Epistrophe

DEFINITION

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

> Epistrophe is a figure of speech in which one or more words repeat at the end of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. In his Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln urged the American people to ensure that, "government of the people, by the people, for the people,shall not perish from the earth." His repetition of "the people" at the end of each clause is an example of epistrophe.

Some additional key details about epistrophe:

- Epistrophe also goes by the name *epiphora*, and even more occasionally is sometimes called *antistrophe*.
- The opposite of epistrophe is anaphora, which involves the repetition of words at the *beginning* of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences.
- Because epistrophe is such a simple and effective way to emphasize an idea and communicate urgency or emotion, it appears often in songs and speeches as well as in literature.

Epistrophe Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce epistrophe: eh-**pis**-truh-fee

Epistrophe Can Involve Slightly Different Repeated Words

The repeated words of epistrophe *do not* have to be exactly the same. In fact, the dramatic, rhythmic effect of epistrophe can be even more powerful if the repeating element varies slightly each time. For instance, take the example below from Bill Gates' 2007 Harvard University address:

> I left campus knowing little about the millions of young people cheated out of educational opportunities here in this country. And I knew nothing about the millions of people living in unspeakable poverty and disease in developing countries.

The first repetition of "country" is singular while the second one is plural, and the adjective changes from "this" to "developing." Even so, the repeated phrase at the end of each clause still counts as epistrophe. The minor changes from one phrase to the next don't interfere with the rhythm and repetition of Gates' speech, but actually help him emphasize his former lack of knowledge about humanitarian issues both at home and abroad.

Epistrophe vs. Anaphora

Not to be confused with epistrophe is its opposite, anaphora, which is the repetition of one or more words at the *beginning* of successive phrases, clauses, or sentences. Martin Luther King Jr.'s repetition of the words "let freedom ring" in his famous "I have a Dream" speech are an example of anaphora:

> Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.
> Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.
> Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of California.
> Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California.

Epistrophe + Anaphora = Symploce

Using both anaphora and epistrophe at the same time creates another figure of speech called symploce. The following quote from Shakespeare's play Measure for Measure shows symploce in action:

> Most strange, but yet most truly, will I speak:
> That Angelo's forsworn; is it not strange?
> That Angelo's a murderer; is't not strange?
> That Angelo is an adulterous thief,
> An hypocrite, a virgin-violator;
> Is it not strange and strange?

Telling Epistrophe From Other Kinds of Repetition

The above examples of anaphora and symploce are fairly clear cut, and unlikely to be confused with epistrophe. However, the line that separates epistrophe from other forms of repetition can be blurry. For instance, take Sojourner Truth's use of repetition in her famous 1851 speech "Ain't I a Woman?":

> Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have sloughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman?

Technically, the above is *not* an example of epistrophe, because the repetitions occur as their own sentences, and therefore aren't located at the *end* of successive phrases, clauses or sentences. This sort of repetition is actually called a refrain.

However, if the person who wrote down Sojourner Truth's speech had just punctuated it differently, then it *could* have been an example of

epistrophe. Take that same speech, and replace the exclamation points with colons, for instance:

> Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place: And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I could have sloughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me: And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man—when I could get it—and bear the lash as well: And ain't I a woman?

Now the repeated words *do* occur at the end of successive sentences, and so it would be epistrophe. There are two points to take from this:

- Always pay attention to the punctuation to determine whether some form of repetition is epistrophe.
- In spoken speech, it can sometimes be hard to tell epistrophe from other forms of repetition, because you can't see the punctuation.

EXAMPLES

Use of epistrophe is widespread, and can be found in all sorts of literature, in political and other speeches, and in song lyrics.

Epistrophe Examples in Literature

Epistrophe is regularly found throughout literature, in drama, prose, and poetry. It can be used to communicate different ideas and feelings, as the examples below illustrate, though always through the emphasis provided by repetition.

Epistrophe in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*

In this passage from Act 5, Scene 1 of *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia has just criticized her fiancé Bassanio (the speaker) for giving away his wedding ring (she in fact tricked him into giving it to *her* while she was in disguise). Bassanio's spoken epistrophe, his repetition of "the ring," emphasizes that the ring is a symbol of commitment and also Bassanio's scrambling desperation to explain to Portia that he has not broken that commitment:

> If you had known the virtue of the ring,
> Or half her worthiness that gave the ring,
> If you did know for whom I gave the ring
> And would conceive for what I gave the ring
> And how unwillingly I left the ring
> When nought would be accepted but the ring
> You would abate the strength of your displeasure.

Epistrophe in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*

In this example from Chapter 28 of the *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's use of epistrophe in Tom Joad's farewell dialog with his mother emphasizes Joad's desire both to provide her with some reassurance and continue to be there for her:

> Then I'll be all around in the dark—I'll be everywhere—wherever you look. Wherever they's a fight so hungry people can eat, I'll be there. Wherever they's a cop beaten' up a guy, I'll be there...I'll be in the way guys yell when they're mad an'—I'll be in the way kids laugh when they're hungry and they know supper's ready. An' when our folk eat the stuff they raise n'live in the houses they build—why, I'll be there.

Joad's repetition of his presence wherever poor people need help also emphasizes his dedication to the cause he believes in, and turns him into an almost mythological or godly presence who is always there to protect and support the downtrodden.

Epistrophe in Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"

In these lines from Section 16 of his poem"Song of Myself," Whitman uses epistrophe to communicate a sense of contentment, acceptance of his own identity and place in the world:

> I resist any thing better than my own diversity,
> Breathe the air but leave plenty after me,
> And am not stuck up, and am in my place.
>
> (The moth and the fish-eggs are in their place,
> The bright suns I see and the dark suns I cannot see are in their place,
> The palpable is in its place and the impalpable is in its place.)

Epistrophe Examples in Political Speeches

The repetition at the heart of epistrophe creates emphasis and urgency, can put persuasive focus on particular ideas, and can create a rhythm that can capture the attention and sentiment of a crowd. In other words, it's great for speeches.

Epistrophe in Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" (1863)

Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address" contains one of the most familiar examples of epistrophe.

> It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they here gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

His repetition of "the people" emphasizes his belief in the founding idea of the United States—that it is a government that serves the

people, as opposed to the other way around—and also a statement of belief in and a challenge to the people who make up the country. It is a rallying cry that in the wake of the Civil War the American people must persevere, must *repeat* and continue the work of those who died in the war to preserve the ideals and nation for which they fought.

Epistrophe in Lyndon Baines Johnson's "The American Promise" (1965)

In his Special Message to the Congress: "The American Promise" President Johnson spoke of his support for voting rights for all Americans. In the example below, he uses epistrophe to strongly urge Americans to come together on this issue:

> There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem. And we are met here tonight as Americans—not as Democrats or Republicans—we are met here as Americans to solve that problem.

Epistrophe in Barack Obama's Charleston Address (2015)

Though we've already covered a number of political speeches that use epistrophe, this last example from President Obama's Charleston Address shows another way in which epistrophe can be a powerful tool, which is through its connection to song. Obama delivered this speech in front of a church congregation to honor members who had died in a shooting. After singing the spiritual "Amazing Grace," he brings up each victim and describes how he or she "found that grace":

> If we can find that grace, anything is possible. If we can tap that grace, everything can change. Amazing grace. Amazing grace.
>
> Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me;
> I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind but now I see.
>
> Clementa Pinckney found that grace.
> Cynthia Hurd found that grace.
> Susie Jackson found that grace.

Simply by taking the word "grace" from the song lyrics and repeating it throughout the speech, Obama is able to pay a powerful tribute to the individual victims of the tragedy by weaving their names into the musical tradition of this religious community.

Epistrophe Examples in Song Lyrics

Politicians use epistrophe to give their speeches a catchy rhythm or cadence, which in turn helps them emphasize their ideas. In much the same way, songwriters spanning every genre from pop to jazz use epistrophe to complement the beat or composition of a song and communicate powerful emotions.

Epistrophe in "Single Ladies" by Beyoncé

> 'Cause if you liked it then you should have put a ring on it
> If you liked it then you shoulda put a ring on it
> Don't be mad once you see that he want it
> If you liked it then you shoulda put a ring on it
> Oh, oh, oh

Epistrophe in "Just Like a Woman" by Bob Dylan

> She takes just like a woman, yes
> She makes love just like a woman, yes, she does
> And she aches just like a woman
> But she breaks just like a little girl

Epistrophe in "And I love her" by the Beatles

> I give her all my love
> That's all I do
> And if you saw my love
> You'd love her too
> I love her
>
> She gives me everything
> And tenderly
> The kiss my lover brings
> She brings to me
> And I love her

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use epistrophe to give a sequence of words emphasis, for a variety of reasons:

- To drive home a point
- To make their words "catchy" or memorable
- To express a deeply held belief
- To convey strong emotion
- To help set the scene by imitating a certain sound or rhythm (i.e. the galloping of horses or the ocean tide)

Songwriters, poets and authors often use epistrophe to increase the emotional weight of a description or dialogue. For instance, take this example from Edgar Allen Poe's *Annabel Lee,* in which the narrator recalls his childhood love who died young of an illness:

> And neither the angels in heaven above,
> Nor the demons down under the sea,
> Can ever dissever my soul from the soul
> Of the beautiful Annabel Lee.
>
> For the moon never beams without bringing me dreams
> Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;

> And the stars never rise but I feel the bright eyes
> Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
> And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
> Of my darling- my darling- my life and my bride,
> In the sepulchre there by the sea,
> In her tomb by the sounding sea.

Poe could not have picked a more perfect way to describe his longing for Annabel Lee than through the use of epistrophe, especially when we consider the origins of the word—in Greek, the word "epistrophe" means "a turning about." By including a verbal "turning about" in the form of the Annabel Lee epistrophe, Poe brings to mind his soul's constant "turning about" in search of his lost love. In addition, the epistrophe also creates a repetitive cadence that recalls the rhythm of the tide coming in and out, and evokes the setting of Poe's love affair with Annabel in a seaside town.

OTHER RESOURCES

- **The Wikipedia Page on Epistrophe:** A short and to-the-point explanation with examples from literature, politics, and the bible, as well as links to definitions of related literary devices.
- **The Dictionary Definition of Epistrophe:** A basic definition and etymology of the term—it comes from the greek *epi* "upon" and *strophe* "a turning."
- A blog entry by a public speaking expert on the use of epistrophe in rhetoric.
- **Epistrophe on Youtube**
  - A video of epistrophe examples from popular music, guaranteed to revolutionize your experience of the Beatles!
  - A song called "Epistrophe" by jazz musician Thelonius Monk, inspired by the literary term.

HOW TO CITE

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