

Assonance



DEFINITION

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

Assonance is a [figure of speech](#) in which the same vowel sound repeats within a group of words. An example of assonance is: "Who gave Newt and Scooter the blue tuna? It was too soon!"

Some additional key details about assonance:

- Assonance occurs when *sounds*, not letters, repeat. In the example above, the "oo" sound is what matters, not the different letters used to produce that sound.
- Assonance does not require that words with the same vowel sounds be directly next to each other. Assonance occurs so long as identical vowel-sounds are *relatively* close together.
- Assonant vowel sounds can occur anywhere (at the beginning or end, on stressed or unstressed syllables) within any of the words in the group.

How to Pronounce Assonance

Here's how to pronounce assonance: **ass**-uh-nuhnce

Assonance vs. Consonance

Assonance is identical to another figure of speech called [consonance](#), with one critical difference: assonance has to do with repeated *vowel* sounds, whereas consonance has to do with repeated *consonant* sounds.

- **Assonance is repetition of vowel sounds:** "I might like to take a flight to an island in the sky."
- **Consonance is repetition of consonant sounds:** "A duck that clucked drove a truck into an aqueduct."

Assonance vs. Alliteration

[Alliteration](#) is another figure of speech that involves the repetition of sounds and is related to assonance. Assonance and alliteration differ in two key respects.

- **Types of repeating sounds:** Assonance involves the repetition of only vowel sounds, whereas alliteration can involve the repetition of *either* vowel sounds or consonant sounds.
- **Position of repeating sounds:** The repeating sounds of assonance can occur anywhere in a word. The repeating sounds of alliteration, in contrast, must occur either in the first syllables of words or on the stressed syllables of words.

In practical terms, these rules mean that assonance can sometimes also be alliteration, but isn't always.

Assonance That Is Also Alliteration

Here are two examples of assonance that is also alliteration. In the first example, the assonance occurs at the beginning of words in the group. In the second example, assonance always occurs on stressed syllables of words (note that the second syllables of the words "decline" and "define" are the stressed syllables):

- "Aunt Agnes! Ack! Another accounting error!"
- I like to decline an offer of wine to define my style.

Assonance That Is NOT Also Alliteration

In the example below, assonance is *not* also alliteration, because the repeating vowel sound almost never occurs on either the first or stressed syllables (only on "imp" does it do either):

- Alice ignored the malice of the imp and bought the palace.

If you read this example aloud, and also read aloud the assonance examples that *are* alliteration, you'll sense that, while both have repeating vowel sounds, the examples that are also alliteration have a kind of rhythm to them that non-alliterative assonance lacks.

Assonance and Rhyme

Assonance also plays a role in [rhyme](#). Rhyme is the repetition of identical sounds located at the ends of words. Rhymes can be either repeated consonant sounds or vowel sounds (or combinations of the two). A rhyme, then, *can* be assonant, but not *all* rhymes are assonant. Here's an example of assonance functioning as rhyme at the end of lines three and four of the limerick below:

There once was a man named Clark
Whose dog refused to bark
But when he gave the dog pie
It stopped being so shy
And is loud nonstop until dark

Assonance also plays a noticeable role in [slant rhyme](#), a type of rhyme formed by words with sounds that are similar but not identical. Slant rhymes often pair similar vowel sounds with dissimilar consonant sounds, which means that slant rhymes often contain assonance. In the example below from the song "N.Y. State of Mind" the rapper Nas uses assonance to create slant rhymes between the first syllable of "prosperous," the word "cops," and the first syllable of the word "hostages." In addition, the assonance of the "uh" sound in final syllables of "prosperous," "dangerous," and "could just"

establishes the slant rhyme that ends with the slightly different vowel sound in "hostages."

And be prosperous, though we live dangerous
Cops could just arrest me, blamin' us, we're held like
hostages



EXAMPLES

Assonance is common in all sorts of writing, including poetry and prose literature, as well as song lyrics.

Assonance Examples in Literature

In both poetry and prose, assonance's repetition of sound can give language a musical element, as well as emphasize sounds or words that particularly resonate with the ideas or themes of the work. When assonance is also alliterative, it can add rhythm to text, too.

Assonance in John Donne's "Holy Sonnet 3"

Here, the long-i sound is assonant, and its repetition emphasizes how the sound itself seems to embody the feeling being described, that of longing and sighing—of emotional turmoil. Assonance is particularly useful for this kind of sonic demonstration of feeling.

"O might those sighs and tears returns again ..."

Chris Martin's "Trajectory of a Thief"

This poem contains both assonance and alliteration. The "ee" sound in "each," "piece," and "meat" slows down that particular sequence, rendering especially vivid the eating of the turtle soup.

"Ted takes you to Chinatown for turtle
Soup, each piece of its floating meat
Wholly disparate ..."

Assonance in *The Iliad*

In these lines from Book XII of Lattimore's translation of Homer's *Iliad* the assonance helps reinforce the lulling effect of the winds' sleep:

"When Zeus ...
stills the winds asleep in the solid drift ..."

Assonance in "The Seafarer"

The Seafarer is an Old English poem. In Old English poetry, rhyme was much less common, and assonance and consonance much more prevalent. In this translation of the poem by Ezra Pound, the assonance helps to emphasize the "harshness" described in the lines, through the repetition of the "-ar" sound.

Journey's jargon, how I in harsh days
Hardship endured oft.

Assonance in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*

In this example, the assonance reinforces the repetition of the surname Bon, which is itself the French word for "good," thus drawing a contrast between the continued presence of "goodness" and the "getting rid of" described.

"So it took Charles Bon and his mother to get rid of old Tom, and Charles Bon and the octoroon to get rid of Judith, and Charles Bon and Clytie to get rid of Henry; and Charles Bon's mother and Charles Bon's grandmother got rid of Charles Bon."

Assonance in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

In this example from the first chapter of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, the insistence of the repeated "i" sounds intensifies the staccato present in these lines and establishes the narrator's tone—a combination of fear, intense description, and melancholy remembrance.

She got sicker an sicker.
Finally she ast Where it is?
I say God took it.
He took it. He took it while I was sleeping. Kilt it out there in
the woods. Kill this one too, if he can.

Assonance in Song Lyrics

Assonance is also common in song lyrics. It can help to emphasize words and ideas, make connections across lines of lyrics, and when assonance is also alliteration it can help to build rhythm in the lyrics, as well.

Assonance in "Painter in Your Pocket" by Destroyer

"And I'm reminded
of the time that I was blinded
by the sun
It was a welcome change
From the sight of you hanging
Like a willow

Assonance in "Something in the Way" by Nirvana

In this example, there are two sets of assonant sounds, one set on the long "e" sound, and another on the short "a" sound.

Underneath the bridge
The tarp has sprung a leak
And the animals I've trapped
Have all become my pets
And I'm living off of grass
And the drippings from the ceiling
But it's okay to eat fish
'Cause they don't have any feelings

Assonance in "Without Me" by Eminem

Eminem uses assonance in complicated ways throughout his songs, giving them additional rhythm and structure. This example from "Without Me" is a good example:

Some vodka that'll jump start my heart quicker
Than a shock when I get shocked at the hospital
By the doctor when I'm not co-operating
When I'm rocking the table while he's operating



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Assonance is, fundamentally, an *intensifier* of language. This intensifying occurs in several senses.

- Assonance tends to draw out the sonic quality of words in a group. This drawing-out makes those words more obvious, or clearer to the reader. It also tends to encourage the reader to spend more time looking at, sounding out, and thinking about those words.
- Because assonance encourages continued attention, it *slows down* the reading process (and the reading-comprehension process). But because assonance also sounds good and is often easy and/or pleasurable to pronounce, it can also *speed up* the reading experience of a group of words. This simultaneous speeding-up and slowing-down of language is pleasurable. It's hard to explain why it's pleasurable, but it is; and writers know that creating text that's pleasurable to read will attract more readers.
- Assonance is of special use to poets because of how it encourages repeated reading of a group of words. Poets' lines are often more dense with meaning, wordplay, and figures of speech than a typical line of prose is.
- Sometimes, assonant words can resonate with the content of the lines or sentences in which it occurs, as in the John Donne example from Holy Sonnet 3, above. The assonance in these

words allows the poem to *put into effect*, or to *do* the thing it is describing, rather than simply to describe or to tell about it.

- In prose that reaches for poetic beauty, assonance highlights the craft of the language by calling attention to the language itself. Not all prose wants to make itself known as language; some prose wants to report facts plainly and clearly. But prose using assonance conveys information *and* causes the reader to consider the words chosen and the order in which they're written.
- In songs, assonance increases the texture of the lines as they are sung, and provides opportunities for interaction with the tones and pitches the singer uses in combination with the lines. In both the Destroyer and Nirvana lyrics, above, the assonant features are highlighted by the singer via a change in pitch, or a notable increase in the length of the word as it is sung.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia entry on Assonance](#): A fairly detailed explanation of assonance, with examples from across different languages.
- [The dictionary definition of Assonance](#): A short definition, with helpful comparison to rhyme.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

Schlegel, Chris. "Assonance." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 5 May 2017. Web. 31 Aug 2017.

Chicago Manual

Schlegel, Chris. "Assonance." LitCharts LLC, May 5, 2017. Retrieved August 31, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/assonance>.