

Antimetabole



DEFINITION

What is antimetabole? Here's a quick and simple definition:

Antimetabole is a [figure of speech](#) in which a phrase is repeated, but with the order of words reversed. John F. Kennedy's words, "Ask not what [your country can do for you](#), ask what [you can do for your country](#)," is a famous example of antimetabole.

Some additional key details about antimetabole:

- Antimetabole appears in a wide variety of contexts, from jokes and [idioms](#) to political speeches and literature. It can be used to convey [paradoxes](#) and [irony](#), to strengthen an argument, or to show in a novel way how two ideas relate to each other.
- Antimetabole is tricky to use: it can be moving, memorable, and persuasive, but it can also feel trite and predictable if used poorly.
- Antimetabole comes from a Greek phrase that means, "turning about in the opposite direction," and which sums up the effect of words being repeated in reverse order, sort of like retracing steps on a path.

Antimetabole Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce antimetabole: an-tee-met-**ab**-oh-lee

A Closer Look at Antimetabole

There are a few additional nuances of antimetabole that are helpful to know in order to understand it.

The Repeated Phrases of Antimetabole Don't Have to Contain *Exactly* the Same Words

While symmetry is central to antimetabole because of the way it repeats the same phrase in reverse order, *exact* symmetry is not required for something to count as antimetabole. In fact, in many cases the repeated phrases wouldn't make grammatical sense if they were simply an exact reversal of the original word order. For instance, in this line from Shakespeare's [Twelfth Night](#), an adjective ("witty") turns into a noun ("wit") when repeated, and a noun ("fool") turns into an adjective ("foolish") so that the sentence will make grammatical sense:

Better [a witty fool](#) than [a foolish wit](#).

In the expression below, the antimetabole *is* a perfectly reversed repetition, but the *subjects* of the two phrases are different (one is about the French, the other about Americans), making the two clauses of the sentence slightly asymmetrical:

The French [work to live](#), whereas Americans [live to work](#).

Phrases of Antimetabole are Usually—But Not Always—Back to Back

Typically, antimetabole occurs in adjacent phrases or clauses. But since the heart of antimetabole is the inverted repetition of two phrases or clauses, the repetition can also be spaced farther apart, embedded in longer sentences or even separate sentences. In this quote, Sarah Palin's use of antimetabole occurs at the ends of two separate sentences as opposed to back to back.

In politics, there are some candidates who [use change to promote their careers](#). And then there are those, like John McCain, who [use their careers to promote change](#).

Antimetabole Can Be Pithy and Powerful, or Trite and Oversimplified

The reason antimetabole is popular in political speeches is the same reason some are skeptical of it. It's useful in reducing a larger argument into a bite-size, catchy phrase, which can be, well, reductive. Take this common expression:

[I mean what I say](#) and [I say what I mean](#).

This example takes a statement of integrity and boils it down to a short sentence, but it doesn't really offer any evidence to back up *how* or *why* the speaker's words and actions align. Antimetabole can fall flat as empty-sounding claims when the argument's logic isn't further supported or explained.

In addition, because antimetabole is based on a single repetition of a phrase, it can only make, at most, two separate claims. As a result, using antimetabole can result in the exclusion of other possibilities that aren't encompassed by those two claims. This has the potential to create a false dichotomy—a misleading opposition of two ideas that aren't necessarily opposed to each other, leaving out other, more nuanced possibilities. For instance, in the above quote by Sarah Palin about John McCain, she suggests that candidates either "use change to promote their careers," or "use their careers to promote change," as if there can be no overlap or gray area between these two types of behavior. Of course, oftentimes such oversimplification is *intended*, as speakers may use antimetabole with the intention of making their point persuasive enough to distract from the more complex nature of the subject. Other times, a speaker or writer using antimetabole may not be aware of how they are reducing a complicated topic to something that is overly simplistic.

Antimetabole vs. Chiasmus

Antimetabole is easy to confuse with another [figure of speech](#) called [chiasmus](#), which also involves repetition in reverse. However, the two differ in key ways:

- **Antimetabole** is the repetition of words or phrases.
- **Chiasmus** is the repetition of *similar concepts* within a repeated *grammatical structure*, but doesn't necessarily involve the repetition of the same words.

For instance, in the following line of dialogue from Shakespeare's [Othello](#), the character Iago uses chiasmus when he says:

"Who **dotes**, yet **doubts**, **suspects**, yet strongly **loves**..."

This is an example of chiasmus because (as in antimetabole) the same concept is repeated in reverse order, but (unlike in antimetabole) *different words* are used to express the concept when repeated. "Doting" and "loving" are similar but not the same—and the same goes for "doubting" and "suspecting."

Generally, chiasmus allows more complexity than antimetabole because antimetabole needs to repeat the same words, but for this same reason antimetabole can sometimes seem snappier and more clever than chiasmus.

Antimetabole is a Type of Chiasmus

If you look around the Internet, you'll find that there's a lot of disagreement over whether or not antimetabole is a type of chiasmus. The two sides of the argument can be summed up in this way:

- Stricter definitions of chiasmus maintain that it *never* involves the repetition of the same words, which would mean that antimetabole could not be a type of chiasmus.
- Most definitions of chiasmus hold that it *can* involve the repetition of words, in which case antimetabole would be a type of chiasmus.

First, it's worth it to know that this debate exists. Second, we think it makes sense to go with the majority view and treat antimetabole as a specific type of chiasmus. In that view, all examples of antimetabole are *also* being examples of chiasmus. For instance, had Iago instead said "Who **loves, yet doubts—doubts, yet loves**," that change would turn the sentence into an example of both antimetabole *and* chiasmus because it would repeat both the same words as well as the same grammatical structure and related concepts.

Antimetabole Examples in Literature

Antimetabole is regularly used in literature, for a variety of different purposes, from exposing a paradox to creating memorable mottos.

Antimetabole in George Orwell's *1984*

In George Orwell's book [1984](#), the narrator's struggle to come to terms with a paradox is wonderfully captured through the inverse repetition of antimetabole. The paradox is that members of the oppressed working class will continue to go about their lives unquestioningly until they become conscious of their oppression—but it seems that a radical change or revolution would need to take place in order for the oppressed working class to even understand that they are oppressed.

Until **they become conscious they will never rebel**, and until after **they have rebelled they cannot become conscious**.

Note how in this example the phrase "they will never" isn't repeated verbatim, but the same meaning is conveyed through "they cannot."

Antimetabole in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

In [Their Eyes Were Watching God](#), the narrator uses antimetabole to explain how women can construct their own reality by picking and choosing what to remember and what not to.

"Now, women **forget all those things they don't want to remember** and **remember everything they don't want to forget**. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly."

The inverted repetition of antimetabole in this quote helps to emphasize the way that the narrator is implying that women have both sides of the equation covered: they both forget what they want to, and remember what they want to, and that total control allows them to create their own truth.

Antimetabole in John Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn"

In this poem, the speaker makes a claim that equates truth and beauty:

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st
'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know'

The way that the use of antimetabole here condenses this idea into a concise, declarative statement gives it a feeling of power and gravitas.



EXAMPLES

Antimetabole appears regularly in literature, speeches, common expressions, as well as in jokes.

Antimetabole in Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*

The dashing trio's rallying cry in *The Three Musketeers* is a famous example of antimetabole. The saying has remained in circulation until today—in part because antimetabole makes it so memorable.

All for one and one for all!

Antimetabole Examples in Speeches

Antimetabole can be a powerfully persuasive tool in oration. Its use of repetition drives concepts home and helps them stick in the memory. It's important to keep in mind that, because antimetabole packs a rhetorical punch, it can permit a speaker to make a claim so powerfully that listeners don't notice that the speaker never offered any evidence or explanation to support their claim. This is, of course, precisely *why* some orators use antimetabole.

Antimetabole in Malcolm X's 1964 Speech at the Audubon Ballroom

Malcolm X uses antimetabole to concisely argue that American history isn't what it seems. He first makes reference to the predominant narrative of colonialism—that white Europeans discovered America—then reverses the word order to make his own argument: that the arrival of white people to the Americas, along with the intersecting legacies of slavery and colonialism that came with them, wreaked catastrophic damage on entire races of people.

We didn't land at Plymouth Rock. The rock landed on us.

Antimetabole in John McCain's 2008 Republican National Convention Speech

Below, John McCain uses antimetabole to criticize politics' influence on the integrity of lawmakers. In the first clause, he presents how things *should* be, and then he reversed the word order to say how they *are*—a common use of antimetabole.

We were elected to change Washington, and we let Washington change us.

Antimetabole Examples in Common Expressions

Antimetabole's repetition and formulaic structure make it perfect for catchy phrases and popular expressions.

- When the going gets tough, the tough get going.
- It's nice to be important but it's more important to be nice.
- You can take the girl out of the country, but you can't take the country out of the girl.

Because antimetabole can produce concise and memorable phrases, it can be helpful for developing short phrases that function as a kind of checklist or set of guidelines. For instance, SCUBA divers are taught this pithy phrase to stress the importance of making plans ahead of time and then following through on them:

Plan your dive and dive your plan.

Antimetabole Examples in Jokes

Since comedy is all about the subversion of expectation, it makes sense that antimetabole is common in jokes. The structure of reverse repetition allows a comedian to present a sensible, common phrase, then to twist those same words to produce a surprising effect.

- What's the IRS's motto? We've got what it takes to take what you've got.

The structure of antimetabole also works well for [ironic](#) phrases, sometimes in a racy way, such as these famous quotes:

- "I'm not a writer with a drinking problem—I'm a drinker with a writing problem." —Dorothy Parker
- "It's not the men in my life that count—it's the life in my men." —Mae West



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use antimetabole in a wide array of contexts: to produce powerful arguments, to compare two related things or concepts, to present [paradoxes](#), or to generate a comedic effect.

Antimetabole is Great for Pithy, Memorable Arguments

Antimetabole, with its repetition and catchy inversion of words, does wonders to motivate and persuade. It can first present, then challenge, a prominent narrative, the way Malcolm X uses it ("We didn't land at Plymouth Rock. The rock landed on us"). It can also suggest irony at the way things are (compared to expectations). In this quote from cybersecurity expert Dan Greer, he implies that important ideas ought to be appealing, but that the inverse is, ironically, true:

Most important ideas are unappealing and most appealing ideas are unimportant.

Or, antimetabole can cast a claim as obvious, needing no further defense, as in Hillary Clinton's quote:

Human rights are women's rights and women's rights are human rights.

Antimetabole Can Convey Paradoxes

The structure of antimetabole makes it a natural tool in conveying [paradoxes](#), arguments that may seem self-contradictory yet have sound logic. Take this quote by legendary college basketball coach John Wooden:

Failing to prepare is preparing to fail.

By not preparing at all, one in fact *is* preparing—for failure (there's the paradox). Wooden stresses the link between both preparation and success, as well as preparation and failure. But by using antimetabole, he accomplishes this very concisely, using just two key words.

Here are other examples of paradox in antimetabole:

- "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." -The Witches in Shakespeare's [Macbeth](#)
- "He who questions training only trains himself at asking questions." -The Sphinx in *Mystery Men*

Antimetabole is Good for Laughs

When antimetabole meets wit, it has a comic effect, largely because it's perfect for [ironic](#) statements. Below, the sentence claims an ironic relationship between having money and spending it.

The richer people get, the tighter they become, and the tighter they become, the richer they get.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [Wikipedia Page on Antimetabole](#): A breezy definition of the term, but a large stock of examples.

- [Manner of Speaking Page on Antimetabole](#): Short but smart notes on the use of antimetabole. Includes a couple videos of the device in action.
- [American Rhetoric Page on Antimetabole](#): A solid definition and a resource for good examples of antimetabole.
- [Slate Article](#): A smart essay on both the clumsy and graceful uses of antimetabole in the 2008 presidential campaign.
- [Star Tribune Article](#): A clever, light piece on the difference between antimetabole and chiasmus.

HOW TO CITE

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