

# Epanalepsis



## DEFINITION

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

Epanalepsis is a [figure of speech](#) in which the beginning of a clause or sentence is repeated at the end of that same clause or sentence, with words intervening. The sentence "The king is dead, long live the king!" is an example of epanalepsis.

Some additional key details about epanalepsis:

- Epanalepsis emphasizes particular words not only by repeating them, but also by placing them in prominent locations at the beginning and end of the sentence, so that the repeated words act as "bookends." The phenomenon of first and last things sticking in the memory is known generally as the "primacy" and "recency" effects, respectively.
- The term epanalepsis doesn't apply only to *exactly* the first and last words of a sentence or clause. It can also refer to repetition that occurs *very close* to the start or end of a sentence or clause, as well as across two separate sentences.
- A good mnemonic for epanalepsis is to remember that "p" appears toward the beginning of the word, and is repeated again at the end (epanalepsis).

## Epanalepsis Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce epanalepsis: ep-uh-nuh-**lep**-sis

## A Closer Look at Epanalepsis

There are a some nuances in the definition of epanalepsis that are helpful to know in order to fully understand the term.

### The Repeated Words in Epanalepsis Don't Have to be Identical

Repeating phrases at the beginning and end of a sentence or phrase still count as epanalepsis even if they aren't perfectly identical:

No matter where I end up, I never seem to feel any different or any better—no matter where I land.

Since the two clauses at the beginning and end of the sentence don't contain similar words, grammar, and meaning, they still give an effect of repetition, and so they count as epanalepsis. In fact, epanalepsis often *benefits* from having slightly different wording, as the slight change can make it feel more natural and less calculated.

### Epanalepsis Doesn't Have to Involve the *Very* First or Final Words

Epanalepsis may appear *near* the beginning or end of a sentence or clause. So, even if other words precede or follow the repeating phrases, the repetition may still qualify as epanalepsis. For instance, most would agree that epanalepsis applies to these lines from T.S. Eliot's "The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock":

Do I dare  
Disturb the universe?  
In a minute there is time  
For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse.

Even though the word "in" precedes the repeated phrase in line 3, and the words "will reverse" follow it in line 4, this is considered a case of epanalepsis because the key phrase ("a minute") appears very close to the beginning and end of the sentence.

### Epanalepsis Can Occur Within a Clause of a Sentence

Sometimes epanalepsis appears within a piece of a longer sentence. For instance, in the following sentence from Virginia Woolf's [To the Lighthouse](#), the first clause of the sentence contains an example of epanalepsis (with the repetition of the word "smile"), but it is followed by clauses that describe the smile and do *not* contain epanalepsis:

He smiled the most exquisite smile, veiled by memory, tinged by dreams.

### Epanalepsis Can Occur Across Two Sentences

While some definitions of epanalepsis differ on this matter, it's generally accepted that epanalepsis can take place across multiple sentences. For instance, in these lines from John le Carré's novel [Call for the Dead](#), both sentences involve the idea that people can never know the private, inner lives of those around them, with the second sentence expanding on the first. The repetition and unity in content help it qualify as epanalepsis.

We know nothing of one another, nothing, Smiley mused.  
However closely we live together, at whatever time of day or night sound the deepest thoughts in one another, we know nothing.



## EXAMPLES

### Epanalepsis Examples in Literature

Epanalepsis is a versatile tool found in both poetry and prose. It's used to draw attention to words or concepts, create a sense of

musicality and rhythm, and give the pleasing sound that comes with carefully arranged repetition.

### Epanalepsis in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

In this line from [Beloved](#), Sethe invokes her daughter Beloved's name twice within a just few words.

Beloved is mine; she is Beloved.

This epanalepsis helps illustrate the enormous space Beloved occupies in her mother's mind. The degree of Sethe's focus on and obsession with Beloved is emphasized even more by the brevity of the sentence, and therefore the proximity of the repeated name.

### Epanalepsis in Alice Munro's "Runaway"

In her short story *Runaway*, Alice Munro uses epanalepsis subtly, in a single, commonplace word: "you."

Few people, very few, have a treasure, and if you do you must hang on to it. You must not let yourself be waylaid, and have it taken from you.

The repetition of the "you" draws the reader personally into the story, makes the reader feel what it is like to have a treasure, and the urgency of making sure no one takes it from you.

### Epanalepsis in Shakespeare's *King Lear*

In this example from [King Lear](#), King Lear stands outside, shouting at a terrible storm. The repetition of the word Blow at the start of one sentence and the end of the next adds to the sense of thundering chaos, which captures both the power of the storm but also Lear's own growing madness.

Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!

Here, even though "blow" appears in two separate sentences, it's still epanalepsis—the second sentence, being a brief fragment, still functions as an extension of the first.

### Epanalepsis in Sherman Alexie's "Valediction"

In this poem, Alexie uses epanalepsis to explore the pain and incomprehensibility of suicide. Although the speaker acknowledges he couldn't have persuaded this unnamed person to stay alive, he nonetheless poses an argument against the suicide, as if trying to revise the past.

I know, I know, I know, I know, I know  
That I could not have convinced you of this

But these dark times are just like those dark times.  
Yes, my sad acquaintance, each dark time is

Indistinguishable from the other dark times.

Here, repeating the phrase "dark time" in two separate sentences invites the reader to really think about the meaning—what exactly is a "dark time," and does it justify such an extreme action? Further, epanalepsis helps show the speaker's emotion and perhaps fatigue—the choice to use repetition, rather than search for a new word, betrays a type of weariness.

### Epanalepsis Examples in Songs

Repetition is essential to most song lyrics, and epanalepsis is sometimes used in [refrains](#) or to repeat a song's key message.

#### Epanalepsis in the Eagles' "Take it Easy"

This song by the Eagles makes a good case for epanalepsis' power to help a phrase stick in memory. The words "take it easy," which frame this stanza, contain the song's main message, and together constitute the line we're most likely to sing in the shower.

Take it easy, take it easy  
Don't let the sound of your own wheels  
Drive you crazy  
Lighten up while you still can  
Don't even try to understand  
Just find a place to make your stand  
And take it easy

#### Epanalepsis in John Prine's "Christmas in Prison"

In this tragic song about a Christmas spent in prison away from a loved one, epanalepsis helps to create a sense of rhythm that deepens the tone of heartache as the speaker repeatedly calls to a woman who can't hear him.

Wait a while eternity  
Old mother Nature's got nothing on me  
Come to me, run to me, come to me now

### Epanalepsis Examples in Speeches

Like many devices that use repetition, epanalepsis is a powerful tool of rhetoric, useful in highlighting a message and dialing up a speech's persuasiveness.

#### Epanalepsis in Ralph Nader's 2000 Speech to the NAACP

In this excerpt from a speech by Ralph Nader, the repetition of "minimum wage" underscores its role as a major concern in both his speech and his political priorities.

A minimum wage that is not a livable wage can never be a minimum wage.

Epanalepsis in this case invites the audience to really think about what a minimum wage is and should be. Further, the [juxtaposition](#) of the phrase "livable wage" with the repeated "minimum wage," draws

attention to the fact that minimum wages are often *not* enough to live on—so why are they the minimum?

### Epanalepsis in Salvador Allende's 1973 Speech

In Allende's last speech as Chilean president, he uses epanalepsis to claim that history is a social process in motion in which people are the key players. The repetition of "history" within a few words makes it more memorable.

History is ours and people make history.

### Epanalepsis Examples in the Bible

The Bible is known for the prodigious amount of repetition that it contains, so it should be no surprise that it is chock full of epanalepsis, as well. This repetition often lends a poetic quality to verses, which also makes them easier to remember and ideal for quoting aloud.

#### Epanalepsis in Ecclesiastes 1:2

In this famous Bible verse, epanalepsis emphasizes the claim that all of human activity is in vain, both ephemeral and shortsighted. The repetition shows the Preacher's fervor about the issue.

Vanity of Vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.

While the repetition of "vanity of vanities" is obviously epanalepsis, the final "vanity" is arguably also a case of epanalepsis, since it repeats the "vanity" at the very beginning of the verse even though it omits the rest of the phrase.

#### Epanalepsis in Philippians 4:4

This verse clearly shows the impact of the primacy and recency effects: "Rejoice" is the sentence's key word, and it lands both at the start and finish of the verse, sticking in the reader's mind as all-important.

Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.

### Epanalepsis Examples in Aphorisms

The structure of epanalepsis, which can be formulaic, makes it well-suited for use in [aphorisms](#)—which are concise expressions of truth. This is largely because exact repetition makes phrases easier to remember than, say, the use of a synonym would. Here are some examples of aphorisms that use epanalepsis:

- "The inevitable is no less a shock just because it is inevitable." - Xuela in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*
- "Nothing can be created out of nothing." -Lucretius



## WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use epanalepsis to place greater emphasis on a string of words or an idea—perhaps with the desired effect of persuading their listeners, aiding in memorization, or making their words more pleasing to the ear by adding to the feeling of rhythm and musicality. In short, epanalepsis is useful for many of the same reasons that repetition in general is useful.

#### Epanalepsis is Great for Emphasis and Persuasion

As a rhetorical device, epanalepsis is a stellar tool for emphasizing a concept, and therefore persuading audiences. This is due largely to the phenomenon that people tend to remember the first and last parts of a sentence, which epanalepsis perfectly exploits by placing its repetition at the beginning and end of the sentence or clause.

#### Epanalepsis Helps Give Writing Rhythm and Makes it Beautiful

Generally speaking, repetition can be helpful for building cadence, rhythm, and flow in poetry and prose. Epanalepsis in particular has a compact, built-in pattern (repetition at beginning and end), which provides a unifying sense of coherence and adds the aesthetic benefit of repeating the same sounds, which we associate with music and poetry.

In the poem "Bread and Music" by Conrad Aiken, epanalepsis gives the lines a songlike quality:

Music I heard with you was more than music.  
And bread I broke with you was more than bread.

Though, this phenomenon has its limits, too. Readers are bored or irritated by *too* predictable patterns, such as those used in children's songs.

Consider also Virginia Woolf's line from [To the Lighthouse](#): "He smiled the most exquisite smile, veiled by memory, tinged by dreams." The repetition of the word "smile" gives the sentence a more pleasing and poetic sound than it would have if Woolf had written "He gave the most exquisite smile, veiled my memory, tinged by dreams."



## OTHER RESOURCES

- [ThoughtCo.com Page on Epanalepsis](#): Some helpful quotes on epanalepsis by rhetoricians, plus a stock of examples.
- [Manner of Speaking Page on Epanalepsis](#): This definition doesn't go into detail, but has some useful, concise notes on the term's meaning.
- [Brigham Young University Page on Epanalepsis](#): Brief but dependable source, with a detailed definition of the device.
- [Wikipedia Page on Epanalepsis](#): Not an in-depth explanation, but a good introduction to the term.

## HOW TO CITE

### MLA

Lambert-Sluder, Rose. "Epanalepsis." LitCharts. LitCharts LLC, 17 May 2017. Web. 18 Sep 2017.

### Chicago Manual

Lambert-Sluder, Rose. "Epanalepsis." LitCharts LLC, May 17, 2017. Retrieved September 18, 2017. <http://www.litcharts.com/literary-devices-and-terms/epanalepsis>.