

Euphony



DEFINITION

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

Euphony is the combining of words that sound pleasant together or are easy to pronounce, usually because they contain lots of consonants with soft or muffled sounds (like L, M, N, and R) instead of consonants with harsh, percussive sounds (like T, P, and K). Other factors, like [rhyme](#) and rhythm, can also be used to create euphony. An example of euphony is the end of Shakespeare's famous "Sonnet 18," which goes "So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee."

Some additional key details about euphony:

- The word euphony comes from the Greek word meaning "good sound."
- The word euphony is itself slightly euphonic because of its soft sounds.
- Euphony is one of the words that is used most often to speak about the *musicality* of language—how it sounds when it's spoken aloud.
- The opposite of euphony is cacophony, or the combination of words that sound harsh or unpleasant together.

How to Pronounce Euphony

Here's how to pronounce euphony: **Yoo-fuh-nee**

Euphony Explained

Euphony has to do with the way words sound, and it's easy to identify if you trust your own ear, and ask yourself: do the words sound pleasing together? On the other hand, "pleasing" is a subjective criterion: some combinations of words might sound pleasing to one person's ear, and not particularly pleasing to another's. So it's useful, when you're trying to identify euphony, to know what types of letters are used most often to make euphonic sounds. Generally speaking, those letters include:

- Consonants with muted or muffled sounds, like L, M, N, R, and W.
- Consonants with buzzing sounds, like V, Z, and hard Th sounds (as in "The").
- Consonants with hissing sounds, like F, H, S, and Sh.

So a word, phrase, sentence, paragraph, or poem is typically considered euphonic when it contains a lot of these consonants in relatively close succession. However, these consonants *don't* have to appear right next to each other, and euphonic phrases often

contain some harsher or more percussive consonants (like T, P, and K) as well. These consonants are referred to as "explosive consonants," and while they can't be avoided entirely, too many of them can make a sentence begin to sound cacophonous—the *opposite* of euphonic.

Other Elements Used to Create Euphony

In addition to knowing what letters to look for in words, it's important to have a sense of the other tools that writers use to make their words euphonic. Those include:

- **Rhyme:** A rhyme is a repetition of similar sounds in two or more words. Rhymes are widely used in poetry, songwriting, and prose because they're pleasant to the ear, making them the perfect euphonic tool.
- **Rhythm:** Rhythm is the term we use to describe how words flow—quickly or slowly, regularly or irregularly—according to the interrelation of long and short or stressed and unstressed syllables. Language that has a steady, regular rhythm is more likely to be euphonic than language with a fast, irregular, jarring rhythm.
- **Figures of speech:** There are many [figures of speech](#) in English, and not all help create euphony, but here are some of the ones that do.
 - **Assonance:** [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!"
 - **Consonance:** [Consonance](#) is a figure of speech in which the same consonant sound repeats within a group of words. An example of consonance is: "Traffic figures, on July Fourth, to be tough."
 - **Alliteration:** [Alliteration](#) is a figure of speech in which the same sound repeats in a group of words, such as the "b" sound in "Bob brought the box of bricks to the basement." The repeating sound must occur either in the first letter of each word, or in the stressed syllables of those words.
- **Repetition:** Repetition is a literary device in which a word or phrase is repeated two or more times. The repetition of words (as in the Shakespeare example above) creates a pleasing sound when used in moderation.
- **Sibilance:** [Sibilance](#) is the repetition of hissing sounds. It can be used to create various effects, but often creates a mild, soft effect that is soothing to the ear.

Now that we've covered some of the tools used to create euphony, let's revisit the Shakespearean sonnet from above. It uses a lot of these same tools to create euphony.

- It rhymes;
- It's written in iambic pentameter (rhythm);
- It makes use of *repetition*;
- It uses **assonance** in several **different** places;
- And it is even slightly **sibilant**.

See for yourself:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

But There Isn't a Formula

Despite everything we've just said, you can't be too technical about euphony. Some words, phrases, and sentences are beautiful to the ear, it seems, just because they *are*—and not because they use particular consonants or figures of speech. A good example of this is "cellar door," two words which, together, are often said to be the most euphonic words in the English language. The writer J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote:

Most English-speaking people ... will admit that *cellar door* is 'beautiful', especially if dissociated from its sense (and from its spelling). More beautiful than, say, *sky*, and far more beautiful than *beautiful*.

But why is "cellar door" pleasing to the ear? It doesn't rhyme or use assonance. It could be attributed to the use of soft consonants like L and R, or the sibilant C. Or perhaps it's just a good reminder that you can't always explain exactly *why* something sounds beautiful—and that's fine, too. At the end of the day, whether or not something is euphonic comes down to the listener's interpretation. As if to illustrate that very point, in 1926 George Benjamin Woods and Clarence Stratton wrote "A Manual of English," in which they advise writers:

Give heed to the sound of the sentence. Euphony demands the use of words that are agreeable to the ear. Avoid, therefore, whatever would give offense, such as harsh sounds, similar word endings or beginnings, riming words, alliteration, and careless repetition.

In other words, they recommended *against* using the very tools that are now generally accepted as *helping* to create euphony. It just goes to show that, with euphony, it's often a matter of the listener's preference.

Euphony in *The Iliad*

In these lines from Book XII of Lattimore's translation of Homer's *Iliad*, euphony helps reinforce the lulling effect of the winds dying down. Pay particular attention to the use of **assonance** and **consonance** to make the words euphonic.

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

Euphony in Dorothea Grossman's "I have to tell you"

This very short poem by Dorothea Grossman, titled "I have to tell you," uses a combination of factors to achieve euphony, including **assonance**, **consonance**, and lots of euphonic letters in general (e.g., lots of R's, S's).

I have to tell you,
there are times when
the sun strikes me
like a gong,
and I remember everything,
even your ears.

Euphony in *Romeo and Juliet*

This example from lines 5-6 of the Prologue of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* creates euphony with two sets of alliteration, one with "F" sounds and one with "L" sounds (both of which are consonants often used to create euphony).

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;



WHY WRITERS USE IT

Writers use euphony to make their language sound beautiful. It's a particularly useful device to use when writing about a subject that is supposed to be beautiful, since it makes the language itself mimic its subject. As Edward P.J. Corbett and Robert J. Connors wrote in *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, "the euphony and rhythm of sentences undoubtedly play a part in the communicative and persuasive process—especially in producing emotional effects" in the reader. If a writer is describing something they want to make seem attractive, pleasant, or beautiful, one of the best ways of achieving this is to make the language itself sound harmonious.



OTHER RESOURCES

- [The Wikipedia Page on Phonaesthetics](#): This page has a short section on euphony and explains phonaesthetics and the musicality of language more generally.



EXAMPLES

The following examples of euphony have been gathered from poetry and plays, ranging from the time of the Greeks to today.

- [The Wikipedia Page on Cellar Door](#): An in-depth explanation of "cellar door" as the most euphonic words in English.
- [The Dictionary Definition of Euphony](#): A simple definition, with a section on the etymology of the word (it comes from Greek and means "good sound").

HOW TO CITE

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