

# Aporia



## DEFINITION

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

Aporia is a rhetorical device in which a speaker expresses uncertainty or doubt—often *pretended* uncertainty or doubt—about something, usually as a way of proving a point. An example of aporia is the famous Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem which begins, "How do I love thee? Let me count the ways." Browning's pretense that she might not remember all "the ways" is what gives her an opportunity to enumerate them.

Some additional key details about aporia:

- Aporia often takes the form of a question, but does not have to since uncertainty can also be expressed using statements.
- Aporia appears frequently in speeches and political rhetoric throughout history, from ancient Greek orator Demosthenes to modern politicians.
- The word *aporia* comes from a Greek word meaning "to be at a loss."

## How to Pronounce Aporia

Here's how to pronounce aporia: uh-**pore**-ee-uh

## Pretended Aporia and Sincere Aporia

The expression of doubt in aporia may be sincere, or it may be feigned for the purpose of making a point. Below we cover both types of aporia.

### Aporia as Pretended Doubt

Aporia in the form of pretended doubt (as opposed to sincere doubt) appears frequently in literature, philosophy, and political rhetoric. In such cases, the speaker pretends to be in doubt as a tactic so that they can then:

- Give themselves the opportunity to respond to the "doubt" they've raised so as to make a point or discredit a point made by someone else.
- Sow doubt or make points by asking [rhetorical questions](#) that are not intended to be answered. Rhetorical questions usually have an obvious "right" answer, and a speaker will ask them in order to make a point without needing to explain what their point is.

Whether or not a writer answers their own questions, aporia in the form of pretended doubt is often used to gradually build an argument,

as well as to encourage the reader to re-examine faulty assumptions that they might currently hold.

Classical philosophers like Socrates and Aristotle used this form of aporia to build philosophical arguments. For example, in the works of Plato, such as [The Republic](#), Socrates often makes his point without ever having to actually argue it, simply by asking someone else a series of questions, slowly leading them to reassess their own opinions until they ultimately arrive at a new opinion. This tactic of teaching philosophy or analysis by asking questions is known as the Socratic Method, and teachers and professors today still use it to lead class discussions. The Socratic Method is a specific type of aporia.

### Aporia as Real Doubt

Another form of aporia occurs when a writer or character expresses a genuine sense of doubt or uncertainty. In these instances you can think about aporia as a way of "thinking out loud," since the speaker is sharing their thought process with their audience. A writer might have a character express uncertainty or doubt for a variety of reasons.

- A speaker or character's uncertainty might tell us more about their ideas, emotions, personality, or motivations, and will also communicate their humility.
- Expressions of sincere doubt can also spur thought and conversation, whether in people listening to a speech or an audience reading a book or watching a play.
- One character's uncertainty might lead another character to express their own views and ideas.
- A writer might have one character express a question or doubt that they think the reader is likely to share, then have another character answer that question.
- A writer also might use a character's expression of genuine doubt to create suspense or introduce [exposition](#). For example, if a mysterious stranger surrounded by rumors arrives in town, a character might ask, "Is it true what they say about that man?" As an expression of genuine uncertainty, this would be an example of aporia. If the writer wants to create a sense of mystery and dread, another character might reply, "It's better not to ask." Such a reply would create an ominous sense of uncertainty, leaving the first character and the reader *in aporia*.

### Aporia as a Philosophical Term

In addition to describing genuine and feigned expressions of doubt, the word "aporia" is also used in a very different sense in the world of philosophy. As a philosophical term, aporia is used to describe a contradiction, [paradox](#), or logical impasse in a text. Oscar Wilde's paradoxical quip, "I can resist anything but temptation," is an example of this philosophical definition of aporia.

More broadly, a piece of philosophical writing based on a faulty premise might end "in a state of aporia"—where the writer cannot bring their argument to a logical conclusion because they have reached a logical impasse.

This philosophical definition of aporia is also used in some literary criticism, particularly among a movement of literary criticism called post-structuralism.



## EXAMPLES

Aporia appears in political speeches both ancient and modern, as well as many different types of literature. Below are a few examples of each.

### Examples of Aporia in Political Speeches

#### Aporia in "On the Crown" by Demosthenes

In part of this speech, delivered in 330 BCE, ancient Athenian politician and orator Demosthenes uses aporia as he attacks the family, social status, and personal character of his opponent, Aeschines:

What have you or yours to do with virtue? How should you discern what is noble and what is not? Where and how did you get your qualification to do so? [...] Shall I tell first how your father Tromes was a slave in the house of Elpias, who kept an elementary school near the temple of Theseus, and how he wore shackles and a wooden halter? Or how your mother, by celebrating her daylight nuptials in her hut near the shrine of the Hero of the Lancet, was enabled to rear you, her beautiful statue, the prince of third-rate actors? But these things are known to all without my telling them.

Demosthenes is certain that Aeschines is not a virtuous man, but rather than stating this outright, he expresses his disdain using rhetorical questions. When Demosthenes then attempts to humiliate his opponent by describing Aeschines's parents' low social status, he pretends that he is uncertain which anecdote he should tell first, another example of aporia in the form of pretended doubt.

#### Aporia in "Ain't I A Woman" by Sojourner Truth

Sojourner Truth, the famous abolitionist and former slave, employed aporia in her well-known "Ain't I A Woman" speech, which she delivered to the Akron Ohio Women's Convention in 1851:

That man over there says that women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. 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! [...] I have borne thirteen children, and seen most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with

my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman?

Truth does not actually doubt her own humanity or womanhood, and so her repeated question, "And ain't I a woman?" is an example of aporia in the form of pretended uncertainty. By asking this rhetorical question, Truth points out the hypocrisy of men who claim to be chivalrous while supporting the inequality of the sexes as well as the institution of slavery.

### Aporia in Literature

#### Aporia in *The Merchant of Venice* by William Shakespeare

In Act III, Scene I of [The Merchant of Venice](#), Shylock employs aporia in the speech he makes to Salarino, explaining why he is seeking revenge against Antonio, who has humiliated him with antisemitic insults:

...hath not a Jew hands, organs,  
dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with  
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject  
to the same diseases, healed by the same means,  
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as  
a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?  
If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison  
us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not  
revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will  
resemble you in that.

Here, Shylock is using aporia in the form of pretended doubt (he and Salarino both know that Jews have hands, eat food, bleed, and so on). Through this series of rhetorical questions, Shylock proves that Jews are just as human as Christians, and argues that he is justified in his desire for revenge because it is a natural human reaction to humiliation and mistreatment.

#### Aporia in "The Lovesong of Alfred J. Prufrock" by T.S. Eliot

Eliot's long poem, "The Lovesong of Alfred J. Prufrock" is written as a series of questions, doubts, and uncertainties. Mid-way through the poem, the speaker asks:

Would it have been worth while,  
To have bitten off the matter with a smile,  
To have squeezed the universe into a ball  
To roll it towards some overwhelming question,  
To say: "I am Lazarus, come from the dead,  
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all"—  
If one, settling a pillow by her head  
Should say: "That is not what I meant at all;  
That is not it, at all."

Throughout the poem, Prufrock repeats the questions, "Would it have been worth it?" and "Would it have been worth while?" Each time he

does so, he seems to express a sincere doubt, making his questions an example of aporia. Though we never learn for certain what the "overwhelming question" is, Prufrock seems to be wondering if he should have asked a love interest whether she loved him in return. Now, it may be too late for him to know. As a result of his fear of rejection, Prufrock finds himself *in aporia*—uncertain of the woman's feelings and uncertain about whether his inaction was a grave mistake.

### Aporia in *Candide* by Voltaire

In *Candide*, the title character often makes observations in the form of rhetorical questions.

"But is there not a pleasure," said Candide "in criticizing everything, in pointing out faults where others see nothing but beauties?"

"That is to say," replied Martin, "that there is some pleasure in having no pleasure."

In this passage, Candide expresses an idea using aporia, and in the very next sentence, Martin paraphrases the same idea in the form of a statement. Candide's words are an example of aporia in the form of a pretended doubt—though he frames his idea as a question, he believes that there *is* pleasure to be found in criticizing everything.

### Aporia in "The Tell-Tale Heart," by Edgar Allan Poe

In the opening lines of "The Tell-Tale Heart" (anthologized in *Poe's Stories*) the narrator attempts to persuade the reader that he is perfectly sane:

True!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad? The disease had sharpened my senses—not destroyed—not dulled them. Above all was the sense of hearing acute. I heard all things in the heaven and in the earth. I heard many things in hell. How, then, am I mad?

Here, the narrator's questions are an example of aporia in the form of genuine uncertainty—the speaker does not understand why his crime, his nervous manner, and his claims to have heard things in heaven and hell do not suggest that he is perfectly sane.

### Aporia in "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost

In the closing lines of his poem, "The Road Not Taken," Frost sets up an aporia in the *philosophical* sense of the word, meaning a logical impasse:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.

On the surface, the speaker's conclusion that choosing the less traveled road "made all the difference" seems to encourage readers

to less conventional lives. Yet the speaker's conclusion is logically faulty: since he did not take the other road, he has no way of knowing if it really made a difference. Perhaps both roads lead to the same place, or to equally good places. Through this aporia, Frost asks readers to question whether they can ever truly know the impact that their choices have made, and suggests that people tend to assume their past choices were the "right" ones.



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use aporia to show or describe uncertainty. Beyond this basic definition, aporia can be used to create different effects. A writer can use aporia to indicate genuine uncertainty and to lead readers through the speaker's own thought process. A writer might also use a character's expression of uncertainty as an opportunity for another character to answer a question or resolve a doubt.

Writers can use aporia in both the forms of real and pretended doubt to voice and then answer questions that the reader might have, either to develop exposition or to construct an argument. Alternatively, writers often use aporia to question assumptions that the reader might have about a key idea or theme. Entire arguments can be constructed in this way through careful expressions of doubt, as in the work of Plato. When writers ask [rhetorical questions](#) (an example of aporia as pretended doubt), they are attempting to persuade readers by asking them questions that have implicit or obvious answers, so that the reader is guided toward the writer's opinion without the writer having to explicitly make any argument at all.



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [ThoughtCo on the Socratic Method](#): Read sample dialogues and learn more about how Socrates used aporia as a teaching tool.
- [Wikipedia Entry for Aporia](#): Read about the etymology of aporia and how the term's use has changed over time. Note that this entry puts more emphasis on the philosophical definition of aporia than the rhetorical definition of it.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Aporia](#): A basic definition that covers both uses of the word.
- [Manner of Speaking on Aporia](#): A helpful, to the point entry with some good examples.

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Frisella, Emily. "Aporia." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

**Chicago Manual**

Frisella, Emily. "Aporia." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/aporia>.