

Anachronism



DEFINITION

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

An anachronism is a person or a thing placed in the wrong time period. For instance, if a novel set in Medieval England featured a trip to a movie-theater, that would be an anachronism. Although the device can be used for many different purposes, authors often use anachronisms to make it easier for audiences to relate to other historical periods, or to add an element of humor and surprise to a story.

Some additional key details about anachronisms:

- While the inclusion of an anachronism can be a purposeful decision made by an author, it can also be the result of an error: an author making a mistake or doing inadequate research.
- Anachronism is closely related to [juxtaposition](#), another literary device that places two things side by side in order to highlight their differences.

How to Pronounce Anachronism

Here's how to pronounce anachronism: uh-**nack**-run-iz-um

Understanding Anachronism

An anachronism is usually someone or something that is so clearly associated with a particular historical period that readers would be surprised to find it in a work set during any other time period. An anachronistic object might be way ahead of its time (imagine a modern-day couple pulling up to a dinner party in downtown Manhattan on a horse-drawn chariot), or it might be so outdated that no one would possibly use it (imagine a character from a story set in the 16th-century suddenly pulling out a vacuum cleaner after a party).

Though historical accuracy is a major concern for many poets, novelists, and playwrights, it is sometimes outweighed by a writer's desire to connect with a popular audience. For example, it is not historically accurate for Cassius, an ancient Roman in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, to say "The clock has stricken three" (since modern mechanical clocks weren't invented until many hundreds of years later); however, it probably helped Shakespeare's audience understand the scene, in which timing is critical. Though Shakespeare certainly could have written the scene such that Cassius read the time off a historically accurate time-keeping device, such as a Roman sundial, that might have puzzled readers and shifted their focus away from the more important points in the plot.

Comedic Anachronisms

Writers often intentionally include anachronisms for comedic effect. For example, the comedic filmmaker Mel Brooks used anachronism in scene after scene in *Blazing Saddles*, a [satirical](#) Western set in 1874. In one [scene](#), the 19th-century characters bust down a wall, only to find that they have interrupted a modern-day Hollywood dance production. The scene is a surprising interjection, and may seem like nonsense at first, but it's likely that the writer or director inserted the scene as a way of commenting on the artifice of Hollywood films in general—and Westerns in particular.

Anachronism in Nonfiction

An entire work may be considered anachronistic, especially if it judges past or even future civilizations according to modern day values. For example, it would be anachronistic to write an essay about Marxist undertones in Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, given the fact that Chaucer's work predates Marx's *Communist Manifesto* by nearly five hundred years, and Chaucer likely had very little consciousness of the class struggles that Marx wrote about. However, the fact that an argument is anachronistic doesn't make it worthless. In fact, anachronistic arguments may have considerable intellectual value. They might demonstrate the way in which an older work anticipates or addresses modern-day concerns. Nonetheless, most analytical writers try to avoid anachronistic arguments because they prefer not to remove an older text from its historical context.

Juxtaposition and Anachronism

Anachronisms often rely heavily on [juxtaposition](#), a literary device that places two different things side by side in order to highlight their difference. Anachronistic people, objects, ideas, or phrases must be juxtaposed with someone or something that clearly belongs to another historical time period. It may seem like a subtle juxtaposition to modern readers, but in the example of Cassius reading the time from a clock in *Julius Caesar*, the juxtaposition of Roman politicians and modern mechanical clocks produces an anachronistic moment in the text.

Unintentional vs. Intentional Anachronism

Authors are people, too—so it should come as no surprise that, sometimes, writers would mistakenly incorporate ideas, objects, and customs that are familiar to them into stories that take place before those things actually existed. Alternatively, writers can purposefully use anachronism to appeal to a modern audience's sensibilities.

As seen in the example from *Julius Caesar* above, it's not always easy to distinguish one kind of anachronism from another. We have no way of knowing for certain whether Shakespeare referred to a mechanical clock because of his ignorance of Roman technology, or because of his desire to make the play easier for readers to

understand. (Note that it's actually fairly anachronistic to talk about Shakespeare's concern for his readers, since when his plays were written in the 16th and 17th centuries, far more people *watched* his plays than *read* them.)

Often readers must rely on their knowledge of a writer's craft to determine whether an anachronism is intentional or unintentional. An assessment of Shakespeare's body of work as a whole reveals that he is a playwright with deep historical knowledge and a clear sense of his audience (for example, many of Shakespeare's plays are retellings of historical events that he knew would resonate with theatergoers in 16th- and 17th-century England) so it's reasonable to assume that his use of anachronism in this case was considered and purposeful. In other cases, though, critics or readers might conclude that a writer was careless in accidentally including something anachronistic in their story, and criticize the writer for it.

Anachronism vs. Archaism

In literature, archaism is the use of outdated language for stylistic effect. There are a number of archaisms in John Keats's poem "Ode to Psyche," for example:

The winged boy I knew;
But who wast thou, O happy, happy dove?
His Psyche true!

Keats's language sounds poetic, with his use of "thou" and antiquated verb tenses like "wast," but the language is actually inconsistent with the standard English of his day. However, the poem doesn't specify *when* what it is describing takes place, and Keats' use of old-sounding language is consistent throughout the poem, so even if his antiquated style makes some readers pause, it wouldn't be accurate to describe this use of language as an anachronism. Rather, in the poem Keats employs archaism to achieve the effect that he wants.

Authors often use archaisms like this on purpose, to add a sense of mystique, sophistication, or even timelessness to their work.



EXAMPLES

Because writers don't always have perfect knowledge of time periods other than their own, there are examples of unintentional anachronism in most art forms. There are just as many examples of intentional anachronism, because the use of anachronism can help translate stories about different time periods into more relatable terms for modern audiences, and can also add humor to a piece.

Anachronism in Literature

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*

In this example from Act 1, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Claudius's words contain an **anachronism** that Shakespeare may or may not have intended to include in the text.

For your intent
In going back to school in **Wittenberg**,
It is most retrograde to our desire;
And we beseech you, bend you to remain
Here in the cheer and comfort of our eye,
Our chiefest courtier, cousin, and our son.

Shakespeare portrays Hamlet as a former student at the Danish University of Wittenberg, which still exists today. One little problem with that reference—Wittenberg was established in 1502, almost a hundred years after the story of Hamlet is supposed to take place. It's impossible to say whether Shakespeare simply failed to remember the date of Wittenberg's founding, or felt it was important to use a university that members of his audience would recognize. It's also possible that Shakespeare purposefully included Wittenberg because it was where Martin Luther began the Protestant Reformation, and Hamlet (as well as Hamlet himself) wrestles with religious questions that also drove the Reformation.

Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*

In Chapter Three of *The Prince and the Pauper*, Twain includes an **anachronism** in his description of a popular form of entertainment in 16th-century England:

"In truth, yes, so please you, sir, save when one is hungry.
There be **Punch-and-Judy shows**, and monkeys—oh such antic creatures! and so bravely dressed!—and there be plays wherein they that play do shout and fight till all are slain, and 'tis so fine to see, and costeth but a farthing—albeit 'tis main hard to get the farthing, please your worship."

The anachronism here is that the first "Punch-and-Judy show" took place in the late 17th-century, making it impossible for Twain's English characters to have watched a performance as early as 1547, the year in which Twain's book is set. It's possible that Twain mistakenly believed that the plays were already being performed in 16th-century England, but it seems more likely that he took liberties with some aspects of his historical fiction. If it is intentional, Twain's anachronism may be a way of satirizing, or poking fun at, the customs of 16th-century England, since the Punch-and-Judy shows were a popular form of entertainment that typically depicted brutal violence.

Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*

In Chapter Two of Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, the title character's elaborate armor is presented to readers as an **anachronism**.

Things would have come to a pretty pass if it hadn't been for the appearance at that moment of the innkeeper, a man who, being very fat, was very peaceable, and who on seeing such an ungainly figure, with **such ill-matched equipment as the long stirrups, the lance, the leather shield, and the infantryman's body-armor**, was more than willing to join the maidens in their merry-making.

This passage is one of many examples in *Don Quixote* of characters responding to Don Quixote's old-fashioned suit of armor with scorn or puzzlement. One of the major themes of Cervantes' masterpiece is the incongruity between Don Quixote, who believes in medieval codes of chivalry, and the society he lives in, which treats those chivalric values as outmoded relics of the past. In this case, unlike others, it is not just that Cervantes includes an anachronistic detail of which the characters themselves seem to be unaware. Rather, the characters are *very* aware, and scornful of, Don Quixote's own anachronistic characteristics.

Charles Olson's "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You"

Charles Olson's "I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You" is an anachronistic poem about American history written from the perspective of a character who calls himself Maximus and is modeled after a second-century Greek philosopher of the same name.

Antony of Padua
sweep low, o bless
the roofs, the old ones, the gentle steep ones
on whose ridge-poles the gulls sit, from which they depart,
And the **flake-racks**
of my city!

The passage above is a mishmash of references to things from vastly different regions and historical periods. Maximus (a name from ancient Greece) invokes the name of a 13th-century Portuguese priest (Anthony of Padua) and then goes on to describe racks that are used in parts of North America to sun-dry fish. As an experimental poet, Olson purposefully used anachronism to create complex associations between different historical periods.

Anachronism in Theater

Some plays continue to be performed hundreds of years after they were originally written. Inevitably, as directors and producers adapt such plays so that they appeal to modern audiences, they end up giving rise to anachronisms in the work.

Sam Gold's 2017 Production of *Hamlet*

In Sam Gold's recent production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the characters are costumed in polos, jeans, and tennis shoes. Though many theater-goers expect elaborate, period-specific costumes in productions of Shakespeare's plays, they might find Gold's "modern take" on a classic to be an exciting twist that makes the characters seem more relatable.



Keegan-Michael Key as Horatio in Sam Gold's *Hamlet* | [Image source](#)

Anachronism in Film

While writers can avoid anachronism by cutting down on allusions to historical events they're not entirely familiar with, filmmakers face an even greater risk of unconscious anachronism—they need to research and recreate period-correct costumes, hairstyles, vehicles, architecture, and, as seen below, musical instruments! Further, when making a series or trilogy, it is important for filmmakers to remain faithful to the chronology developed in earlier movies. Filmmakers also sometimes intentionally use anachronisms for the same reasons writers do: to help their audience interpret different historical periods or to draw laughter.

Robert Zemeckis' *Back to the Future*

In this [clip](#) from the 1985 classic about time travel, the teenager Marty McFly has gone back in time to perform at his parents' prom in 1955. The scene features intentional anachronism: McFly performs the guitarist Chuck Berry's hit single "Johnny B. Good," which was actually written three years later, in 1958. McFly, who happens to be performing the song in front of Chuck Berry's cousin, says that the song will be a big hit one day. The anachronism jokingly suggests that McFly changed the history of American pop music.

But the scene also contains unintentional anachronism: McFly plays the song on a Gibson ES-345—a guitar that didn't exist in

1955—which suggests that whoever was responsible for props in the film probably didn't do their research.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers don't always *mean* to use anachronisms, but when they do it's often with one of the following aims in mind:

- To make it easier for readers to understand or relate to time periods other than their own.
- To add humor to their work.
- To analyze things from the past using ideas or theories that didn't come into practice until much later.
- To underscore the outmodedness of a thing or person.
- To appeal to modern readers' aesthetic tastes and sensibilities.
- To establish a relationship between different time periods.

It can be difficult to draw the line between intentional and unconscious uses of anachronism—so be careful before you conclude that an anachronism means that the author didn't do their research!



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Anachronism](#): The list of categories of anachronism in this wikipedia entry is more complicated than it

has to be, but the page includes illuminating examples of anachronism from many fields.

- [The Merriam-Webster Dictionary Definition of Anachronism](#): Includes a bit on the word's etymology that actually makes it easier to remember anachronism's function.
- [Mental Floss's List of 15 Obvious Movie Anachronisms](#): Though the list can be a bit mean spirited, it's a reminder of just how hard filmmakers must work to avoid historically inaccurate props or plot lines (and how they sometimes fail).
- [The Poetry Foundation's Definition of Anachronism](#): Features a wonderfully simple definition of the device, with more details about the Charles Olson poem cited above.

HOW TO CITE

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