

Aphorism



DEFINITION

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

An aphorism is a saying that concisely expresses a moral principle or an observation about the world, presenting it as a general or universal truth. The Rolling Stones are responsible for penning one of the most catchy aphorisms of all time: "You can't always get what you want." Aphorisms are often (though not always) witty or humorous, and they're used everywhere, from philosophical texts and great works of literature, to pop songs and everyday conversation.

Some additional key details about aphorisms:

- Aphorisms are memorable and convincing because of their pithiness. This pithiness can also be a weakness, though, since it usually means that bold assertions are being made without any elaboration or evidence to back them up.
- Many commonly used aphorisms are actually paraphrased quotations from literary, philosophical, political, and religious texts.
- Aphorisms are closely related to proverbs and adages. See below for more details on the relationships between these terms.

Aphorism Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce aphorism: **aff-or-iz-um**

Understanding Aphorisms

Aphorisms allow people to convey an idea or even a worldview using just a few words. As a result, they are used frequently in everyday speech, as well as in all types of literature. Some aphorisms are regional [colloquialisms](#) that originated as folk sayings, but even aphorisms that originate in literature are often quoted and repeated frequently enough that they become common in everyday speech.

It's important to remember that aphorisms do not have to express ideas that all people believe are true, or ideas that are true in every situation (if that were the case, aphorisms would be incredibly rare). Rather, an aphorism expresses an idea that *someone* (and usually the speaker) holds to be universally or generally true, though aphorisms can also be used to [satirize](#) (make fun of) ideas that others believe to be true.

Aphorisms, Adages, and Proverbs

Most people think that aphorisms, adages, and proverbs are all the same thing. However, some people maintain that adages and

proverbs are two specific *kinds* of aphorism. Here's a rundown of the different perspectives on the relationship between these terms.

Aphorism vs. Adage

People who think that adages are a type of aphorism argue that an aphorism is a concise observation that has remained popular over time, whereas an adage is a *new* saying that conveys the same meaning as an older aphorism. By this definition, "carpe diem" (which means "seize the day") would be an aphorism, while "YOLO" (a recent acronym for "You Only Live Once") would be an adage.

Aphorism vs. Proverb

The word "proverb" comes from the latin *proverbium*, which means "words put forth." Because the word's etymology is linked to the idea of spoken language, some people say that proverbs are aphorisms that come from spoken language rather than from a literary source.

Aphorisms vs. Epigrams and Witticisms

Aphorisms, [epigrams](#), and witticisms are all short, pithy statements, but they have some key differences that are important to understand. Aphorisms are set apart from epigrams and witticisms by two key factors:

- Aphorisms are truisms, meaning they convey an idea that is supposed to hold some universal truth.
- Aphorisms do not have to be funny.

Epigrams and witticisms, meanwhile, do *not* have to be truisms, though they *do* have to be funny. As a result, both epigrams and witticisms usually incorporate a punchline or satirical twist. Epigrams are further differentiated from witticisms and aphorisms because epigrams are typically written in verse.

Ironic Uses of Aphorism

While in most cases aphorisms are used as a genuine expression of an idea that the writer or speaker believes to be true, aphorisms may also be used [ironically](#) in order to cast doubt on an idea that is commonly taken as universal truth.

For example, consider the opening line of Jane Austen's [Pride and Prejudice](#):

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

While it's difficult to know from this line alone if Jane Austen really believes that all wealthy single men are "in want of a wife," Austen's phrasing of this aphorism (a truism of Victorian England) hints that she might be a skeptic. All aphorisms express ideas that some believe

to be universal truths, yet by stating outright that this "is a truth universally acknowledged," Austen creates a [hyperbole](#) (or overstatement) that is subtly satirical. As her novel goes on to show, not all wealthy single men should marry (or wish to marry), and Austen rejects the notion that in marriage, securing a fortune is just as important (or even more important) than finding love.



EXAMPLES

Aphorism in Literature

Writers of literature often invent memorable aphorisms because they need to communicate a big idea in a striking way. Some aphorisms that originated in literature are now so common that their literary origin is practically unknown, while other aphorisms are still strongly associated with the authors that penned them.

Aphorism from Sextus Propertius' *Elegies*

In one of his elegies, the ancient Roman poet Sextus Propertius wrote the following line:

Always toward absent lovers love's tide stronger flows

While this line is unrecognizable today, it is the origin of the common aphorism "absence makes the heart grow fonder."

Aphorism in *Anna Karenina*

Leo Tolstoy begins his novel [Anna Karenina](#) with the following aphorism:

All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.

This aphorism sets a thematic backdrop for the novel, which follows several different unhappy families. In a way, Tolstoy's aphorism is a justification of (or explanation for) his subject matter: if all happy families are alike, then unhappy families must be the only interesting subject for literature.

Aphorism in *The Importance of Being Earnest*

In [The Importance of Being Earnest](#), Jack and Algernon exchange the following lines, which include an [aphorism](#) and a [witticism](#):

Jack: ...That, my dear Algy, is the whole truth, pure and simple.

Algernon: The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility!

Through Algernon's [aphorism](#), he expresses a general philosophical principle that cleverly questions Jack's use of the phrase, "the whole truth, pure and simple." Yet his next sentence, a [witticism](#), uses that

aphorism as a starting point to fuel a joke about the complex and often enigmatic nature of modern literature. *The Importance of Being Earnest* is a [satire](#), and these lines show how Wilde uses aphorisms to pivot between serious and comic observations.

Aphorism in Everyday Speech

This list represents just a small fraction of the aphorisms people commonly use in everyday speech.

- You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.
- All is fair in love and war.
- A jack of all trades is master of none.
- Measure twice, cut once.
- An apple a day keeps the doctor away.
- Better safe than sorry.
- Better the devil you know than the devil you don't.

Aphorism in Politics

Here's a short list of some famous aphorisms that come from political speeches or writing.

- **You can put lipstick on a pig, but it's still a pig.** Variations on this phrase are frequently used by American politicians accusing their opponents of representing their policies in a disingenuous way. During the United States' 2008 presidential election, Barack Obama's use of the phrase stirred up controversy when some believed he was calling vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin a lipstick-wearing pig (read more about the origins of the phrase and the 2008 controversy [here](#)).
- **Religion is the opiate of the masses.** This aphorism is paraphrased from political philosopher Karl Marx's book, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*.
- **Man is born free, but he is everywhere in chains.** In *The Social Contract*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau uses this aphorism to critique the limitations that the modern state places on individual freedom.
- **It is better to be feared than loved.** This aphorism is paraphrased from Niccolo Machiavelli's work of political philosophy, *The Prince*.

Aphorism from the King James Bible

Many commonly-used aphorisms originated in religious texts. The King James Bible, known for its virtuosic use of language, is full of aphorisms such as these:

- **You reap what you sow.** This aphorism is a paraphrase of the line from the King James Bible, "Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap."

- **Pride comes before the fall.** This aphorism is a paraphrase of the line, "Pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall."
- **Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.** This aphorism is a paraphrase of the line, "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise."

Aphorism in Film

Since aphorism can heighten drama and convey a big idea succinctly, many of the most iconic and quotable moments from film involve aphorism:

- "With great power comes great responsibility." - *Spiderman*
- "My Mama always said, 'Life is like a box of chocolates; you never know what you're gonna get.'" - *Forrest Gump*
- "Sometimes you eat the bear, sometimes the bear eats you." - *The Big Lebowski*
- "A life without cause is a life without effect." - *Barbarella*
- "Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer." - *The Godfather II*
- "Tomorrow is another day!" - *Gone With The Wind*
- "*Que sera sera*. Whatever will be will be." - *The Man Who Knew Too Much*



WHY WRITERS USE IT

As the above examples from *Anna Karenina* and *Pride and Prejudice* show, aphorisms can make for excellent opening lines because they introduce big ideas in relatively few words—in other words, they pack a punch. Of course, aphorisms function just as well within the body of a work. Regardless of where they occur in a text, writers use aphorisms to cleverly and concisely express observations or philosophical ideas.

Because aphorisms are short phrases that evoke big ideas, writers often use them as shorthand for a work's central themes. For example, by opening *Anna Karenina* with the aphorism, "All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," Tolstoy introduces a theme that he will build on and explore throughout the novel: that unique and deeply personal forms of

unhappiness are part and parcel of what it means to have individuality.

Aphorisms from well-known literary, political, philosophical, and religious texts are often repeated and adapted, recycled and reused. For that reason, writers sometimes use an aphorism coined by another writer to allude to that writer's ideas. For example, someone who writes, "religion is the opiate of the people" may do so in an effort to align herself with Marx's atheistic, anti-capitalistic worldview. A person who opens an essay with the phrase, "it is a truth universally acknowledged" is making an [allusion](#) to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, and thereby subtly informing his audience that, like the work of Austen, his writing should be read as social criticism.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Aphorism](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Aphorism](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of aphorism (it comes from the Greek word "aphorismos," a word meaning "definition" that was originally used by Greek physician Hippocrates to refer to key scientific principles).
- If you're on the hunt for compelling and quotable aphorisms, check out [this article from NPR](#), which excerpts sections of *Geary's Guide to The World's Great Aphorists*.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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