

Epigraph



DEFINITION

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

An epigraph is a short quotation, phrase, or poem that is placed at the beginning of another piece of writing to encapsulate that work's main themes and to set the tone. For instance, the epigraph of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and establishes the book's main theme (i.e., the relationship of contempt between creators and their creations): "Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay / To mould me Man, did I solicit thee / From darkness to promote me?"

Some additional key details about epigraphs:

- Not all works have epigraphs. In fact, most don't. Epigraphs are most common in longer works, like novels and books of poetry.
- Some writers love epigraphs so much they put them at the beginning of each chapter.
- Some books have more than one epigraph, placing two or more quotations in dialogue with one another.

How to Pronounce Epigraph

Here's how to pronounce epigraph: **ep-ih-graff**

Understanding Epigraphs

Epigraphs are an often-overlooked component of literary works. Because they're a part of the "front matter" (or the material that precedes the actual beginning of the work) it's easy for readers to breeze right past them without even noticing. Furthermore, the relationship between the epigraph and the rest of the text is not always 100% clear, since the author never—or very rarely—explains the significance of their epigraph outright. For that reason, it's up to the reader to determine what the epigraph "means" in relation to the text, which is typically only possible *after* they've finished reading the entire work, since it's only then that all the work's [themes](#) can be fully understood. Epigraphs can be thought of as the reader's first hint as to the themes of the work they're about to read.

Epigraph vs. Epigram

Epigraphs and [epigrams](#) are often confused for one another. The words sound very similar and do refer to somewhat similar things—they're both short, highly quotable blocks of text. But they are not the same. Here's a quick overview of epigrams to help clear up the difference:

- 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. While 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 tend to rhyme because it makes them more memorable, but as with all rules (especially when it comes to poetry) there are exceptions.

To sum up the difference between epigrams and epigraphs:

- An **epigram** is a type of statement or writing with certain qualities (it is short, witty, often [satiric](#), etc.)
- An **epigraph** is primarily defined by its location (it is always found at the beginning of a text) and by the fact that it is a quote of a different text.

Some Epigraphs Are Epigrams (and Some Aren't)

Epigraphs are sometimes—but certainly not always—also epigrams.

- **An epigraph that is an epigram:** 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 epigraph that isn't an epigram:** The epigraph of Ernest Hemingway's book, *The Sun Also Rises*, 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 that points to the main themes of the literary work.



EXAMPLES

The following epigraphs, taken from novels and poetry, exemplify how a work can be strengthened by placing it in dialogue with a quotation or excerpt from another writer's work.

Epigraph in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

The Great Gatsby tells the story of Jay Gatsby, a man who claws his way (through dubious means) into high society New York in order to win the affection of the love of his life, a married woman named Daisy Buchanan. One of the novel's major themes is the blindness and

determination with which people pursue dreams that turn out to be hollow. The book's epigraph hints at this theme:

Then wear the gold hat, if that will move her; If you can
bounce high, bounce for her too, Till she cry Lover, gold-
hatted, high-bouncing lover, I must have you!" — Thomas
Parke D'Invilliers

The suggestion is not just that people will do anything to win their object of desire, but that the entire courtship ritual is a silly and arbitrary dance.

Epigraph in Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*

[The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian](#) tells the story of Junior, a Native American born with hydrocephalus, and who feels like a kind of double-outsider, both from his own tribe and from the rest of America. Junior takes refuge in his drawing, through which he finds the strength to believe in himself and fight for a better future for himself. The book's epigraph reads:

There is another world, but it is in this one. — W.B. Yeats

The epigraph points to one of the book's main themes: that finding a sense of belonging often requires looking beyond appearances and the approval of others, to discover a rich inner world and a source of strength that transcends superficial social boundaries. By the end of the book, against all odds, Junior has found a place for himself in the world, overcoming racial and social divisions to earn the respect of his peers.

Epigraph in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

The events of [The God of Small Things](#) center around the life of one family in India, and are revealed in a fragmentary manner, jumping between different years and perspectives. This is important to the structure of the story because the main events of the story—the drowning of a little girl, the sexual molestation of a little boy, and a woman's affair with a man of a lower caste—all set off chains of events that mean very different things to the different people involved. Therefore, the different perspectives given in the story are critical to actually understanding what took place and its significance—and no one person's story is adequate by itself. The book's epigraph sums this up nicely:

Never again will a single story be told as though it's the only one. — John Berger

Epigraph in Jorie Graham's *The Errancy*

The epigraph of Jorie Graham's 1997 collection *The Errancy* is a line from the poetry of Thomas Wyatt:

Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.

The epigraph frames the collection of poetry as an attempt to hold the wind in a net, calling attention to the impossibility of the project of expressing the inexpressible through language, but also seeming to affirm the project as a worthwhile and beautiful one.



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Many works of literature don't include epigraphs at all, but a writer might choose to attach one to their work for any of the following reasons:

- To place their work in dialogue with the work of a writer they respect, or whose work they see as being related to their own.
- To suggest one of the main themes of the work before the reader begins reading.
- To set the tone or mood of the work.
- To create an association in the reader's mind—with a certain time period, artistic movement, idea, or image.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Epigraph](#): A simple overview of epigraphs in literature.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Epigraph](#): A basic definition.
- [17 Incredible Epigraphs](#): A Huffington Post listicle detailing the writer's favorite epigraphs—light on critical analysis.

HOW TO CITE

MLA

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