

Epigram



DEFINITION

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

An epigram is a short and witty statement, usually written in verse, that conveys a single thought or observation. Epigrams typically end with a punchline or a satirical twist.

Some additional key details about epigrams:

- Epigrams tend to rhyme because it makes them more memorable, but as with all rules (especially when it comes to poetry) there are exceptions.
- Although the term "epigram" is used most often to describe a short poem, it can also be used to describe a *part of a poem*, or even a sentence from a longer piece of prose.
- Epigrams often contain an opposition or a contradiction that generate their witty "twist," as in the poet Ogden Nash's most famous epigram: "Candy / Is dandy, / But liquor / Is quicker."
- In ancient Greece, epigrams were short poems placed at the tombs of fallen friends. Only later, in ancient Rome, did humor and wit become defining features of the epigram.

How to Pronounce Epigram

Here's how to pronounce epigram: **ehp-ih-gram**

Types of Epigrams

Epigrams can exist either as individual poems, as parts of longer poems or works of prose, or even as individual prose sentences.

Epigrams as Stand-Alone Poems

A poem is called an epigram if it is short (usually no longer than six lines) and it makes a witty observation. Here are some key defining features of epigrams:

- Unlike many forms of poetry (such as [sonnets](#)), epigrams don't have defined [meters](#) or [rhyme schemes](#). Instead, epigrams are defined chiefly by their brevity and wit. As these are relatively subjective qualities, to classify a poem as an epigram often has as much to do with the author's intention (for example, the poet might put the word epigram in a poem's title) as it does with the reader's interpretation.
- Although epigrams don't have to have a particular rhyme scheme, meter, or form, most epigrams do rhyme, and they commonly, though not always, have four lines.

Epigrams as Witty Statements Within Poetry and Prose

The term "epigram" is sometimes used to describe not just stand-alone poems, but stanzas *within* longer poems, as well as quotable sayings and passages from other sources. Here are some details about how "epigram" is defined in contexts other than stand-alone poems:

- Any stanza that adheres to the basic definition of an epigram—short, witty, dedicated to a single subject or observation—may also be considered an epigram or an "epigrammatic stanza," even if the stanza just a part of a much longer poem.
- Sentences that aren't written in verse can be referred to as epigrams if they are pithy and contain a witty remark or observation. For example, Oscar Wilde's prose witticisms are often labeled as epigrams, though they are just as often referred to as aphorisms (more on that difference below).
- Passages from songs, speeches, essays, interviews, or any other form of language can also be referred to as epigrams when quoted as stand-alone statements that are valued for their pithiness and wit.

Epigrams vs. Aphorisms

If any pithy witticism can be considered an epigram no matter what form it takes—poetry or prose—then what distinguishes an epigram from other short sayings, like [aphorisms](#)? There are the two important features that distinguish an epigram from an aphorism:

- **Wit, satire, and sarcasm:** Epigrams are defined by their use of wit, satirical humor, or sarcasm. Aphorisms, while short and pithy like epigrams, do not have the same association with humor or wit—they could simply be wise, for instance, without being clever. "All that glitters is not gold," is an aphorism. It's wise, but not funny. That isn't to say aphorisms can't be funny. But they don't *have to* be funny, while an epigram does.
- **Use in poetry:** While epigrams occur primarily in poetry and only sometimes in prose, examples of aphorism are found only in prose writing, and would not be said to occur in poetry.

Epigrams vs. Epigraphs

Another literary term commonly confused with epigram is "epigraph," which makes sense—not only do the words sound similar, but sometimes an epigraph can be an epigram, too. Here's a quick overview of epigraphs:

- In a literary context, an epigraph is a short quotation that opens a work of literature (it's usually found after the title page and before the body of the text begins). This quotation could be a piece of poetry or prose excerpted from another piece of literature, a

famous saying, or even a quote from a famous person—the point is that an epigraph is a quotation taken from an outside source that introduces the work of literature by shedding light on its themes, setting a tone, or establishing a particular context.

Epigraphs are sometimes—but not always—also epigrams. In [To Kill a Mockingbird](#), Harper Lee uses an epigraph that may also be considered an epigram: "Lawyers, I suppose, were children once." This quote (from an essay by the 18th century English writer Charles Lamb) is an epigram because it is a brief, witty, and satirical statement which, even without the original context, makes sense all on its own.

An example of an epigraph that is *not* also an epigram is the epigraph of Ernest Hemingway's book, [The Sun Also Rises](#), which quotes Gertrude Stein's influential remark about Hemingway and his peers, "You are all a lost generation." Like many epigraphs, the epigraph of *The Sun Also Rises* is a short and revealing statement, but would *not* be considered an epigram, since Stein's quotation is not particularly witty, humorous, or satirical. It's an earnest observation about a group of people.



EXAMPLES

The following examples cover both the specific and general definitions of epigram. Remember, the specific definition refers to a stand-alone epigrammatic poem, while the general definition refers to short, pithy statements that appear in poetry or prose.

Examples of Epigrams as Stand-Alone Poems

The examples below are all short, self-contained poems.

Martial's "On Accerra"

Martial was an ancient Roman poet and a famous writer of epigrams. He popularized the form and provided the model on which modern epigrams are based. This epigram, like nearly all of the epigrams he wrote, takes as its subject a public figure. In this case, the public figure is named Accerra. Martial originally wrote his epigrams in metered verse. The English translation loses that meter, though it captures the humor:

Whoever believes it is of yesterday's wine that Accerra smells,
is mistaken: Accerra always drinks till morning.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Epigram"

Sir, I admit your general rule,
That every poet is a fool,
But you yourself may serve to show it,
That every fool is not a poet.

Ben Jonson's "On Gut"

Gut eats all day and lechers all the night;
So all his meat he tasteth over twice;
And, striving so to double his delight,
He makes himself a thoroughfare of vice.
Thus in his belly can he change a sin:
Lust it comes out, that gluttony went in.

William Butler Yeats' "The Spur"

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attendance upon my old age;
They were not such a plague when I was young;
What else have I to spur me into song?

Emily Dickinson's "These Strangers, in a foreign World"

These Strangers, in a foreign World,
Protection asked of me—
Befriend them, lest Yourself in Heaven
Be found a Refugee.

Epigrams as Witty Statements in Other Forms

The examples below are not stand-alone poems, but can be considered epigrams because they contain short, witty stanzas or sentences that work by themselves.

Tennyson's "In Memoriam A.H.H."

Lord Alfred Tennyson's famous poem "In Memoriam A.H.H." is best known for the two lines excerpted below. As these are often quoted without the surrounding text, the lines are a good example of an epigram inside of a larger work.

'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all.

William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence"

Blake's poem "Auguries of Innocence" contains many [couplets](#) and [quatrain](#)s with pithy observations, such as the concluding stanza excerpted below. Although it's part of a much longer poem, some people would consider this stanza to be epigrammatic.

God appears, and God is light,
To those poor souls who dwell in night;
But does a human form display
To those who dwell in realms of day.

Oscar Wilde's Epigrams

Oscar Wilde was famous for his quotable witticisms. The following statements are not written in verse, and are referred to as aphorisms

just as often as they are referred to as epigrams, which highlights the difficulty of defining and identifying epigrams that are not self-contained poems. Even so, they can be considered epigrams.

- There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about.
- The first duty in life is to be as artificial as possible. What the second duty is no one has as yet discovered.
- Work is the curse of the drinking class.

Mark Twain's Epigrams

Mark Twain understood the logic and the instinctive appeal of epigrams better than anyone; he wrote hundreds of pithy statements in his life and is still renowned for his wit.

- It is better to keep your mouth shut and appear stupid than to open it and remove all doubt.
- The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco.
- You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Epigrams are used to convey pithy, humorous observations in a succinct and memorable style. As such, writers often use epigrams to show off their wit and sense of humor—qualities that have earned epigrammatic writers, such as Oscar Wilde and J.V. Cunningham, notoriety and respect. The shortness of the epigram and its tendency to employ rhyme and punchlines also serve a mnemonic function, making poems written in this form incredibly easy to remember.

Epigrams that are not stand-alone poems—epigrams, that is, that are part of a longer text—may be used to add dimension to the text by injecting elements of humor or wit. These epigrams, even more so than stand-alone poems, tend to be quoted far and wide—in advertisements, in film and television, and, most of all, in everyday conversation. In this sense, non-poetic epigrams may be said to function more as folk proverbs or [aphorisms](#) than as literature.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Epigram](#): A somewhat technical explanation, including various helpful examples.
- [The dictionary definition of Epigram](#): A basic definition that includes a bit on the etymology of epigram (it comes from the Greek word for "inscription").
- An [extensive list](#) of epigrams from literature, poetry, and pop culture.
- An [infographic](#) about Oscar Wilde and his epigrams.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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Chicago Manual

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