country **discard**
things so readily is because **we have so much**. The facts are

exactly opposite – the reason **we have so much** is simply because **we discard things so readily.**”

Example #8: *Quote* (By Voltaire)

“The instinct of a man is
to **pursue** everything that **flies from him**, and
to **fly from** all that **pursues** him.”

Example #9: *Quote* (By Thomas Szaz)

“When **religion was strong** and **science weak**, men
mistook magic for medicine;
Now, **when science is strong** and **religion weak**, men
mistake medicine for magic.”

Function of Chiasmus

As the above discussion reveals, chiasmus is a unique rhetorical device that is employed by writers to create a special artistic effect, in order to lay emphasis on what they want to communicate. In his treatise, *Analyzing [Prose](#)*, Richard A. Lanham puts forward his interesting [point of view](#) about chiasmus in the following words:

“By keeping the phrase but inverting its meaning we use our opponent’s own power to overcome him, just as a judo expert does. So a scholar remarked of another’s theory, ‘Cannon entertains that theory because that theory entertains Cannon.’ The pun on ‘entertain’ complicates the chiasmus here, but the judo still prevails — Cannon is playing with the power of his own mind rather than figuring out the secrets of the universe.”